



*Routledge Advances in Theatre & Performance Studies*

# **CRISIS AND *COMMUNITAS***

**PERFORMATIVE CONCEPTS OF COMMONALITY  
IN ARTS AND POLITICS**

Dorota Sajewska and Małgorzata Sugiera



# Crisis and *Communitas*

This book is a critical, transdisciplinary examination of a broad range of philosophical ideas, theoretical concepts, and artistic projects of community in the 20th and 21st centuries in the context of global/local social and political changes.

This volume opens new vistas by focussing on carefully selected instances of multipronged crises in which existing concepts of commonality are questioned, reformulated, or even speculatively designed with a (better) future in view. As many authors of this volume argue, in the face of today's unprecedented global ecological and economic challenges speculative design is of utmost importance as it can foster alternative, unthought-of forms of connectivity that go far beyond progressivist narratives of nation, corporation, and nuclear family. Focussing on the situations of upheaval, both historical and fabulated, the collection not only examines how multipronged crises trigger antagonisms between egalitarian forms of *communitas* and the normative concept of the nation (and other normative forms of communities) as a community that separates and excludes. It also looks closely at philosophical and artistic projects that strive to go beyond the dichotomies and typically extrapolated utopias, envisaging new political economies, ways of living, and alternative relational structures.

It will be of great interest to students and scholars in performance studies, cultural studies, political studies, media studies, postcolonial and decolonial studies, critical anthropology.

**Dorota Sajewska** is a cultural theorist, performance scholar, as well as dramaturge for theatre and dance. She is a professor of Theatre Studies at the Ruhr University Bochum in Germany, a former assistant professor of Interart (Eastern Europe) at the University of Zurich and for Theatre and Performance at the University of Warsaw.

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# **Crisis and *Communitas***

Performative Concepts of  
Commonality in Arts and Politics

**Dorota Sajewska and  
Małgorzata Sugiera**

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## Contributors

**APART** (Ema Hesterová and Peter Sit) is an artistic collective that has been performing research, artistic-creative, curatorial, publishing, and archiving activities since 2012. It is a meta-participatory platform working on a proto-institutional basis and the principle of shared economies. Today, APART is Denis Kozerawski, Peter Sit, Andrej Žabkay, Ema Hesterová, and Chiara Rendeková. APART has exhibited, screened films, and executed projects at numerous venues including Kunsthalle Bratislava; Karlín Studios Prague; Plusmínusnula Gallery Žilina; Work Hard! Play Hard, Minsk; CCA Kronika, Bytom; e-flux Bar Laika, New York; MoMA New York; Prague City Gallery; Easttopics, Budapest; among others. Under the APART LABEL, the collective has published more than 20 publications, including *Uhuru* by Catarina Simao; Mehraneh Atashi's *Safe Landing*; *Electronic Dadaist Poetry* by Babi Badalov; and the.txt edition (co-published with Display and Kapitál). APART's latest – and to date the largest – project is its own gallery space, A Promise of Kneropy in Bratislava, with an affiliated reading and study room, which seeks to programmatically present critical contemporary artistic positions.

**Katarzyna Bojarska** is an assistant professor in the Department of Cultural Studies at SWPS University in Warsaw and president of the NGO View. Foundation for Visual Culture where she co-founded and is on the editorial board of *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, an international, open access, online academic journal [www.pismowidok.org](http://www.pismowidok.org). She has received numerous grants and awards including Fulbright, Horizon2020 ([www.repast.eu/](http://www.repast.eu/)), and individual and group grants from the National Centre for Science. Her research interests include cultural memory, gender and memory, trauma and visual culture studies, as well as contemporary arts. Her postdoctoral book, titled *Wydarzenia po Wydarzeniu. Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman* (Events after the Event. Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman), was published in 2013. Bojarska is the editor of Ernst van Alphen's *Krytyka jako interwencja: sztuka, pamięć, afekt* (2019). She has also translated and published several works of other thinkers, including Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* (2018), Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional*

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**Susan Buck-Morss** is philosopher, intellectual historian, interdisciplinary thinker, and writer of international reputation. Her most-known book, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009), offered a fundamental reinterpretation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic by linking it to the influence of the Haitian Revolution. Her books *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (1977) and *The Dialectics of Seeing* (1989) have been translated into several languages and have been called "modern classics in the field." Other publications include *Thinking Past Terror* (2003), *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000), *Revolution Today* (2019), *Year 1. A Philosophical Recounting* (2021), and numerous articles ([www.susanbuck-morss.info](http://www.susanbuck-morss.info)). Susan Buck-Morss is currently professor of Political Science at the CUNY Graduate Center and professor emerita at Cornell University's Department of Government, where she taught from 1978 to 2012. Buck-Morss was also a member of Cornell's graduate fields in comparative literature; history of art; German

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# **Crisis and *Communitas*.**

## **An Introduction**

*Dorota Sajewska and Małgorzata Sugiera*

The main idea of *Crisis and Communitas: Performative Concepts of Commonality in Arts and Politics* gained its shape at the end of 2019. We intended for a multi-authored volume that offers a critical, transdisciplinary examination of a broad range of philosophical ideas, theoretical concepts and artistic projects of community in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries within the context of global and local, social and political, as well as environmental, changes. Although the issue of the eponymous crisis and *communitas* has increasingly gained attention over the last turn of the century, we wanted the volume to open new approaches, mainly by focussing on well-chosen moments of recent multipronged crises in which existing concepts of commons and commonality have been questioned, subverted and reformulated—or even speculatively designed with a (better) future in view. Since the time of conceiving the main idea of the volume and sending out invitations to its prospective authors, at least two major crises happened—the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine—and still their end is unforeseen. Both crises—although diametrically different in their political reality—evidently have things in common. On the one hand, the war metaphor has been widely used to describe coping with the virus as an invisible enemy against which state authorities have to and have waged a war. On the other, when describing armed Ukrainians attempting to prevent Russia's aggression from spreading to the whole of Europe, Western politicians and journalists have repeatedly used traditional epidemiological metaphors, especially the one of containment. However, what is worthy of attention in the context of this volume is that there are noticeably distinct responses to these crises, especially when we look at how they were commonly perceived at the time of their respective onsets.

After the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly became global, with news spreading much quicker than other viruses in the last 100 years, it was widely perceived as a kind of singularity that struck almost out of nowhere. It has not only deeply affected the global world, but also marked, albeit differently, everybody's experience at multiple levels. On the contrary, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which came during a period of relative peace in the very heart of the European continent, has rather called forth nightmares and traumas of the Second World War and its aftermath. Now, more than

before, war is viewed as an immediate and overwhelming threat to the ways of life of the vast majority of the world's human population. However, this has been not the first armed conflict since Hitler's defeat in Europe, although the continent had prided itself in putting the danger of military clash firmly behind it. Suffice it to recall the civil war in former Yugoslavia—no less brutal and genocidal than the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. In addition, Russia's invasion started with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and has not stopped since. Therefore, it seems the particular role of the events in February 2022 relates to the fact that shortly after, the EU and NATO alliance decided to support Ukraine in its fight against Russia. They did so in such a way that the almost-forgotten ghosts of the Cold War reappeared. Once again, we are in a situation of increasing direct confrontation between two great military powers, each fully equipped to destroy the human world by choice. The war in Ukraine appears to be, as Ivan Krastev (2022) rightly pointed out, "the last iteration of Europe's political geography based on an East-West divide." That is why, in his official speeches, President Zelensky so often repeats that what we witness in his home country is not a war of two armies, but rather a war of two worldviews—Ukraine representing the West here. At the same time, Western countries, which have increasingly engaged in helping Ukraine, must find themselves unwillingly meeting their Other. After all, in seeking to extend its territory with military means, and declaring that there is not, and has never been, a Ukrainian nation, language, and culture, Russia performs a well-known kind of, not only colonial, but also racial, imperial politics. In so doing, it undertakes, in reality, what several Western countries—Great Britain, for instance—have already done symbolically: wanting to make themselves *great* again.

Both crises—the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine—are incredibly overwhelming that they must be thought through conditions of great global peril with unknown proportions; this increasingly endangers any secure and collectively acceptable future, and puts an end to Western modernity's linear time, if not to one kind of human and natural history. That is why, at the very moment of writing this short introduction to the *Crisis and Communitas* volume, the critical situation has already deeply affected how the eponymous key notions are thought of and defined. However, it does not mean that the articles gathered here have lost their validity, nor that their insights only retain historical importance. Quite the contrary, the contemporary crises existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, thus they should rather be perceived as manifestations of the crises than veritable and verifiable causes. Therefore, before turning to the issue of the modern awareness of crisis, or the modern consciousness as crisis consciousness, which today is evidently in crisis itself, let us have a closer look at some of the decisive changes the last crises brought along. As a matter of fact, these changes have only seemingly brought along emerging economic, social and political problems which our societies are coping with just now. In reality, they are proof of an ongoing, much older and deeply rooted multipronged

catastrophe which most probably reached its peak during recent years. To signal the multicausal nature of the unfolding crisis, time and again, it is called an economic-and-ecological crisis, *eco-eco crisis* for short. For instance, in his 2015 book on crisis, Jason W. Moore did not write about the conventionally understood notions of *social* and *ecological* crisis purely because he viewed the 2008 economic crisis as more than a signal of the unfolding neoliberal capitalist crisis. In his *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, Moore explains that it was “something more epochal: the breakdown of the strategies and relations that have sustained capital accumulation over past five centuries” (2015, 1). To see it clearly, one thing is needed: we have to go beyond the well-established nature/culture binary to reckon that capitalism is “a way of organizing nature” (Moore 2015, 2). Indeed, nothing better has corroborated Moore’s definition of humanity as “a species-environmental relation” (2015, 11) than the COVID-19 pandemic, caused most probably by a zoonotic virus.

Mindful of the COVID-19 pandemic as a common and global experience, many authors of recently published books, regardless of their topic, start with a preface to depict the lingering shock and resulting lack of any comprehensive picture of the ongoing disaster, which, at its beginning, froze the whole world in place. Most authors are also perfectly aware of the fact that it will be long before we are able to clearly see how the ongoing pandemic recast our understanding of the first decades of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, they have no doubt that it has already been—and may forever remain—the defining experience of our time. The shock seems to affect especially those authors who spent many years studying similar epidemiological events and their reverberations across various fields and scales. A case in point is “Politics and Scholarship in a Time of Pandemic,” the preface to Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb’s *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817–2020* (2021), written when the author was in quarantine. In her book, Kolb engages a rich and diverse archive of literary, medical, administrative, and military documents to decipher imperial disease poetics, which then became a productive method in fighting terror and terrorism, particularly after the World Trade Center attack. However, in the preface, Kolb points to these recent proofs of the pervasive force of epidemic imaginary in the hope that “something in this book helps them [young researchers and students] to make sense of the 2020 pandemic not as an isolated disaster, but as a turning point in the history we want to write and the world in which we can live” (xv). She urges them, therefore, to watch out for how the well-known “normal,” which we desperately want to return to after the pandemic—the normal instantiated also in the cropped (re)presentations of COVID-19—will influence our possible future. In other words, although it goes against our common experience, the last pandemic was not a unique event—as has been stressed by experts on historical contagions. Moreover, when removed from its isolation, it does not even possess the power of a turning point in global/local history. In the context of global warming and increasing deforestation, it might well

open up a series of various zoonotic infectious epidemics. Thus, perhaps we will never have the chance of coming back to what we used to know as “normal.”

The fact that the COVID-19 pandemic should not be seen “as an isolated disaster” (Kolb 2021, xv), and not only so from an epidemiological point of view, is testament to the best new readings of much broader colonial and decolonial processes, often completed during the difficult time of social distancing. For instance, Amitav Ghosh’s decolonial undertaking, which begins on the Banda Islands in 1621, unfolds alongside his account of how COVID-19 progresses in New York, and each narrative strand sheds light on the other in his book *The Nutmeg’s Curse* (2021). Ghosh’s argument corroborates the increasingly popular conviction that global and local responses to the COVID-19 pandemic did not bring about entirely new, emerging phenomena, behaviours and practices; however, they initiated unknown multi-pronged processes, which still need deciphering. The pandemic rather made salient these specific aspects of global life under medicalised regimes and their political consequences that many researchers and writers have noticed but still do not fully comprehend. In other words, global society did not enter today’s increasingly dramatic situation because of the coronavirus pandemic alone. What is worth noticing at this juncture—the same could be said about the war in Ukraine. It not only appears to be the last iteration of Europe’s political post-Second World War geography, with its eminent divide between the West and East, as already mentioned by Krastev, it has also aroused unprecedented fears surrounding inflation and recession and exposed an increasingly vast impact on the global world in the combined devastation of Ukraine’s food exports and climate change. Regarding the latter, Russia’s invasion, targeted sanctions, and their aftermath have also visibly decreased efforts to diminish fossil fuels as the main source of CO<sub>2</sub> emission. As a result, Poland—as well as other Central European countries—faces, for instance, an upcoming winter with more toxic air because of the forced need to burn more substandard coal than the last few years.

Crises such as the ones discussed above usually bring to the fore certain structures and assumptions that were invisible and implicitly embedded in our lives. They work as a catalyst, accelerating a social dynamic that has already been long in the making, as we have already pointed towards. Thus, Natascha Strobl, an Austrian political scientist, trying to explain the fundamental workings of such crises, rightly resorts to a traditional metaphor: “The coronavirus pandemic acts as a magnifying glass. Reality becomes hyperreality, bringing social and political fault lines and adjustments into sharp focus” (2021, 143). Ekaterina Degot and David Riff—editors of the volume *There Is No Society? Individuals and Community in Pandemic Times* (2021), in which Strobl’s article is published—phrased the same feeling a bit differently by using another traditional metaphor: a theatre stage, which enables a cathartic revelation. They write, for instance, about “a sense that today many illusions of the past are falling away like a stage set, as the world reveals itself to be

what it really is, what we deeply knew it to be all along” (2021, 14). When “many illusions of the past are falling away,” it is impossible to view it a typical crisis, normally defined as a turning point, awaiting decisive action to overcome it. The original medical Greek use of the word *crisis* most probably described a pivotal moment, a turning point between two possibilities—to succumb to an illness or recover and become healthy. Thus, for a long time it has been thought of as a proper metaphor to express transformative potential immanent to any crisis. However, today, we are faced with so many tightly entangled crises, catastrophes, and global/local perils that they seem to have lost any transformative potential they might bear. It suffices to look at contemporary public discourse terms which we are permanently confronted with: *refugee crisis*, *crisis of values*, *identity crisis*, *crisis of masculinity*, *financial crisis*, *ecological crisis*, etc. In all these examples, the word *crisis* has been used to suggest there is a problem with the issue in question rather than with Western modernity and its usage of the notion. It is Western modernity’s notion of *crisis* itself that is in crisis today.

The current climate of crisis oppression leaves little space for imagination. Instead of debating about how to better future conditions, we are confronted with a further crisis of apocalyptic proportions. Significantly, it does not seem to be the crisis of the original Greek medical usage of the notion, with its transformative potential. Rather, this notion of crisis derives from the word for *judgement* in koine, the common supra-regional form of Greek, spoken and written during the Hellenistic period, the Roman Empire, and the early Byzantine Empire, as reminded, for instance, in Susan Buck-Morss’s close reading of John’s book of Revelation in her *YEAR 1* (2021). Buck-Morss focusses on the first century to challenge “the epistemological apparatus that modernity calls history [...] freeing the past to speak otherwise” (Buck-Morss 2021, ix). The “speaking otherwise” part clearly subverts the common medical understanding of what the notion of crisis used to mean.

Unpicking the knots into which chosen words become entangled in the history of their appropriation, invisibly gaining new meanings while becoming part of greater historical narrations, Buck-Morss recalls Reinhart Koselleck’s claims of the mid-1950s that the eschatological notion of crisis belongs to key concepts of Western modernity (Koselleck 2006). This notion has been primarily used as the fundamental mode for interpreting philosophically historical time, which progresses linearly towards its fulfilment or completion. However, considering that no first century copy of the text exists, Buck-Morss tries to unread progress, which has been read into successive historical interpretations of John’s book of Revelation. She does it firmly convinced that “[t]he part that vanishes from modern optics is its most valuable aspect” (Buck-Morss 2021, 218) because it challenges the inherited traditions of power. In this case, her conviction turns out to be true—“John’s words materialize a world beyond the limits of our temporal horizon” (Buck-Morss 2021, 216). One of the main reasons Buck-Morss focusses on, it is the fact that, for John, futurity in the modern sense of the word does not exist.

What he calls *Kairos*, she believes, is rather a historically specific expression of hope, a recurrent possibility rather than a revolutionary rupture with no likelihood of return. Buck-Morss recognises the difference between John's understanding of time and ours, and notices the importance of this difference, but does not elaborate on it any further. As a philosopher and intellectual historian, she aims to get rid of those layers of meaning which cover the past with the language of the present. That is exactly why we have published an interview with Buck-Morss at the end of this volume. We ask her about the importance of her findings "beyond the limits of our temporal horizon" (Buck-Morss 2021, 2016) for today's threatening apocalyptic catastrophe, very often described in terms and images from John's book of Revelation. Here, however, we would like to have a closer look at yet another temporality and imaginary of catastrophe, distinct to ours—one that the anthropologist and critical theorist Elizabeth Povinelli calls *ancestral catastrophe* in her recent book *Between Gaia and Ground* (2021).

Interestingly, the final draft of *Between Gaia and Ground* was completed during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the preface, the author refers to the different discourses about the pandemic and the visibly divergent impact of the virus on white, Black, brown, and Indigenous communities. Although she admits that the crisis haunts her writing, Povinelli does not include it in the unfolding argument in her book. She does it precisely because, as she explains, the crises existed long before COVID-19 which "emerged from extractive capitalism and was disseminated by transportation capitalism" (2021, x). Therefore, undoubtedly, the ongoingness of today's catastrophe is premised on racial and colonial history. However, this is not how the last major catastrophes have been described. Povinelli elaborates as follows: "The catastrophe of climate change, toxic exposure, and viral pandemics are not *à venir*—they are not on the horizon coming toward those staring at it. These are the ancestral catastrophes that began with the brutal dispossession of human and more-than-human worlds and a vicious extraction of human and more-than-human labor" (2021, ix). What the author defines here as a key difference between *à venir* catastrophes and the ancestral catastrophe is closely reminiscent of the difference Buck-Morss points at in *YEAR 1*—the difference between John's understanding of crisis in his book of Revelation and Western modernity's reading of crisis as an expected eschatological end of linear time. Suffice to quote again Povinelli to make this similarity clearer: "Ancestral catastrophes are past and present; they keep arriving out of the ground of colonialism and racism rather than emerging over the horizon of liberal progress" (2021, 3). That is also why, when thinking about today's entangled crises and catastrophes, she advises—and focussing on the massive extraction and recombination machine of late liberal capitalism, does so herself in *Between Gaia and Ground*—to begin with the force of history and take up a historical perspective rather than an ontological one.

However, although Povinelli views the notion of historical perspective as self-evident, it is our conviction that when thinking about an old/emerging

meaning of crisis, the notion also needs to be reflected upon itself, mostly because two overlapping meanings of history still exist: what happened, and the narrative of what happened. Both meanings have often been confused; Priya Satia—cultural historian of modern British and British Empire history at Stanford University—uses the phrase “history makes history” in the subtitle of her book *Time’s Monster* (2021). Historians’ work does not only shape our imagination and understanding of the past, but also influences how the past infuses our present. That is why, Satia emphasises “that particular ideas of history, conscience, and agency are intertwined in our habit of understanding the formerly colonized world with balance sheets of empire” (2021, 9). Thus, a historical perspective left unreflected could be just as dangerous as an ontological one because the modern historical imagination shaped the unfolding of empires.

Satia purposefully starts her argument by emphasising that “[h]istorians were prominent among the architects of British power from the eighteenth century until very recently, as both policymakers and advisors to other policymakers; the rule of historians coincided with the era of British imperialism” (2021, 1–2). This coincidence does not only indicate that the progress-oriented narrative of the British Empire had been entangled with a particular historical sensibility since its beginning, it also means that it had been influenced by the aforementioned eschatological crisis that Koselleck claimed to be a key concept of Western modernity. Although recently the discipline of history has changed methodologically, subverting long-held master narratives, it is important to note that “Britain’s imperial career from the era of slavery to the current Brexit crisis depended on the sway of a particular historical sensibility that deferred ethical judgement to an unspecified future time” (Satia 2021, 2). In other words, historians have not dispensed altogether with the discipline’s old narratives and categories. Therefore, the well-established historical imaginary continues to influence today’s politics and understanding of human agency and collective and individual responsibility; similarly, it continues to distort the historical perspective Povinelli wanted us to utilise instead of the ontological one.

Mindful of the various pitfalls surrounding historical perspectives and imaginations, this volume seeks to reveal the workings of *crisis* and *communitas* that were increasingly pervasive in the last decades. Using upheaval situations, both historical and fabricated, the volume examines how multipronged crises trigger antagonistic processes between egalitarian forms of *communitas* and the normative concept of the nation as a community that separates and excludes. However, it also looks closely at philosophical and artistic projects that strive to go beyond the dichotomy and typically extrapolated utopias, envisaging new political economies, ways of living, and alternative relational structures. Crisis and *communitas* are here in a dialectical and dynamic interplay, and social efforts to overcome crisis can be thought of not only in the context of restoring traditional community, based on identitarian values, but also in the context of sharing commonalities, being in-between,



forming temporal, ever-shifting bonds. Therefore, along with the well-established notion of crisis, modernity's social models of being together—historical, extrapolative, and speculative—need to be critically revisited and thought-through.

The first step towards a renewed reflection on the various forms of communal existence in times of crises is to propose an old/new category for their description: *communitas*. This term emerges at the intersection of anthropology and political philosophy. It allows us to liberate ourselves not only from the concept of national community entangled in the historical past of totalitarianism, but also from the national rhetoric that has revived over recent years and has haunted the present. Especially in the context of the war in Ukraine, the *imagined community*—a term coined by Benedict Anderson in 1983 as a cultural relic that finds its roots in the death of those who sacrificed their lives in the name of the fatherland—has once again gained dangerous importance. Death confers immortality on a nation as a community, argues Anderson, thus war represents the kind of event that allows a country's citizens to construct their history, while also perpetuating their national identity. The propaganda of today's war resonates like a threatening echo of Anderson's words; while “nation-states are widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical,’ the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future. It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny” (Anderson 2006, 11–12).

It is not only the Russian invasion of Ukraine that has reawakened a seemingly long-buried need for the revival of national belonging in contemporary Europe. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic began with immediate border closures inside the European Union, revealing the enduring power of the idea of the nation-state in the twenty-first century. However, the virus that paralysed life in the Western world was unfamiliar with national boundaries, and it also spread in the exact opposite direction to its supposed trajectory—from imperial centres to impoverished world peripheries. European governments' fear-laden belief that closing national borders would limit the spread of the virus also demonstrated the deep connection between the pandemic crisis and the already existing “refugee crisis.” This is mostly because, just before the pandemic, Europe was practising walling off its own territories from the “aliens” coming from the sea. Additionally, during the pandemic European countries were largely concerned with the health of their own citizens and less so with the fate of the refugees abandoned in camps. This tendency of European societies to turn inwards in situations of danger and fear is well illustrated by what Roberto Esposito calls a process of *immunization*. In his trilogy, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (2009), *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (2011) and *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (2008), originally published in Italian at the turn of the century, Esposito reveals the deep interconnectedness of the categories of community and immunity as complementary notions in Western political

philosophy and reality. At the same time, he argues that the present crisis of community relates specifically to the persistence of trying to uphold boundaries which presumably should protect us from all dangers looming beyond.

From the perspective of one of this volume's main themes, the first part of Esposito's trilogy deserves particular attention and should be put under scrutiny. In *Communitas*, the author deals with the origins, manifestations, reconfigurations and goals of community in contemporary political thought.<sup>1</sup> He opens with a reflection on issues of community in a manner which is free from totalitarian implications, due both to the collapse of communism as a political system and the crisis of individualism that Western philosophy and populations faced at the turn of the century. In doing so, Esposito points out internal differences among discourses which address the issue of community, defining their specific modalities: "communal, communitarian, communicative" (Esposito 2009, 1). The first relates to the issue of material and immaterial values all members in a given society share; the second presents a philosophical perspective to community's decisive impact in forming the individual; and the third indicates communication's key significance in exchanging and sharing. All those aspects are located within the area of interest of this volume's contributors, while their specific focus is determined by the discipline they represent: social science, philosophy, literature, art history, theatre, performativity, film and media studies.

Altogether, the volume *Crisis and Communitas* aims to present various ideas of community, including those that understand it merely as a collection of individuals. Therefore, Esposito's conception proves to be extremely helpful because it abandons the dialectic between what is individually possessed and the common, and this shift makes it possible to focus on the idea of community itself. In order to avoid traps of political philosophy, Esposito recalls the etymology of *communitas* as a form of (co)existence where that which is common is simultaneously that which is not owned—everything belongs to the collective, not the individual. As the Roman rhetorician Quintilian's famous maxim states, "quod commune cum alio est desinit esse proprium," the common thus means something that takes on a public character rather than a private one. Contained in the term *communitas*, however, is yet another semantic reference with its root of *munus*, characterised by a slew of mutually illuminating, as well as opposing, meanings: function, office, obligation, duty and burden, but also aid, service and, finally, gift. From this semantic polyphony comes, thus, a specific understanding of a gift as an obligation, a need to offer a response, a gesture implying reciprocation and exchange.

Recognising the obligatory nature of a gift, and the need to reciprocate it, underpins French ethnologist Marcel Mauss's conceptualisation of the term in his renowned 1924 essay *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. In turn, crossing personal boundaries and sacrificing oneself recalls the profound inspiration Esposito found in Georges Bataille's work. As Bataille emphasised, to experience community, it is necessary to step out of and away from oneself and experience exaltation or even ecstasy; in these

states, he saw potential for a critical approach to thinking about community. Only the experience of losing the “I” can facilitate an opening to the alterity immanent to existence. In Bataille’s interpretation, community does not simply emerge as a result of discovering one’s otherness, but via relations with an Other’s other. Thus, community cannot be understood as a reciprocal act of stepping outside of oneself, simultaneously also taking place within that Other. Grasping this duality makes it possible to understand that, for Bataille, *communauté* means communication through experience, which is always a form of stepping outside the subject, in abandonment of the very idea of subjectivity. As Esposito aptly notes, Bataille conceives experience as “the experience of the lack [*destituzione*] of every subjectivity” (2009, 117) and “coincides with the community, insofar as it is the unrepresentability of the subject to itself” (119). Community thus becomes the quintessence of from-to movement, with no way to identify the subject and the object, and relies on the sharing of emptiness and lack, which border on death. Only death, which is “our common impossibility of being what we endeavour to remain, namely, isolated individuals” (Esposito 2009, 121), can guarantee liberation from ownership, and thereby, an openness to *communitas*.

Influenced by Bataille, Esposito questions the relationship between community and death. This then leads him to a theological interpretation of *communitas*, in which semantics from the Christian tradition overlap with the New Testament concept of *koinonia*. This latter term relates to community through participation, co-involvement—a kind of communion with origins in the personage and redemptive acts of Christ. The deeply theological interpretation of *koinonia* seems to be a manoeuvre to diminish its pre-Christian meanings. Among many semantic nuances of the term, Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* cites: “To have or do in common with, share, take part in a thing with another” (LSJ, n.d.). The authors also refer to the horizontal and human dimension of *koinonia* within the Platonic context of *φιλία* (*philia*) as “an affectionate regard, friendship, usually between equals.” They also quote line 1276 of Euripides’s *The Bacchae*, where *koinonia* denotes sexual intercourse: *γυναικὸς λαμβάνειν κοινονίαν*. In his turn, Esposito firmly ties *munus* to God’s gift in the form of Christ’s sacrifice and the possibility of humanity’s participation in that sacrifice. He then expresses a belief that, consequently, all participation is of a vertical nature and that fraternity is not characterised by horizontal interaction or friendship but relates to brotherhood in Christ, who becomes a constitutive alterity in the formation of *communitas*. Such a reading ultimately leads Esposito to pit the anthropological and theological traditions against each other in his definition of *communitas*: “Against a purely anthropological reading, one that is completely horizontal, one needs to respond firmly that it is only this first *munus* from on high that puts men in the position of having something in common with each other” (Esposito 2009, 10).

Esposito’s line of thinking, while inspiring in philosophical terms, proves, however, to be insufficient for addressing manifestations of *communitas* in

contemporary politics and arts, on which this volume focusses. This is primarily because Esposito leaves out anthropological meanings of *communitas* and those aspects of being and acting together which are connected to purposefully inefficient, ostentatious, orgiastic and immoderate “expenditure,” thus, activities that serve no pragmatic aims. This becomes especially striking when we recall the analysis of excess energy and asset expenditure provided by Marcel Mauss in relation to the potlatch gift-giving ceremonies of Pacific Northwest peoples:

Nowhere else is the prestige of an individual as closely bound up with expenditure, and with the duty of returning with interest gifts received in such a way that the creditor becomes the debtor. Consumption and destruction are virtually unlimited. In some potlatch systems one is constrained to expend everything one possesses and to keep nothing.

(Mauss 1966, 35)

Mauss describes how wealth, that has been painstakingly accumulated, is destroyed during these “agonistic” gatherings and feasts. The ostensible madness in this gesture of frivolously expending goods bears a function of collective cleansing and rejuvenation. It also recalls Bataille’s experience of ecstasy. For Mauss, *munus* reveals a relation with *ludus*—with ludic behaviour, spectacle, and thus an entire sphere of cultural performativity with its affective and symbolic excess.<sup>2</sup> *Ludus* derives from the verb *ludere*—to play something, dance, make merry, pretend, imitate, perform, play a role, poke fun at, fool, or deceive—which renders visible the immanent performativity in the root of *communitas*.

The perspective of *munus*, understood primarily as *ludus*, offers a performative conception of community, governed by an excess that suspends the daily order that has been constructed around rules normalising social life. Therefore, it is necessary to reinstate the anthropological dimension in the study of *communitas*, not only to maintain a horizontal and egalitarian perspective in understanding community, but also to broaden the thinking about community to include non-Western cultures and alter-forms of experience and cognition. This promises—in the perspective being reflected here, this point seems crucial—to unveil the aesthetic and creative dimensions of *communitas*. To achieve that, this volume proposes to revisit an anthropological concept of *communitas* which Victor Turner (1969) developed to denote interpersonal relations that suspend a normative social order in the late 1960s.<sup>3</sup> He presented this term to tap into the non-teleological dimension of human activity and interpersonal relations because he saw them more as an effect of intuition and spontaneity than of conscious choice. Though all varieties of *communitas* are a critical reflection on *societas* and its structures, relations between the two are not binary in nature; they are rather dialectical and processual. First, *communitas* is the source of *societas*, though the yearning for *communitas* in fact arises from the very heart of *societas*. Second, the objective of *communitas* is to establish direct, egalitarian relations between its members.

Defining the emancipative nature of *communitas*, Turner clearly points at the power of imagination as a significant factor for overcoming limitations in normalised social structures and driving creative activities that generate new forms of community. In Turner's perspective, *communitas* is thus the antithesis of society-as-structure, but also a proto-structure of a potentially new community project. Possessing many qualities of flow, it "can generate and store a plurality of alternative models of living" (Turner 1982, 33). This is reminiscent of Esposito's "continuum of community" idea (Esposito 2009, 120) in which the concept of subjectivity based on the separation of individuals caves in, and a wealth of experience transcending subjectivity is made manifest.

As Turner discusses the types of *communitas*—spontaneous (or existential), normative, and ideological—he shows the potential of ephemeral states transforming into phenomena that are more permanent, thus more akin to structures. Unlike Esposito, who steers clear of the territory of aesthetics in his ruminations on community, Turner associates *communitas* at the same time with a processuality suitable in performative phenomena, from ritual and dance to theatre. Turner's conception, by combining anthropological and aesthetic reflection, is easily transplanted into the field of art where it is applicable, in particular, to the analysis of performative activities. Therefore, the notion of *communitas* still seems relevant and vivid for analysing both the historical and contemporary manifestations of communitarianism in arts and politics that this volume is interested in.

The main issue in the *Crisis and Communitas* volume is the intermingling of the title's two terms, as well as their multidimensional interrelation, performative practices, and performative approaches. On the one hand, performance art, as a community-based and community-building medium, is an extraordinary research field for that issue. On the other, performativity offers the most appropriate methodology for tackling the eponymous issues of this volume, given its focus on all kinds of emerging phenomena and processes, their geo-historical locality, and inter- and intra-relational dynamics. Undertaking the topic in question as a collective, a *communitas* of authors, is undoubtedly an advantage. It is further aided by the fact that the volume has gathered both researchers from various disciplinary fields, with their own specific performative approaches, and artists representing various media and intermedial methodologies. Moreover, they represent manifold experiences; existential, academic, and artistic careers; and cultural backgrounds in the Global North, Global South, Eastern and Western Europe, and so on. This allows us to raise timely and vital questions about the importance of the common in arts and politics in the time of multipronged crises: how can we revisit the relationship between arts and politics today? How do performing arts reflect social changes in the contemporary world? What kind of role do arts play in the reformulation of concepts of commonality? Can the artistic process be regarded as a model for building a temporal community and can its

approach be an ephemeral and affective one? Is it possible to work collectively in theatre, film and visual arts, go beyond hierarchy and take responsibility for being together? Can the current tendency to found independent companies, collectives, informal bonds and anti-institutional movements be interpreted as a manifestation of egalitarian forms of (art) community? Can new forms of community-building in contemporary arts be read as a critical reflection on the Western forms of society in an increasingly hybrid world? What kind of interrelationship exists between locally located social dynamics and artistic practices? Can communitarian concepts in contemporary arts be understood as performative phenomena of social transformation? The authors have attempted to answer those key questions, and their answers are divided into four sections.

The authors whose chapters are gathered in the first section, “Community as Potentiality,” share a conviction that how a future is seen today depends decisively on the present in which it is imagined. In this respect, they take on the role of Octavia E. Butler’s *HistoFuturists* who are both an alternative to, and a merging of, the work of historians and futurists because they extrapolate from the historical and technological past and present in order to imagine the future. Shelley Streeby quotes Butler’s unpublished writing on science fiction when she remarks that it “can be one of our methods for looking ahead [...]—not what our future will be, but how we think about it, foresee it” (Butler quoted in Streeby 2018, 25). Hence, on the one hand, to imagine a future is not so much to engage with the society to come, but rather with the urgent matters of the present that might otherwise go unnoticed. On the other hand, however, the once-imagined future can be always decontextualised and redesigned in a new present. Therefore, it is important to do everything to decolonise imagination, free it from a regime of conventional hegemonic thinking and envisioning, unlock its potential. And here, the arts and artists, as demonstrated by all authors, have an important role to play as a kind of social laboratory where hegemonic thinking is critically explored, and ways of assembling things better are tested. As a matter of fact, it has brought a fundamental change to our collective definition of action; nowadays it is not so much about a (revolutionary) process breaking radically with the past to begin from scratch, to think and make the world and society completely anew. Rather, it is primarily about how to draw things together, how to attach, entangle, and care.

The second section, “Bodies and the Communal Power,” addresses another key issue of the volume. All chapters show cross-cultural manifestations of social and political crises and their impact on establishing affective communities. Despite the multiplicity of artistic, textual and historical material, they reflect primarily on the bodily dimension of *communitas* generated by, and in interaction with, numerous agents. These agents are not only human—their bodies, most specifically—but also other life and non-life beings, divinities, objects and environments. Human and

more-than-human agents can be brought together as communities because they are affected, or affectively interpellated, in situations that demand the uncovering of oppressive structures and that call for self-aware modes of collective action. From this perspective, this section understands the body as always being in transition—from affect to emotion, from movement to habit, from experience to memory, from presence to absence. Therefore, the communal power of the body can be repressive and liberating at the same time, and it opens up space for new forms of present solidarities and possible, alternative narratives of the past(s) which may serve as a reservoir of forms of community—marginalised, forgotten or impossible to conceptualise from today’s perspective only.

Chapters gathered in the third section, “Imageries of the Commons,” look critically at historical (re)presentations of the commons by resituating them in their original context and reflecting upon new functions of arts and artists who generate and test new ideas of collectivity. To envisage possible forms of communities yet to come in today’s multipronged crisis, the authors take a closer look at existing (re)presentations of the commons, seeking to situate them historically. This means not only a critical reading of mainstream images of the commons, in particular situating them in their original historical contexts, but also reclaiming marginalised or entirely forgotten images—crucial to shaping human agency beyond widespread entrepreneurialism and empty consumerism. As stressed, for instance, by Claire Bishop in her *Artificial Hells* (2012), it is participatory art that has aimed to restore and realise a communal, collective space of shared social engagement, seeking to forge a collective, co-authored, participatory social body. In the twentieth century, many artists strongly believed that if social agencies have failed, then art is obliged to step in, whether they did it in an affirmative (through utopian realisation) or negative (dystopian) manner. Since the beginning of this century, it has become increasingly visible that this binary (among many others) has been subverted and transgressed. What is more, as Bishop rightly points out in “Conclusions,” the models of democracy in art could not be equalised with the models of democracy in society—we have to “recognize art’s ability to generate other, more paradoxical criteria” (2012, 279). The authors of this section do their best to identify and analyse those criteria.

The fourth and last section “Artists Speak!” presents a collection of three artistic responses to the topic of crisis and *communitas*, and which explore the intersections of dance and performance, performance and theatre, and visual and performing arts. They have all been written with this volume in mind and demand a broader introduction than previous chapters. In his manifesto, *On Eating and Being Eaten*, Marc Streit—dance curator, founder and artistic director of *zürich moves! festival for contemporary arts practice in performing arts*—looks at the Tupi’s cannibalistic ritual as an extreme bodily form of communication with the Other. The consumption of the Other is, however, treated

here neither as destruction nor a defence mechanism, but as a particular way of mixed collective identities and a form of cultural appropriation. Streit discusses Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto Antropófago* ([1928] 1990) as a paradigmatic text, which, in an exemplary manner, shows formation processes of a modern and cosmopolitan Brazilian culture, and emphasises how this "new" culture breathes new life into the global cultural landscape by focussing on a bodily way of building an affect-based community today. Thus, the manifesto combines well with Eduardo Jorge de Oliveira's chapter from Section II on inventing skins through the lens of groups, artists and practices developed in Brazil. In his contribution to Section IV, Wojtek Ziemilski—performer and theatre director—reflects on his own production *Come Together* (2017). The performance premiered in Warsaw, and, by pushing the relationship between stage and audience to the extreme, addresses the ideals and conventions of theatre with playful and desperate self-derision. Commenting on the efforts of his performers as deeply authentic, albeit ultimately unsuccessful, Ziemilski asks fundamental questions concerning theatre as community-based and community-building art and its capability of creating an ephemeral community, despite all differences and inequalities of its participants. The last chapter is authored by Ema Hesterová and Peter Sit from the Slovak art collective APART. The multidisciplinary co-operative works in a very performative way, organising *situations* in the form of lectures, presentations, projects, and exhibitions. They explore temporality, ephemerality, the unrepeatable character of artistic activities and attempt to map artistic expressions in their local environment. This explains partly why the collective offered the poem, *Torn apart*, for the volume. At a time when almost everything has already been said and written about community and art, the authors found this form of textual expression the only possible way to discuss the topics. The poem acts as a perfect, albeit slightly ironic, conclusion to these four sections of the volume.

The closing interview with Susan Buck-Morss, "In a historical perspective," must be read as a temporary closure. It situates contemporary crises and *communitas* within a historical framework—a perspective sometimes lacking in other chapters. As the history of the volume's construction demonstrates, everything could change before the book is read. However, the perspective proposed in this volume foregrounds the cultural dynamics in which arts, politics and theories are deeply interwoven. Thereby, it conceptualises commonality not merely as an aesthetic experience, but as a performative force towards possible futures and social changes. In this sense, *Crisis and Communitas* situates itself at the intersection of visual and performing arts, promoting a transdisciplinary methodology, and simultaneously, it advocates for a performative approach to cultural analysis and history. This volume also invites readers to reflect on the speculative and alternative potential of academic research and theory. It is for this reason that it hopes to retain its topicality, despite the changes we face.



## Notes

- 1 The analysis of Esposito's *communitas* (also discussed later in relation to Turner) partially comes from another text; see Sajewska (2021).
- 2 In an anthropological interpretation, *ludus*—more specifically, the Greek *παίδιά*—denotes games, play, competition, and feast ceremonies (in its plural form, *ludi*), but also childish interplay, pastime, amusement, game and fun.
- 3 Turner adapted the term from the 1947 book by Paul and Percival Goodman, in which utopian forms of urban planning and architecture were assessed.

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**Part I**

**Community as  
Potentiality**



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# 1 An Aesthetics of Solidarity

## Collective Becoming After Neoliberalism

*Jeremy Gilbert*

### **Solidarity in the Wake of Neoliberalism**

If the COVID-19 pandemic has been experienced, in some ways, as an unprecedented historic crisis, then this is precisely because it has posed—to many societies—the question of the necessary conditions, the possible forms, and the institutionalised limits of solidarity today. One reason that the pandemic has proven so traumatic and so disruptive is that it has required inherently solidaristic social responses at a time when such societies have been subject to an unrelentingly anti-solidaristic programme of government and ideological manipulation—as has been the case for several decades. This programme itself emerged in the context of a major hegemonic crisis within countries such as the US and the UK, and the form of highly regulated, but relatively egalitarian, capitalism that had typified them during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Any reflection on the politics of community, solidarity, sociality and *communitas* in the twenty-first century—at least so far as it pays attention to the north Atlantic Anglosphere<sup>1</sup>—must confront the effects and legacy of neoliberal hegemony, considering both the circumstances of its emergence and its destructive consequences. Neoliberal hegemony is both the cause of the ongoing crisis of democracy in those countries (Gilbert 2014) and was itself a response to the crisis of post-war social democracy inside them.

In the US and the UK (and, to a lesser extent, France, and Italy), the political and social crisis of the 1970s (Hall et al. 1978) marked the end of a period during which state institutions had worked to mitigate, and even counter, the social logics of capitalism in various social spheres (media, healthcare, social care, education, etc.), in order to foster higher levels of both social mobility and social solidarity. One feature of the post-war culture of Fordist social democracy in these countries was the growth of new types of communal cultural experience: from cinema and national broadcast media to professional league sports, music festivals, and rock concerts. Few of these were entirely new developments, but their popularity reached new heights during this period. Of course, this culture of mediated solidarity was inseparable from the highly conformist form of capitalist culture that Gramsci (1971) had already seen beginning to emerge from Henry Ford's highly regimented

factories in the 1920s, and was characterised by a degree of social and cultural conservatism that would provoke a major libertarian backlash in the 1960s, as women, young workers, students, gay people, and people of colour sought to express themselves culturally and politically outside the constraints of Fordist mass culture. At the same time, however, even as the post-war consensus (Black 2001) broke down under pressure from this backlash, the solidaristic features of its culture facilitated an intensification of working-class militancy in the 1970s, posing serious problems for capital and its state agents (Beckett 2010; Lewis 2013). As such, it would eventually be those collectivist and collectivising features of modern culture, and their capacity for facilitating communal and democratic experiences, rather than the libertarian demands of the new social movements that neoliberal ideology and policy would eventually seek to suppress (Harvey 2007). Today, the multiple and interlocked crises of environmental collapse, social degradation, rising authoritarianism, and democratic decline (Venn 2018) can all be linked at least partially to the effects of the global hegemony of Atlantic Neoliberalism after the 1970s.

Neoliberalism has been characterised in many different ways: as an ideology, a philosophy, a political programme, a regime of government, a project to restore the power of finance capital, and even as a continuation of certain forms of imperialism (Gilbert 2013; Harvey 2007; Slobodian 2018). As I have argued elsewhere (Gilbert 2016), all these descriptions are accurate on their own terms, and the fact that the term neoliberalism can name a complex assemblage of institutions, practices, and beliefs does not necessarily detract from the general usefulness of the designation. For my purposes here, the term neoliberalism will refer to a hegemonic project that has put all of these elements to use, with the overall strategic aim of strengthening the power of finance capital, private corporations, and asset-holders at the expense of workers, consumers, citizens, tenants, students, patients, and all of the democratic institutions built up to represent their interests over the course of the first seven decades or so of the twentieth century.

To understand the critical effects of neoliberalism across all these contexts, it is important to have some understanding of how neoliberalism is used, and what it has tried to destroy. Again, multiple answers can all be reasonably made. From the 1970s onwards, neoliberalism—the basic precepts of which had first been formulated in the 1930s—was embraced by corporate and political elites (in Latin America, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and much of Western Europe) as a strategic response to a range of threats and opportunities (Gilbert 2012). The threats came from a rising wave of radical democratic demands made by workers, youth, women, people of colour, sexual minorities, etc. (Gilbert 2008a). The opportunities were provided by a wave of technological changes—computing, cybernetics, robotics, container shipping (Gilbert 2020c, 49–57)—and by the breakdown of the Keynesian economic paradigm (Marglin and Schor 2007), all of which enabled a series of material and ideological attacks on social-democratic state institutions and the forms of labour organisation that had helped bring them into

existence, through the mass privatisation of public assets and the imposition of draconian restrictions on labour organising. Of course, in Chile—the first country to implement a fully neoliberal programme—the stakes had been far higher (Harvey 2007). US corporate interests were directly threatened by the emergence of a genuinely popular, technologically sophisticated, democratic socialist regime, and the opportunity to simply crush it was presented by the military weakness of democratic forces in the country and the allegiance of its military to the US. But the Latin American experience is largely outside the scope of this chapter.

In order to understand the fundamental political character of neoliberalism across all of these contexts, it can be useful to view it as a direct attack on the social, cultural, and political conditions underpinning the very possibility of mass democracy in the middle decades of the twentieth century, or more specifically on socialism and the welfare state. It can also be useful to understand it in class terms as a project to undermine the power of organised labour and restore the global authority that finance capital lost after the 1929 crash. But I want to consider here the possible utility of conceptualising neoliberalism in complementary and related—but slightly different—terms, as, above all, a systematic attack on all forms of social solidarity and all solidary social relations. In some senses, this observation amounts to a truism. One of the most frequent ways of characterising neoliberalism is in terms of its obsessive, often authoritarian, promotion of competitive market relations in every social sphere (Davies 2017). As such, neoliberalism is ideologically and institutionally hostile to social relations characterised by high levels of cooperation and/or egalitarianism, and is committed to encouraging human subjects to experience themselves as isolated monads whose interests are irreconcilable with those of others, except through processes of market exchange which will always retain a competitive and non-reciprocal dimension (to the extent that sellers and buyers will always be motivated to maximise their gains at each other's expense). The most immediate and obvious targets of neoliberal attacks since the early 1970s have been labour unions, which are generally understood to be the most obvious expression of characteristically modern, industrial-era forms of solidarity.

While some of this may seem obvious, it is also worth reflecting on the ways in which such anti-solidary logic has animated neoliberalism across a vast range of social and cultural spheres, and what some of its political implications have been. From the perspective I want to develop here, relations of solidarity are fundamental and indispensable to exercising all forms of collective power, and to the constitution of what I have called elsewhere “potent collectivities” (Gilbert 2020b): that is, collectives on any scale that are capable of exercising agency, or making and acting on decisions, in however abstract a sense. In this sense, there can be no meaningful form of democracy and collective agency without some sense and experience of solidarity. The attempt to dissolve, disable, re-model, and even to criminalise almost all solidary relations has been characteristic of neoliberalism in all its forms.



After direct attacks on organised labour, the most evident manifestation of this tendency has been the neoliberal assault on welfare and public service provision, and in particular on universalistic forms thereof. It is a frequent misunderstanding to assume that neoliberal policy has tended towards a simple reduction of public expenditure and an overall contraction of social and welfare provision. While austerity and a straightforward reduction of the capacity of welfare provision have been features of some neoliberal programmes, others have seen a considerable expansion in certain instruments of state power and surveillance, with the aim of actively re-modelling relationships between citizens, government, and public-sector institutions. This active promotion of competitive, consumerist, transactional social relationships, in place of collaborative and non-transactional relations, has amounted to a project to transform the role of the state. Mid-twentieth-century social democracy tried, however imperfectly, to use the state and its fiscal mechanisms to mediate social relations in solidaristic terms: those with the highest incomes and largest assets contributed the most, those highly in need received the most, and benefits and services were largely treated as universal rights to which all citizens had equal recourse. By contrast, neoliberal public-sector reform has, since the 1980s, emphasised the individual responsibility of citizens—especially welfare recipients and public sector users—to exhibit entrepreneurial behaviours, whether in the pursuit of employment or their navigation of the education system. Where possible, it has encouraged competition between citizens, public-service providers, and public service users (e.g., students), and has encouraged transactional rather than collaborative relationships between service users and the professionals providing their services. Neoliberal fiscal regimes have almost invariably sought to replace progressive with regressive mechanisms, reducing the social burden on elites while adopting quasi-punitive approaches towards welfare recipients (Crouch 2013; Mirowski 2015).

Perhaps more fundamental than any of these highly visible interventions, have been the ways in which neoliberal policy and ideology have promoted a culture, and an “affective regime” (Gilbert 2011), that inhibit the likelihood of solidary relationships in everyday life, in the civic and public spheres, and in the domain of personal relationships. Reality television has promoted the spectacular normalisation of competitive relations in every conceivable domain of life (Ouellette and Hay 2008). Social media, despite their evident capacity for promoting collaborative, egalitarian, and productive relationships (Gilbert 2020b) are today more normally associated with the promotion of neurotic and pathological levels of insecurity, paranoia, and narcissism (Couldry and Mejias 2019; Seymour 2019; Zuboff 2019). Digital technologies have largely facilitated the growth and intensification of privatised modes of engagement: moving the site of consumption from the cinema to Netflix, and from the concert or nightclub to the Spotify feed (Harvey 2017). Urban landscapes have seen public and civil space shrink, while the growing insecurity of labour markets has seen individual life-courses become increasingly

fraught with anxiety. Individual consumer-workers have been trained for decades now to view their peers not as potential sources of support and mutual empowerment, but as competitors and threats (Sennett 2011).

On their own, these observations risk drawing a crude and simplistic picture. None of these developments have occurred in a vacuum or absent of any countervailing tendencies; none are necessarily unique to the era of neoliberalism, at least in terms of their general effects. Social dislocation, the breaking of traditional bonds, the disruption of established communities, the privatisation of property, the imposition of insecurity and competition on unwilling populations: these have all been more-or-less consistent effects of capitalist modernisation since the sixteenth century, at the latest. Arguably, what distinguishes our epoch is the fact that those new and modern institutions of solidarity—trade unions, urban municipalities, public services—which emerged in the wake of the industrial revolution, have been under attack since the 1970s. In fact, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the concept of *solidarity* first came into widespread usage to give name to the aspect that had to be cultivated by these new institutions and their animating practices following the disappearance of traditional communitarian forms of agricultural life. So, while capitalism's tendency to dissolve social bonds is not new at all, what distinguishes the neoliberal programme, in historical terms, is the almost surgical precision with which it has sought to undermine and disempower those sources and institutions of modern solidarity that emerged in response to capitalism's dislocatory tendencies. The convergence of neoliberal hegemony, the cybernetic technological revolution, and the breakdown of the Fordist social settlement produced a culture which, by the early twenty-first century, seemed to be anti-solidaristic in almost every conceivable way.

Of course, there have been countervailing tendencies. The rise of international social justice movements, new forms of nationalist conservatism, networked struggles for radical democracy, and distinctively, twenty-first-century forms of socialism, can all be seen as instantiating desires for types of solidarity (Gerbaudo 2021; Gilbert 2008b). Above all, however, it is the global climate crisis that forces this issue before us in ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has only given us a taste of. It is surely self-evident that causes and effects of global heating and ecological breakdown cannot be addressed without a radical practice of solidarity, especially now that the interdependence of organic life on Earth is so starkly visible and so severely threatened. In fact, the urgency and specificity of this situation should focus our attention on the question of what exactly *solidarity* means.

### **What Is Solidarity?**

The word *solidarity* was directly imported into English from French during the early decades of the nineteenth century; the original *solidarité* first appeared a few decades previously. The English and French words share etymology with *solidary/solidaire*, which, at least early in the history of their usage,

were legal terms denoting the sharing of financial interests and/or risks. This is significant because subsequent attempts to define solidarity have tended to understand it primarily as an ethical concept (Scholz 2008), denoting a sense of shared obligation between parties, or even an expectation of self-sacrificing altruism imposed on members of a moral community. I want to suggest here that this can only ever be an impoverished understanding of solidarity; it fails to capture the power of the concept, at least insofar as it has come to inform radical political discourse since the early twentieth century. From this perspective, solidarity constitutes an experience and expression of interdependence that cannot be understood in moral or altruistic terms, because it is indissoluble from a sense of, precisely, shared interests and shared risks.

The most basic and minimal definition of solidarity that I can offer is simply this: a consciousness of shared interests. It is notable that current English-language dictionary entries for solidarity equivocate quite markedly between understanding the word as a *fact* or *feeling* of different communities or individuals having shared interests or aspirations. However, in ordinary contemporary usage, solidarity involves some specific consciousness of shared interests, rather than merely their objective presence. Less easy to resolve is the extent to which solidarity designates only a subjective feeling or state of awareness, or rather an actual set of practices and behaviours. Here, there is clearly some ambiguity in common usage, implying that solidarity is perhaps best understood as an *experience* that can manifest itself in various ways along a continuum, stretching from abstract feeling to concrete practice.

The idea of shared interests is crucial here. Like solidarity itself, *interest* is a concept that has received very little attention from radical, critical, and cultural theory in recent years. Post-structuralist theory largely disregarded the concept of interest, associating it with the social and economic determinism of vulgar Marxism (Laclau and Mouffe 2014), often substituting psychological explanations for socio-economic ones of political behaviour, belonging and identification (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2010). Even Deleuze and Guattari were dismissive of the idea of interest, associating it with a crude, unambitious economism: an implicitly reformist attitude which they contrasted unfavourably with their revolutionary politics of desire (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 343–351). While post-structuralism generally derived its understanding of political motivation from psychoanalytic theory, probably the most influential mainstream theory of political motivation since the 1970s—that of Axel Honneth and his followers—drew on Hegel and existential psychology to posit an inherent desire for *recognition* as a driving force in contemporary social politics. Most of these approaches therefore ended up asserting or implying that the expression of personal identity, or the achievement of social status, constitute ends and motivations in themselves for political actors (individual or collective) (Honneth 1996). From such a perspective, interests as such become difficult to identify or analyse, and so shared interests become difficult to discuss. But ultimately, any attempt to think through the concept of solidarity without reference to a concept of shared interests is clearly going to be inadequate.

I think that interests can best be conceptualised as virtual capacities or risks: potential capabilities that have a chance of being realised, or existing capabilities that have a chance of being eliminated. A group of workers, for example, might have a shared interest in achieving a potential wage-raise or in fending off a pay cut. But interests need not be conceptualised only in class or purely economic terms. In a modern patriarchal culture, for example, women have a shared interest in minimising their physical danger from men: both by extending and defending legal and cultural sanctions against male violence, and by, for example, ensuring that urban landscapes are designed and lit in ways that maximise public safety (Reclaim the Night, n.d.). It is the consciousness of all such shared interests that constitutes the basic form of the experience of solidarity.

The idea of shared risk is interesting and important here in connection with some of the earliest usages of the terms *solidarity* and *solidary*. Most appeals to an ideal of solidarity seem to carry with them the connotation that any consciousness or practice of solidarity implies that something is *at stake* (and of course, *stake* is a term that itself has etymological roots in ideas of mathematical risk: the stake is what is gambled in a game of chance or a bet). If nothing is at stake for any party, then expressions of solidarity can seem empty. One of the most famous Anglophone expressions of solidaristic sentiment is an early-twentieth-century slogan of the Industrial Workers of the World: “[A]n injury to one is an injury to all” (Cole et al. 2017, 18, 132), which perfectly expresses this sense of shared risk. According to the biography of IWW leader “Big Bill” Haywood, the slogan was adapted by David Coates from an existing labour movement slogan: “[A]n injury to one is a concern of all.” The implication of the revision is clear: harm to a member of the collective is not merely a matter of concern, an object of moral attention, rather, it constitutes immediate damage to the collective and to each of its constituent elements.

In the 1990s, social theorist Ulrich Beck elevated the concept of risk—shared or otherwise—to the status of a key explanatory concept with which to make sense of late twentieth-century society (Beck 1992). For Beck, a definitive feature of advanced capitalist societies was the proliferation of *risks* that had emerged as unintended consequences of the processes of modernisation, industrialisation, and urbanisation. These risks might range from nuclear accident to heart disease, from urban crime to pandemics, but their most obvious and potentially catastrophic manifestation is the ongoing breakdown of the planetary ecosystem. From Beck’s perspective, one of the key questions faced by all contemporary societies is how to manage and minimise these risks. A distinctive feature of neoliberalism has been the attempt to privatise social risks (such as unemployment or ill-health) that the twentieth-century welfare states had largely collectivised, forcing individuals to take personal responsibility for negative outcomes (Lazzarato 2016). Globalisation and the climate crisis have clearly transformed the scale on which the potential drivers of such outcomes operate, in turn, demanding political responses that acknowledge the profound interdependence of both economies and ecosystems

today. As Beck himself put it, processes of “cosmopolitanization” have increasingly forced people and populations who do not think of themselves as having a shared past to think of themselves as having a shared future (Beck 2002).

The idea of a shared future is clearly central to any notion of solidarity today. Perhaps one reason that the idea of solidarity seems so urgent is that it is the only concept that can really express the sense of shared futurity to which Beck so perceptively referred. To be *in solidarity* with someone is to have a shared stake in the future and a set of common interests that could be realised or suppressed, depending on what outcomes emerge. An orientation towards this shared future and its possibilities can take different affective and ideological forms. It can appear, for example, in the form of an ethical injunction, however abstract or concrete. Derrida’s formulation of *democracy to come* (Derrida 1994), as an ethical horizon towards which ethical subjects should be open, is notoriously vague (was it ever more than an injunction to hope for the best?). However, perhaps it can be rendered somewhat more substantial by the observation that, according to the logic we have been following here, such a disposition is a necessary feature of all solidaristic relationships.

A more contemporary, and interestingly comparable, injunction was made by Bernie Sanders to his supporters at a rally in December 2019: “Are you willing to fight for that person who you don’t even know as much as you’re willing to fight for yourself?”. This rhetorical question was one of several in a speech celebrating the emergence of a mass political movement around Sanders’s bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, and exhorting his supporters to fully participate in that movement. It could be interpreted as a merely moral exhortation: calling on the listeners to put the needs and interests of others ahead of their own, according to the classic ethical logic of the Christian tradition or even that of those ancient traditions of hospitality that valorise kindness and generosity to the stranger (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000). But a more radical interpretation might be that the question invites the listener to recognise a profound truth: there is no material difference or separation between fighting for themselves or for a stranger with whom they share common interests and membership in a collective movement. What is called for in this very pure expression of solidarity is not an act of faith or moral investment in the possibility of a shared future, but a recognition that that future will be shared whether we like it or not.

Incidentally, Sanders’s deliberate evocation of the “person who you don’t know” is very significant here. In her recent book *Comrade*, Jodi Dean (2019) makes a powerful argument that the concept of the comrade has an important and specific place in radical discourse, precisely because it designates a relationship between participants in a movement, party or cause that is not reducible to, or dependent on, any kind of personal familiarity. Arguably this marks out another key feature of the solidaristic relationship: it cannot be dependent on relations of kinship, friendship, or immediate social proximity. As such, it cannot be based upon identity. From the perspective we are

developing here, the logic of solidarity is one of shared *becoming*, in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) use the term: a vector of transformation that may be plotted between different identities or modes of being, but which can never be simply defined by any one of them.

### Solidarity vs Identity

Here we come to the crux of what is at stake politically in an elaboration and valorisation of the concept of solidarity today. *Identity politics* is a vexed and over-used term whose implications are widely debated but not widely agreed upon. The term was first coined in the 1970s by Black feminists seeking to challenge marginalisation and exploitation along gendered, racialised, and class lines, while also finding ways to build relationships of solidarity along and across all such axes of oppression (Taylor 2017). In this context, identity politics did not mark a break with the universalistic aspirations of socialism, communism or democratic politics more broadly: rather, it expressed a desire to expand the constituency and the range of demands represented by them, aiming to include highly oppressed people and their aspirations within these movements.

From the 1980s onwards, however, the term came to be used in quite different ways in different contexts (Rutherford 1998). One contemporary understanding of the term simply equates identity politics with any political attention whatsoever to issues of gender, race, or sexuality. But another more specific usage refers to forms of feminism, anti-racism, anti-heteronormativity etc. that take on an explicitly particularistic, anti-universalistic character: ignoring or abjuring appeals to norms, struggles or demands that are more universal than those of any one, narrowly defined identity group (Butler 2015, 27; Haider 2018).

From this perspective of identity politics, appeals to solidarity—beyond the internal solidarity of these very particular groups—are always suspect (Andrews 2016). At risk of over-simplifying a very complex history, the fear animating such suspicion has generally been that broadly based social and political movements with universalistic ambitions will always tend to represent the interests of their least oppressed constituencies at the expense of the most oppressed; a workers' movement, for example, will end up representing the interests of white, straight male workers at the expense of all others, unless those others organise separately. Some defenders of this type of identity politics advocate for separatist modes of political organisation among those who share certain specific identities (Hoagland and Penelope 1988). But some are seemingly suspicious of collective projects of any kind, effectively confining themselves to defining politicised identities as positions from which individuals can make moral or legal claims on the state or other institutions. A recent example of this position can be found in Robin DiAngelo's recent bestseller, *White Fragility* (2019), which notoriously dismisses the possibility of white people acquiring anti-racist consciousness through collective political

struggle (92–93), and uses the term *white solidarity* multiple times as a synonym for organised racism, yet never acknowledges active multi-racial solidarity as a political possibility.

DiAngelo's book is an extreme example that has been widely criticised, but we can see the pervasiveness of this conception of identity politics in the widespread overuse of Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of *intersectionality* to designate all forms of raced and gendered oppression (Rubbelke 2017). Crenshaw's original argument was a specifically legal one, concerned with the difficulty of applying multiple concepts of oppression to legal claims made against employers by individual citizens under US employment equality legislation (Crenshaw 1989). Despite the term's obvious suggestiveness and utility—which I do not wish to dispute at all—its widespread extension to cover all forms of social oppression suggests that this individualistic and legalistic conception of identity politics is widely normative in the English-speaking world.

We have to be very careful when making claims of this nature. Although many prominent thinkers have criticised identity politics and *identitarian* thinking in recent years (Butler 2015; Fraser 2013; Fraser and Honneth 2003; Haider 2018), relatively few writers and scholars have taken either of these positions in a pure or explicit form. At the same time, the absorption and marginalisation fears that such tendencies respond to are understandable and partially historically justified; they certainly deserve to be taken seriously. Nonetheless, the great danger of such responses is that they simply overlook the most powerful lessons to be drawn from the actual histories of democratic, socialist, feminist, and anti-racist struggle. The impulse to achieve limited political and normative gains, by reconciling feminist and anti-racist demands with prevalent forms of liberalism and neoliberalism (Banet-Weiser 2018; Gilbert 2020a; Rottenberg 2018), can thereby foreclose the possibility of building wider cultures of solidaristic resistance and invention.

From such histories of cross-cultural struggle, it is possible to draw countless examples of solidarity between individuals and social groups with differing ethnic, national, gendered, and sexual identities. In the British case, the period 1971–1985 marks a (relatively) recent high-point for political agitation, union militancy and democratic mobilisation, and falls prior to the Thatcher government's successful suppression of most meaningful opposition in the middle of the 1980s (Beckett 2015). Two historical episodes are particularly worth identifying here. One is the 1976–1978 dispute at the Grunwick Film Processing Laboratories in London; the other is the short but colourful life of the organisation Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners, 1984–1985.

Still today, the Grunwick dispute is remembered as a key episode in provoking a dramatic rightward shift among major sections of the British political establishment and media (Beckett 2010). At the time, sections of the press and the political right had begun to win considerable popular support for increasingly racist rhetoric and narratives (Hall et al. 1978). The dispute saw large numbers of white male trade unionists mobilise in solidarity with the largely female, South Asian workforce at the Grunwick labs,

who went on strike to protest extremely poor pay and conditions. This all occurred against the backdrop of the UK government's historic 1975 agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to implement a neoliberal structural adjustment programme in return for a substantial loan, and the ensuing squeeze on wages and public spending (Beckett 2010). The dispute was ultimately defeated, but many commentators and historians today regard that defeat as an absolute precondition for the eventual success of Thatcherism, and all its implications for the resulting breakdown of social democratic hegemony in Western Europe (Gamble 1988).

The organisation, Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners, is now relatively well known, having been the subject of a popular movie: the 2014 feature film *Pride* (Tate 2017). The organisation was active towards the end of the key period of struggle between emergent authoritarian neoliberalism and its political enemies that opened with the Grunwick dispute; and the period marked a significant shift in the political culture of the British labour movement. Although they played only a minor role in the historic 1984–1985 UK coal miners' strike, their fund-raising activities, and their work as bridge-builders between miners' organisations and the institutional remnants of the 1970s Gay Liberation movement, had enormous symbolic value. Coal miners were seen as the epitome of masculine trade-unionism for much of the twentieth century, and since the 1920s, continued to occupy a vanguard position within the British labour movement. Their public alliance with queer activists, at a time when full public acceptance of same-sex relationships was still far away, played a significant role in cementing relationships between the LGBTQ+ movement and the wider left.

What characterises each of these episodes is not just the important symbolic place they have acquired in the collective memory of British progressive politics; it is also the fact that they exemplify instances in which culturally divergent constituencies engaged in very deliberate practices of solidarity with each other. This action arose out of a conviction of shared interests focussed on overcoming a common enemy while defending and democratising the post-war social-democratic settlement. I have chosen to refer to these examples not just because of their historical significance and inspiring nature, but because they are vivid examples of the emergence and prosecution of a highly solidaristic and explicitly anti-identitarian politics. Moreover, they occurred during the period immediately preceding the rise of more explicitly particularistic forms of identity politics in the second half of the 1980s, at least in the English-speaking world (Katzenstein 1990; Rutherford 1998). Doubtless other examples could be selected: for example, Jesse Jackson's adoption of the "Rainbow Coalition" strategy in his Democratic presidential campaign. All these instances exemplify a highly developed and highly solidaristic form of democratic politics that had become increasingly widespread and increasingly dangerous to corporate interests by the early 1980s.

In fact, we can see the sequence of institutional and ideological forms taken by *actually existing neoliberalism* (Gilbert 2013) from the early 1980s onwards as



a series of strategic responses aimed at defeating, containing and ultimately neutralising the threat that this radical democratic politics had posed: from the violent authoritarianism of the first half of the 1980s, through to the promotion of highly individualised and institutionalised forms of social liberalisation by the Third Way governments of the 1990s. The former largely served to demoralise and demobilise these solidaristic coalitions, provoking members of marginalised social groups to seek out more discrete, individual, short-term and particular solutions to their immediate problems from the second half of the 1980s; the latter actively promoted very limited forms of liberal feminism, anti-racism and sexual liberalisation insofar as they manifested themselves solely in the cultivation and expression of individualistic, consumerist, entrepreneurial modes of subjectivity (Gilbert 2016; McRobbie 2009; Scharff 2016).

### **The Aesthetics of Solidarity**

Over the past four decades, many of the most interesting developments in both the fine arts and popular culture can be understood as responses to this direct suppression of solidaristic relations. In much of the English-speaking world, the early 1980s is now remembered as a period of striking popular inventiveness, particularly in fields such as popular music and street fashion (Reynolds 2005; Lawrence 2016). Post-punk, the post-disco club scene, early hip-hop: all were characterised by highly experimental sonic innovations, by a strong tendency to hybridise previously distinct cultural forms and by a capacity to provoke widespread imitation. In some ways, the *style tribes* that emerged in their wakes were perfect examples of the emergent *publics*, as described by the great theorist of social contagion, Gabriel Tarde (Tarde 1901, 2001; Lazzarato 2002). It was this colourful admixture of pluralism and collectivism that led some critics of the period to understand *postmodern* culture as characterised by a set of aesthetic tendencies with progressive and democratic implications (Hebdige 1988), rather than *postmodernism* being the byword for hyper-commodified superficiality that it would become by the early 1990s (Jameson 1991).

The search for intense, non-hierarchical experiences of collectivity found, perhaps, its purest expression in one of the definitive cultural developments of the 1990s: the global popularisation of dance, club, and rave cultures of many different varieties (Reynolds 2012). Sympathetic critics (myself included) were quick to identify these emergent forms of festivity as direct reactions to the neoliberal privatisation of everyday life (Gilbert and Pearson 1999). Certainly, the experience of joyful collectivity—the entire end purpose of these practices—shares something, at an affective level, with the experience of solidarity, and might even help to identify and illuminate what some key features of that experience are. The loss of any limiting sense of individuated and ego-centred selfhood, the direct experience of the *transindividual* character of social existence (Gilbert 2014; Read 2016), the sense of mutual empowerment

and psycho-physical liberation that were so routinely reported as characteristic for their participants: all are key features of any experience or practice of solidarity. But this might also explain the often-reported sense of disappointment felt by long-standing participants of those cultures. It was, and remains, very common for such participants to experience a profound intuition—a radical, democratic, empowering potential, and yet feel that the potential has never been truly realised. This might be because the political and economic conditions under which they have been practised have almost always prevented any true and lasting relations of solidarity from emerging out of the intense, but always-temporary, experiences of *communitas* that rave and dance cultures exist to facilitate (St. John 2009). This tells us something interesting about the aesthetics of solidarity: it must involve an affective orientation both towards the possibility of a realisable shared future, and towards the sense of commitment and potential for sustainability that genuinely solidaristic relations require. Perhaps this is why those manifestations of dance culture that have had the most dramatic impacts on their participants have been the ones that have passed a certain threshold of iterability and sustainability; thus, they have become sites for building actual social relationships capable of sustaining meaningful forms of solidarity (McKay 1998, 187–207; Lawrence 2003).

Seemingly far away in spirit from urban dancefloors and festival fields, the most influential theorisation of gallery art practice since the 1970s was concerned with a surprisingly similar set of themes. Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* ([1998] 2009) argued that much of the most interesting art of the previous 20–30 years could be characterised as *relational* in character. Bourriaud's definitions of his terms were always a little vague. He describes *relational art* as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations” (113). It seems hard to imagine what kind of aesthetic practice could ever fail to meet that criterion if applied strictly or liberally. His definition of *relational aesthetics* is “[a]esthetic theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt. (See: co-existence criterion)” (112). He specifies his *co-existence criterion* as follows:

All works of art produce a model of sociability, which transposes reality or might be conveyed in it. So there is a question we are entitled to ask in front of any aesthetic production: “Does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?” A form is more or less democratic. May I simply remind you, for the record, that the forms produced by the art of totalitarian regimes are preemptory and closed in on themselves (particularly through their stress on symmetry). Otherwise put, they do not give the viewer a chance to complement them.

(109)

Although the word solidarity does not appear in Bourriaud's book, its insistent appeal for art that explores, and in some way valorises, “the social bond” (8)

clearly comes very close to evoking something like an aesthetics of solidarity. But—perhaps like the fleeting utopias and *temporary autonomous zones* of 1990s rave culture—its preoccupation with evading the threat of *totalitarianism* arguably leaves both Bourriaud’s aesthetic programme, and most of the art that it endorses, unable to offer more than short-term, ephemeral and potentially trivial passages through an experience of positive interrelation (Gilbert 2014). As Žižek (2001) observed, between the 1970s and 1990s, totalitarianism became a generic term that elided crucial differences between modes of thought and politics that differed from those of liberal democracy. Its casual usage is often symptomatic of a key tendency in contemporary liberal thought: the positing of any form of potent collectivity as necessarily monstrous, a permanent threat to the freedom of the benighted individual (Gilbert 2014). The weakness of Bourriaud’s criterion—so vaguely defined in the above citation—and the uninspiring, self-congratulatory vagueness or banality of much of the work that it champions, is, I would suggest, a symptom of the fact that it cannot really meet the challenge it has implicitly set for itself. That challenge is to meaningfully confront the alienation, reification and individualisation inflicted upon late twentieth-century culture by neoliberalism. And that cannot be confronted by a mere celebration of relationality for the sake of relationality. It is an aesthetics of *solidarity* that the crisis of our times really demands.

Of course, Bourriaud was writing 20 years ago, and much of the art that he was commenting on was considerably older. Since that time, the central socio-cultural shifts of our era have only made the need for an aesthetics of solidarity greater than ever. The internet, massive online platforms, and social media clearly have extraordinary capacities to facilitate relations of solidarity on multiple scales (Gilbert 2020b): just think how international support for the Zapatista cause was made possible by the early use of the World Wide Web in the 1990s (Burbach et al. 2001), or how many entirely localised political projects have made use of those tools to facilitate organisation and communication. However, it is also clear that, deployed in a historical context characterised by advanced neoliberal hegemony and an unprecedented accumulation of capital in Silicon Valley, recent generations of these technologies have been deliberately designed and calibrated in order to reduce and neutralise their solidaristic potential, at the expense of their capacity to facilitate competitive, narcissistic and paranoid modes of subjectivity (Lovink 2019; Zuboff 2019).

None of this, however, has entirely prevented the re-emergence of powerful new forms of solidaristic politics or the invention of aesthetic modes appropriate to their expression. Perhaps the most obvious example in the English-speaking world has been the emergence, popularisation, and widespread legitimisation of the Black Lives Matter movement (Taylor 2016). In the history that I have begun to sketch out here, this surely occupies a singular place. The Black freedom struggle in the US occupies a key position in the history of solidaristic politics in the twentieth century—at least for the Anglophone world. Not only was it a key point of inspiration for a range of movements for collective liberation, and not only did it invite and inspire the

committed solidarity of supporters and participants from many localities, at the same time, the aesthetic inventiveness of African-American music culture became a defining force in shaping popular sensibilities all around the world, from the 1920s until well into the twenty-first century (Floyd 1995). This cannot be separated from the role that African-American political culture played as an exemplar of solidaristic resistance to oppression (Polletta 2004). It was the relative abeyance of Black collective struggle in the US, as much as anything else, that marked the high period of neoliberal hegemony—between the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 and the end of the Obama presidency in 2015. As such, the importance of its resurgence cannot be overstated.

From this perspective, it is unsurprising that some of the most impressive aesthetic innovations of recent years have emerged directly from the context of Black American culture, all in ways that resonate directly with a politics of insurgent solidarity. Arguably the most strikingly experimental, popular film of the past decade—Boots Riley’s *Sorry to Bother You*—is, despite its surrealist science-fiction *mise-en-scène*, nothing but an extended meditation upon the practice and limits of solidarity: the protagonist’s failure to keep faith with his striking call-centre co-workers is eventually punished in a classically mythological fashion. One of the most memorable pieces of popular performance art in recent years—Childish Gambino’s track “This is America,” and its accompanying promotional video—directly evokes and challenges the sense of complicit helplessness that decades of anti-solidaristic neoliberalism has inculcated in many citizens, even in the face of overt racial violence by the state. And if any modern aesthetic form has explored the fundamental experience of solidarity—of collective becoming exceeding any personal identity, of mutual empowerment, and the creative potential inherent in transindividual relationality—then it is surely jazz (Buchanan and Swiboda [2004] 2006; Holland 2008). Recent years have seen an extraordinary revival in jazz practice on both sides of the Atlantic, with labels like International Anthem and Gondwana, artists such as Noel Brass Jr. and Yazz Ahmed, all drawing on the utopian tradition of artists like Alice Coltrane, Sun Ra, and Herbie Hancock to produce soundscapes that both evoke and inspire experiences of collective joy (Ehrenreich 2008; Gilbert 2014; Segal 2018).

Do such developments herald a more hopeful historical moment than that of the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s and 2010s? Nobody can say for sure, and there are certainly grounds for pessimism today. What we can say, I hope, is that a meditation on the nature, experience and aesthetics of solidarity can at least offer some powerful insights into what some of the conditions of possibility for democratic hope might be. The aesthetic experience of solidarity is something like the empowered self-dissolution of *communitas*, but always involves a consciousness of shared futurity and transindividual interests. Without some conscious experience of all these dimensions of collectivity, no lived form of meaningful democracy is possible. While there may be little ground for optimism wherever we do find them, we at least find some *resources of hope* (Raymond Williams 1989; Zournazi 2003).

**Note**

- 1 Arguably, we should be talking about the global Anglosphere here, as most of the same observations could be made with reference to the historical experience of Australia and New Zealand during this period; but this observation is beyond the scope of the present chapter.

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## 2 Speculative Communities

### Designing Contact Zones in Times of Eco-Eco Crisis

*Małgorzata Sugiera*

In one of her first interviews after receiving the 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature, Olga Tokarczuk repeated her controversial 2016 statement, first expressed during a grave migration crisis in Europe when many of her compatriots demonstrated a visibly anti-immigrant attitude. In it, she referred to her native Poland as an open country that had always tolerated all minorities. However, she certainly did it to contradict this prevalent image: “Just the opposite, we have done terrible things as colonizers, as the ethnic majority suppressing minority, as slave owners or murderers of Jews (Konicieczna 2019; my translation).” These words were quoted in *An Open Letter to Olga Tokarczuk* (2019), signed by Iwona L. Konicieczna, distributed via social media, which was then quoted and commented upon extensively a few days later. This lengthy letter, markedly emotional and repetitive, is compelling in the context of my present article because of its line of argument. Konicieczna writes explicitly: “Multiculti is a crime against our own nation—it is a source of its weakness and potential annihilation (my translation).” This strong stance allows Konicieczna to compare the current situation with that of the recent past to bring the dangers of excessively liberal immigration politics to the foreground. As the author posits (although almost 90% of Poles oppose), as a member of the European Union, Poland “has to face a forced implantation of a new ethnic minority,” which is “culturally alien, uneducated, unwilling to assimilate (for religious reason), poor,” and she concludes, “[a]n analogy with Jewish shtetls and city districts occurs by default” (Konicieczna 2019; my translation). *An Open Letter to Olga Tokarczuk*, and the views of its author contained within it, could have gone unnoticed had they not elicited a heated debate in Poland. Moreover, they largely correspond with anti-immigrant discourse and attitudes found in many European countries, often attributed to an apparent failure of their previous multicultural policy. This failure has laid bare the workings of the biopolitical mechanisms of excluding certain forms of life from the protection of modern liberal humanism, even as such exclusions participate in the (re)production of a seemingly universal liberal subject, not only in the former colonies but also in the heart of the Western world. This situation, increasingly complicated by new waves of economic and ecological migration (in many cases the former caused by the latter), has

been recently analysed and commented upon as a clear sign of an approaching global economic and ecological crisis by a range of sociologists and anthropologists who, despite their various methodological approaches, have come to similar conclusions.

In his *Alter-Politics* (2015), Ghassan Hage, an Australian anthropologist born in Beirut, draws from his own experiences of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to describe an exemplary attitude towards everyone who does not belong to one's own ethnic community. In his book, he writes about "the Israeli ethos of a besieged white colonial settler society" (loc. 228). This culturally defensive ethos, he underlines, has become globalised today as one constructed around the well-known figure of Otherness—"the Muslim," who in a certain respect has replaced "the Jew" as a symbolic figure of religious and cultural alterity. Mindful of that, Hage proposes to take a closer look at Western societies, which in the 1980s were open and welcoming to other cultures. However, after economic, refugee, and ecological crises (albeit on a local scale), such societies made a transition towards the state of permanent deadlock and closure. Hage elaborates, "[a]s the welfare state shrinks we increasingly have a state interested in governing the effects of social crisis rather than in the search for its causes" (loc. 564). Consequently, such anti-politics only serves to escalate the basic conflicts in all areas of life, and intensifies the feeling of having no future and being surrounded by barbaric hordes. Therefore, what we urgently need, Hage insists, is a search for alternatives: not only alternative economies and alternative modes of inhabiting and relating to the earth, but also alternative modes of thinking about and experiencing Otherness. He privileges all forms of alter-politics over oppositional politics. Therefore, he calls for various speculative visions of a possible future, similar to those designed by feminists back in the 1980s. Hage offers a Marxist analysis of a current global situation, as seen from a Western hegemonic perspective; however, something more is needed to practise his eponymous alter-politics, and I will come to this issue soon. Nevertheless, his voice belongs to those within the academia which not only document marginalised forms of being/knowing/doing but also testify to a profound crisis of our modern liberal (capitalist, racist, and heteropatriarchal) world, that is a particular onto-epistemology. This must be considered when designing speculative communities of a possible future.

Artists have an important role to play in designing speculative communities. Not only do they publicly speak about current waves of a global economic and ecological crisis and local anti-immigrant attitudes, as Tokarczuk's interview demonstrates, they take up this issue in their artistic activities. The Polish Nobel Prize winner's concept of the *Tender Narrator*, presented in her acceptance speech and named Emerging Europe's Artistic Achievement 2020, can rightly be counted among such activities. As Andrew Wrobel, Emerging Europe's funding partner underlined, "Olga Tokarczuk's lecture offers an acute analysis of the state of miscommunication in the modern world" (quoted in Turp-Balazs 2020), coupled with a speculative remedy—a dream

of a new language, a new metaphor, and a new narrator. The Tender Narrator would be

a ‘fourth-person’ one, who is not merely a grammatical construct of course, but who manages to encompass the perspective of each of the characters, as well as having the capacity to step beyond the horizon of each of them, who sees more and has a wider view, and who is able to ignore time.

(quoted in Turp-Balazs 2020)

Waiting for Tokarczuk’s dream to come true, in my article, I present what designing contact zones in the time of economic and ecological crises could mean. I focus on a few examples of a recently defined subgenre of speculative fiction—called Cli-Fi—that centralise the issue of climate change when imagining the future. Although speculative fiction shares the acronym SF with the genre of science fiction, it engages less with a future predicted on the probabilistic logic of science, progress, and modernity, and instead focusses on the intense issues of our present that might otherwise go unnoticed. In other words, the future only serves as a narrative convention to convey a significant distortion of the present; meanwhile its authors concentrate on interrogating the systems that produced mainstream science, rather than getting this science right. Moreover, as Shelley Streeby rightly argues in her *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* (2018),

speculative fiction is the larger category precisely because it is less defined by boundary-making around the word ‘science,’ stretching to encompass related modes such as fantasy and horror, forms of knowledge in excess of white Western science, and more work authored by women and people of color.

(20)

This will not only broaden the sphere of where futurity is produced, but also demonstrate how the speculative design of possible communities in the wake of climate change is linked with the endeavour to decolonise the concept of contact zones and—more broadly—Western imagination.

### **Designing a New Concept of Contact Zones**

Obviously, not only Hage has recently pointed out a close connection between the welfare state’s anti-politics and the importance of speculating about a (better) future in the world. Others, too, have spoken about a paradigmatic change which will reach out beyond Western modernity and its concept of reality, premised on, and validated by, scientific knowledge. In his *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2017), Arturo Escobar convincingly depicts one of the reasons for a global eco-eco crisis, that is “the crisis of a particular world

or set of world-making practices, the dominant form of Euro-modernity” (loc. 1662). In other words, he posits, it is crucial to rearticulate global warming not only as a multipronged capitalist crisis but also as a crisis within modernity. Similarly to Hage, Escobar sees it related to a particular ontology or mode of being in the world because, according to the Western episteme “we all live within a single world, made up of one underlying reality (one nature) and many cultures” (loc. 2017). Consequently, he identifies an urgent need for “the transition from the hegemony of modernity’s one-world ontology to a pluriverse of socionatural configurations” (loc. 394)—that is, a world in which many worlds fit. In this world “*designs for the pluriverse* becomes a tool for reimagining and reconstructing local worlds” (loc. 394; original italics). To make design—once a basic political technology of modernity—an important realm of thought and action, it needs to be decoupled from its former unsustainable, defuturing modernist practices, and its distributed nature of agency should be rediscovered. Only then will designers be able to make use of people’s capacity for shaping their worlds through collaborative ideas and solutions.

In his more recent work, *Pluriversal Politics* (2020), Escobar situates the idea of speculative design(s) within a clearer political horizon. While stressing that “another possible is possible” (2020, ix), he focusses on the practices of political ontology through which our interrelated worlds are enacted. He underlines performative aspects of such a world-making while writing explicitly: “The pluriverse is not just a trendy concept; it is a whole practice. Living in accordance with the idea that there are multiple worlds, partially connected but radically different, entails an entire different ethics of life, of being~doing~knowing” (27). Because of this clear interconnection between practices of being, doing, and knowing, Escobar sees not only a political dimension of many of the current territorial-ethnic struggles in the Global South. For him, there are ontological conflicts that are primarily fought to defend alternative models of living. In this sense, Escobar speaks about political ontology, linking it not only with speculative communities which have been, and continue to be, designed, but also with the fundamental fact of being communal—their commonality. He explains the last notion as follows: “Faced with the social devastation caused by the progressive and implacable establishment of the dominion of the individual and the market, communality seeks to assert itself as a strategy for reconstituting forces in defence of the Earth~form of life” (61). Therefore, to understand the territorial and communal defence as an ontological political practice, in the sense proposed by the author, it is crucial to stress that communality establishes itself through non-liberal, non-state organised forms. Thus, more than anything, it constitutes relational worlds, and as such requires the delineation of new trajectories for thinking beyond the Eurocentric academic mode.

Bearing the above in mind, I posit that a redefinition of the concept of *contact zones*, introduced by literary theorist and linguist Mary Louise Pratt in the early 1990s, can be helpful in enacting non-binary, relational

worlds as multiple onto-epistemic formations, while highlighting their interconnectivity. Although Pratt did her best to offer a new perspective on encounters, or even confrontations, between two or more cultures, she did not move beyond the already existing centre-periphery models which, only a few years later Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Stephen Greenblatt (2010), among many others, subsequently deemed quite inapplicable in the era of global migration. These models take for granted the—albeit questionable, especially at the turn of the millennium—stability, fixity, and internal coherence of (mostly two) distinct cultures before they are disrupted or contaminated when meeting or clashing with one another under conditions of unequal power relations. Therefore, if the concept of contact zones should remain operational in today's world of global migration and permanent multipronged eco-eco crises, and bring forth much-needed new forms of communication and *communitas*, we have to look back to its inception in order to adequately redefine it and make it applicable in the present context(s).

Pratt coined the term contact zones in her keynote address at the Modern Language Association Literacy Conference in 1990. She did it with the clearly expressed intention “to contrast ideas of community that underlie much of the thinking about language, communication, and culture that gets done in the academy” (Pratt [1993] 2008, 507). As her main example, Pratt took a comprehensive 1,200-page letter, *The First New Chronicle and Good Government*, which an Indigenous Andean, Poma de Ayala from the city of Cuzco, Peru, wrote to King Philip III of Spain in the early 1600s. As Pratt argued, the letter, which was found three centuries later, by chance, in the Danish Royal Archive in Copenhagen, revealed a space of encounters, typical of colonial systems, which she termed a contact zone. The notion refers to “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 501). With reference to this example, Pratt proposed her own model of an autoethnographic text, which critically engages with representations Others have made of us. As she explained, although such texts could be socially and culturally complex, they have an interactional dimension. However, what is of importance here, is that Pratt did not limit such contact zones to textual materials. The notion, as she envisioned it in the early 1990s, covers all kinds of phenomena pertaining to transculturation in other disciplines and media; it applies to the ways and strategies of appropriating and adapting fragments of the invader or metropolis' dominant culture.

Since the 1990s, the concept of contact zones has been reformulated and modified time and again by many researchers from various fields who often foregrounded different aspects of the original concept. Most recently, in her *When Species Meet* (2007), Donna Haraway highlighted one specific contact zone which she named *natureculture*. However, she did not limit her definition to cross-species communication—quite the opposite. Her definition also refers to intra- and interrelations between nations, ethnic groups, and other kinds of communities. Referring to Cary Wolfe, Haraway defines embodied

communication as a flow of entangled, meaningful bodies in time, “a shared trans-species being-in-the-world constituted by complex relations of trust, respect, dependence, and communication” (Haraway 2007, 372). Clearly, this specific formulation, based upon one chosen example of cross-species relationship, subverts the inherent binary opposition between the Western-specific practice of cultural asymmetry and a utopia of harmonious multiculturalism, as is characteristic of the previous definition and re-definitions of Pratt’s contact zones. Nonetheless, I would argue, it does not adequately address the question of how to design such “complex relations of trust, respect, dependence, and communication” (Haraway, 372) for more intricate human communities in the context of ongoing eco-eco crisis, which might turn out to be even more severely in need than those already confronted. It is not an easy task to design the relations Haraway writes about in *When Species Meet*. As I have already pointed out, the crux of today’s multipronged crisis—the effects of which the welfare state so desperately tries to govern, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic—constitutes an increasingly evident failure of fiercely promoted multiculturalism.

Significantly, multiculturalism in its Western guise in the 1980s and 1990s was based on a highly asymmetrical relation between the encompassing and the encompassed cultures. Within its scope, the dominant culture only offered a limited space of tolerance. However, as Hage (2017) argues, in the case of deeply religious Muslims, all aspects of everyday life are governed by the Laws of God, and this is a kind of religiosity that constitutes a serious negation of the logic of multicultural acceptability. Thus, within the framework of his alter-politics, he wonders whether and how failed multiculturalism, conceived within the framework of Western hegemonic onto-epistemological order, could be replaced by various alternative realities that could coexist and mutually respect one another. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) also demonstrates how, in the 1990s, such postulated recognition of cultural diversity did not necessarily mean an acceptance of epistemic plurality. At the same time, his writings are the best example of a crucial difference Escobar, among others, makes—the difference between alternatives modernities and alternatives to modernity (Escobar 2018).

In his *Epistemologies of the South* (2014), Santos posits a speculative concept of an ecology of knowledges which encompasses diverse and interwoven epistemic practices. However, if I read him correctly, it does not necessarily include diverse ontological practices, ways of world-making, focussing predominantly—if not exclusively—on traditionally understood epistemological dimensions of social interactions. However, important for Santos is that every social practice is simultaneously an epistemic practice. Thus, he puts the economic and ecological crises on par with the epistemic one, and looks for alternatives which could hardly be envisaged within any of the Eurocentric critical theories. While highly critical towards the Western episteme, he is concurrently deeply convinced that we ought to appreciate all those social practices, ways of life and experiences which have been marginalised by the

monoculture of the Moderns in Europe. Therefore, Santos quite matter-of-factly states: “What is usually called Western modernity is a very complex set of phenomena in which dominant and subaltern perspectives coexist and constitute rival modernities” (2014, 145). What is more, he is certain that if today’s Westerners leave aside the issue of their past, which ought to be imagined anew, it will be impossible to design new ways of how Western societies could transform and emancipate themselves. However, a newly imagined, and therefore speculative past, must encompass all those realities (or worlds) which have been suppressed, silenced, or marginalised.

Consequently, Santos postulates a new sociological transgressive procedure which he calls the sociology of absences. “This consists,” he writes, “of an inquiry that aims to explain that what does not exist is in fact actively produced as nonexistent, that is, as a noncredible alternative to what exists” (2014, 171). For this reason, he also speaks about clear-cut cases of epistemicide, simply caused by the hegemonic and Eurocentric modernity. As such, the destruction of a local, subaltern knowledge involves the destruction of specific social practices, and simultaneously the disqualification of the social agents that operate accordingly. Such a destruction cannot remain without long-lasting consequences. One of them, Santos argues, is a still deepening abyss between the Global North and the Global South, a multipronged process premised on the invisibility of popular, lay, plebeian, peasant, or Indigenous knowledges which do not fit into any of the hegemonic concepts of knowledge and, for this reason, vanish, deemed irrelevant to the supposedly universal Western knowledge, or incommensurable with dominant social and life practices in Europe. Bearing this in mind, at Western universities we have to work out the basic rules to coexist with heterogeneous-situated knowledges and realities (or *reals*, if we reserve *reality* for the West, as defined by the Moderns and guaranteed by scientific knowledge). Such basic rules involve learning how to consult diverse cognitive maps which use alternative scales and perspectives. It is exactly in this context that Santos recalls Pratt’s definition of contact zones. However, he does it only to postulate a new type of contact zone, without offering any modification to this category’s definition, namely “translational contact zones” (Santos 2014, 227). This new type of contact zone must involve linguistic and extralinguistic phenomena and be politically articulated. Significantly, Santos understands translatability as the acknowledgement of a difference and the motivation to deal with it that should make hegemony impossible, albeit to a limited extent. The following citation clearly demonstrates this: “Ecologies of knowledges and intercultural translation can only proceed and flourish in subaltern cosmopolitan contact zones, that is, decolonial contact zones” (Santos, 227). Therefore, according to Santos, although they can flourish in subaltern areas, translational contact zones could become an epistemological political practice but not ontological one, as suggested by Escobar (2020), and referred to before. In other words, with Santos’s concept of contact zones, premised on an idea of ecologies of knowledges, we nevertheless remain in the hegemonic realm of “One World

made from one world” (Escobar 2020, 9), unable to properly address the critical failure of multicultural policies.

I am not entirely convinced by the answers provided in *Epistemologies of the South*, especially the new type of contact zones it introduces; despite its novelty, it remains a variation of Pratt’s definition. However, I am positive that Santos’s basic question concerning knowledge premised upon order is still relevant: “[W]hether it is possible to know by creating solidarity” (2014, 156). In the same vein, James Clifford formulated similar questions:

Stories of cultural contact and change have been structured by a pervasive dichotomy: absorption by the other *or* resistance to the other [...]. Yet what if identity is conceived not as a boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject? The story or stories of interaction must then be more complex, less linear and theological. What changes when the subject of “history” is no longer Western? How do stories of contact, resistance, and assimilation appear from the standpoint of groups in which exchange rather than identity is the fundamental value to be sustained?

(Clifford 1988, 344; original italics)

I have quoted this passage almost in its entirety because Clifford addresses an issue which is really important nowadays—one reads his words as a plea for going beyond Western fundamental dichotomies, along the lines of Escobar’s onto-epistemological, pluriversal politics.

In a sense, the question is whether it is possible both to know by creating solidarity, as Santos would have it, and to value exchange more than identity, as Hage posited. While defining his concept of *multiple realities*, Hage draws on Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s concept of alter-anthropology and his understanding of the relational identity, which has been deeply informed by Amerindian perspectivism. As a result, Viveiros de Castro describes a unified subjectivity producing a multiplicity of natures or realities. Significantly, he assumes that “the different points of view emerge from the ways in which different bodies constitute different modes of relating to, inhabiting and being enmeshed in their environments” (Hage 2015, loc. 1796). In other words, none of the different points of view mean subjective interest. Here, a perspective is not a representation—the point of view is always in the body, grounded in its cumulative experiences and affects. Contrary to Viveiros de Castro’s anthropological approach, Hage seeks comparative examples in Western thought, such as Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of bodily habitus which, to a certain extent, shares a similar vision of multiple realities with Viveiros de Castro and Hage. Bourdieu’s different worlds, produced within the framework of the modern concept of reality, decidedly reject the possibility of radical alterity as posited by Viveiros de Castro. Nevertheless, the French philosopher investigated the differences between such durable, transposable dispositions as worldviews, or rules of conduct and thinking, because they



usually operate beneath the level of rational ideology and, as such, are the best proof of subjects living in alternative realities. Thus, as Hage points out, Bourdieu conceptualised the very core of what alterity of the Alter could mean—its bodily and affective grounding in the reality in which everyone lives (Hage 2015).

With manifest irony, Hage repeats that one of the greatest accomplishments of Western modernity has been to convince the Moderns that a single reality exists. However, “our reality is far more layered and differentiated than we thought and that, just as there are dominant and dominated forces within a reality, there are also dominant and dominated realities” (Hage 2015, loc. 3223). Therefore, once again it is quite evident that speculative contact zones, defined in times of global eco-eco crisis, should not be limited to “language, communication, and culture,” as Pratt once defined them ([1993] 2008, 507). They must consider epistemic differences which result from ontological characteristics of multiple worlds, existing side by side in one and the same pluriverse, as depicted by both Santos and Escobar. In *Pluriversal Politics*, while developing tools for confronting the multipronged crisis, Escobar introduces a Spanish compound verb *sentipensar* for conceiving and describing life in new non-binary terms. Namely, the verb names “a way of knowing that does not separate thinking from feeling, reason from emotion, knowledge from caring” (Escobar 2020, xxxv). Although *sentipensar* focusses on a crucial difference between knowledge and knowing, a notion that seems handier in my pursuit of redefining the contact zones is a material-semiotic category of committed knowledge as a form of care, similarly premised on interdependency as the ontological state, like in María Puig de la Bellacasa’s *Matters of Care* (2017).

As Puig de la Bellacasa explains, caring implicates different rationalities, issues, and practices in different settings, and it means, firstly, taking responsibility for the other’s well-being. In her book, Western speculative ethics meets what Amerindians called—and still call—*Buen Vivir* (good living), or *Sumak Kawsay* in Quechua—the native language of Poma de Ayala who wrote the letter on which Pratt’s notion of contact zones was premised in the early 1990s. No wonder, therefore, that Puig de la Bellacasa sees a response to the agonistic politics of incompatible interests and power relations in the eponymous matters of care. She writes:

Respect of concerns and the call for care become arguments to moderate a critical standpoint, the kind of standpoint that tends to produce divergences and oppositional knowledges based on attachments to particular visions, and indeed that sometimes presents (its) positions as nonnegotiable.

(2017, 48)

Significantly, the author of *Matters of Care* never speaks about caring in terms of epistemic normativity and ethical obligation. For her, it is always a

transformative ethos which involves affective, ethical, and hands-on agencies of practical and material consequence. That is why caring is not only “a speculative affective mode that encourages intervention in what things could be” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 66). It is also a haptic speculation which

is not about imaginative expectation of events to come; it is the everyday (survival) strategy rooted in the present of ‘life below the radars’ of optic orders that do not welcome, know, or not even *perceive* the practices that exceed preexistent representations and meanings.

(Puig de la Bellacasa, 117; original italics)

Here a (better) future is, therefore, not so much foreseen in the old oculo-centric way but rather “fore-touched.”

Haptic speculation, defined by Puig de la Bellacasa, turns out to be particularly crucial when one thinks about designing new kinds of contact zones and communities. First, we should conceive it as the everyday (survival) strategy in times of incremental global crisis and a way of living on a damaged planet. This strategy should be practised both in real life and in the arts (or, much better, beyond this division between real-life and artistic practices). In both cases, the strategy incites a similar speculative move from the instrumentalisation of probability in the service of capitalism, to the limitless possibilities that can foster alternative forms of connectivity—forms that exceed and defy the privatising logics of nation, corporation, and nuclear family. As an example of such speculation, I have chosen a recently published climate fiction novel whose author focusses on ways of “living below the radars” of capitalist order as a proper way of building, maintaining, and caring for new communities: Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* (2017), which takes place in a not-too-far future of the eponymous year 2140. The action is set in a flooded lower Manhattan following two major rises in seawater level, caused by global climate change. However, the area remains a preferable destination for refugees fleeing from eco-eco disasters in other parts of the world. Significantly, the unprecedented climatic catastrophe serves as a truly experimental zone, providing the author with a hotbed of new designs for societal transition that dare to imagine a world beyond capitalist neoliberal economy. These new designs are meant to reinvent the human and the commons, as well as particular ways of being, knowing, and doing, of being together, trusting, and caring for each other. If today the main aim of speculative design is to cause creative onto-epistemological frictions, Robinson’s *New York 2140* does it, indeed, in an exemplary fashion.

### **Towards a Post-Economic Society**

By choosing the Anthropocene over the notion of climate change in the title of his book, Adam Trexler rightly points out that in the mid-2010s, when his *Anthropocene Fictions* (2015) was published, we were facing a phenomenon

that had been measured and scientifically verified, and conclusively linked to human emissions of fossil fuels. This allowed us to see the real agency of atmospheric warming (Trexler 2015, 6–7). Thus, Trexler has a point when writing: “Early climate change novels tended to focus on the theoretical malleability of global climate, in terms of terraforming, nuclear winter, or geological processes” (9). The novels treated anthropogenic global warming mainly as another environmental problem, “alongside deforestation, urban development, toxic waste, and depletion of the ozone layer” (Trexler, 9). Only at the turn of the twentieth century did climate change become a central issue in American politics, bringing forth a new wave of novels. However, if we shift our focus from fossil fuel-linked anthropogenic climate change to speculative fabulations that make climate change the central problem in imagining the future, as I have done in this introduction, we will widen our perspective.

In the aforementioned *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* (2018), Shelley Streeby indicates that the first environmental wave of concern was sparked by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in the early 1960s. Carson’s work used the example of pesticides in order to make a case for human-created damage to the planet. What is of interest here, is how Carson mixes fictional and factual genres, and begins her argument with a piece of speculative fiction about a small town that one sunny day woke up in total silence because all insects had been killed by the overuse of pesticides. The speculative aspect of the story is indicated already in the opening chapter’s title “A Fable for Tomorrow.” Significantly, as Streeby underlines, the corporation Monsanto—one of the biggest producers of pesticides at the time—answered almost immediately with a parody. In its *Monsanto Magazine*, the firm published a piece of speculative fiction “The Desolate Year,” which narrated a global invasion of rampant bugs during a year without pesticides. The bugs not only caused various agricultural disasters, but also attacked people, eating them from the inside (Streeby 2018, 16–17). This kind of war of speculative fabulations proves how such stories were less about engaging readership with a possible future in favour of overlooked aspects of the present. Although various genres of fictional speculation addressing the future of climate change emerged from the first wave of environmental concern in the early 1960s, hardly any of them speculated about new forms of community. A cursory look at a couple of examples will suffice.

Already in the early 1960s, future communities were viewed with a dystopic lens, as clearly seen in two of J. G. Ballard’s novels, often named as the founding texts of climate fiction: *The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Burning World* (1964)—the latter was expanded and retitled as *The Drought* in 1965. Both envisage meteorological cataclysms which bring forth deep social crises; only in the latter, climate change is manmade. *The Burning World/The Drought* tells how industrial waste has created a thick mantle over the oceans and destroyed the precipitation cycle. This has progressively transformed Earth into a desert, scourged by dust storms and fires. In *The Drowned World*, however, what caused rising temperatures, the melting of polar ice caps and

permafrost, and turned Europe into a system of giant lagoons, is extreme solar instability and increased radioactivity. Consequences involved not only a dramatic depopulation, but also a kind of counter-evolution which retrogressed the planet into a world of lizards and rainforests of the Triassic epoch. Significantly, the world's regression is accompanied by a human regression. Their reality and dreams fuse together, and they slowly move back into their amniotic past, and into the emergent past of the species, entering the world of total, neuronomic time. In turn, this causes not only deeper isolation and self-containment, but also a strange feeling of dissolving of one's own cells in the surrounding medium. Already at the beginning of the novel, the main character, marine biologist Robert Kerans who abandoned his research of new flora in a place known as London, speaks quite clearly that the social and individual de-evolution has to be "a careful preparation for a radically new environment, with its own internal landscape and logic, where old categories of thought would merely be an encumbrance" (Ballard 2014, 12). Self-evidently, this radical newness which Kerans forebodes here makes it fully impossible to speculate about any future. The same kind of time-machine is actually moving backwards for both the individual and society in *The Drought*. And its main aim is to demonstrate the collapse of Western civilisation with all its inherent forms of commonality. Although the last sentence announces: "It was some time later that he failed to notice it had started to rain" (Ballard 1968, 122), the rain signifies no rescue for those absurd remnants of what used to be human society, which the author depicts in a manifestly satirical manner. Also here, therefore, he refuses to speculate about any future because of its ultimate otherness.

Frank Herbert's *Dune*, one of world's bestselling science fiction novels, could be situated at the opposite end of the spectrum to Ballard concerning speculative fabrications about climate change written in the 1960s. The first instalment of the saga, published in 1965, shows the downfall of a galactic empire on the verge of *Jihad*, or struggle. This topic is but a pretext to depict the way humans and their institutions may change in a multi-layered manner in times of crisis. It is exemplified by the fate of the character Paul Atreides, a foreigner forced to adopt the way of people living in the desert on the planet Arrakis. The author focusses on the planet, both an inhospitable wasteland and the only natural resource of "the spice" which extends human life and enhances mental abilities across the whole Herbertian universe. However, as it turns out, the local natives, called Fremen, have unwittingly taken part in two ongoing, long-term undertakings, carried out in great secrecy. Firstly, in pursuing its own political aims within the framework of an aptly designed breeding programme among competing feudal interstellar houses, the sisterhood, Bene Gesserit, secretly introduced a specific mixture of myths and legends in case they need the Fremen's support. Secondly, a dry-land ecologist Kynes, and his son, introduced advanced technologies and trained the natives to terraform Arrakis. However, as the appendix "The Ecology of Dune" makes clear, Kynes and Bene Gesserit treat the Fremen the same

way—a malleable tool in their hands. Thus, *Dune* reads as a model of how colonisation and civilising missions work; Arrakis is a stage for demonstration purposes. By the same token, what is clearly visible from today’s perspective, Herbert re-enacts already known communal forms, not only of the competing Western feudal houses and colonial empires, but also of Indigenous kinships as described by anthropologists of his time. He does it to aptly display their inherent mechanisms and—more importantly—to demonstrate their mutual dependence. Nevertheless, like Ballard, in his *Dune*, Herbert shows no interest in speculating about new forms of communality to come.

In this respect, the recent climate change novels that Trexler calls “Anthropocene fictions,” especially those written in the last decade, represent a new trend. Not only do they make climate change the central problem in imagining a future, but they also try to design such in-depth economic, political, and ecological transitions that are needed “to face the interrelated crises of climate, food, energy, poverty, and meaning” (Escobar 2020, 69). One of these eco-eco novels, as I call them, is Robinson’s *New York 2140* (2017). It focusses on small parochial communities, or even smaller unities of human relations, to demonstrate the dynamics of how they must change and restructure to regain the agency needed to cope with the harsh reality in times of crisis. In this respect, *New York 2140* differs visibly from Robinson’s renowned and most frequently interpreted Cli-Fi novel, *Science in the Capital* trilogy (2004–2007), republished in a compressed and amended version as *Green Earth* (2015). There is good reason for the action in *Green Earth* to develop in the American capital. After all, the enormous geoengineering projects, which scientists have developed to combat more acute climate changes, need huge central funding and governmental support. In contrast, *New York 2140* shows networked local strategies, clearly inspired by Bruno Latour’s Actor–Network Theory (ANT); in this case, in the face of ecological and economic disaster, the survival movements centre on what people can create together, rather than what powerful nation–states and corporations are willing to give.

In a sense, the way *New York 2140* is structured is reminiscent of Tokarczuk’s Tender Narrator who should manage “to encompass the perspective of each of the characters, as well as having the capacity to step beyond the horizon of each of them, who sees more and has a wider view” (quoted in Turp-Balazs 2020). However, rather than telling the story, Robinson’s typical third-person narrator makes place for, and gives voice to, each character, in turn. The narrator is also a kind of camera which follows individual characters (and two couples), depicting their different ways of living without even trying to connect them in a single story. The characters and the events they get involved in are neatly separated into discrete chapters, each with several, sometimes extensive mottos that distinguish them from the rest. What is more, one character, called “a citizen,” “the citizen,” or even “the city,” stands out as a vantage point from which a wider view of *New York 2140*’s world is offered. This voice tells, for instance, the history of New York and

Manhattan, and gives detailed information on the two big surges at the beginning of the twenty-second century that have resulted in around a 50-foot sea level increase when compared to the twentieth century. And when the individual fates of other characters come to a happy ending of sorts, “the city” warns the reader: “There was no guarantee of permanence to anything they did” (Robinson 2017, loc. 9352). Such a solution enables the reader to see the agency of loosely connected people who, step by step, learn how to build new forms of community in order to respond properly to the emerging problems. Importantly, Robinson’s figures represent a whole range of nationalities, classes, races, ages, and life stories. However, one can hardly speak about Pratt’s contact zones in this novel. They all live in the old Met Life tower on Madison Square, in the intertidal zone of lower Manhattan, named SuperVenice. The 40-story building, housing over 2,000 people, is a cooperative, owned by its residents. It has its own boathouse, dining room, farm and animal floor which means the co-op is largely self-sufficient. As one character sums up: “Have you ever noticed that our building is a kind of actor network that can do things? We got the cloud star, the lawyer, the building expert, the building itself, the police detective, the money man...” (loc. 6222). The way Robinson’s novel unfolds demonstrates how right he is to offer the reader the ANT perspective.

The year 2140 is the pinnacle of the novel’s action for a reason. Over 50 years has passed since the second big surge; sea levels appear to have stabilised, providing opportunities for investment and gentrification. For instance, this leads to an offer on the residents’ building, twice its retail value. But it is only the tip of the iceberg. Thanks to Franklin, the “money man” from the above quotation, the reader has a good insight into how a volatile, high-risk, high return, derivative finance market works. To demonstrate its workings, the author focusses on the intertidal zone of lower Manhattan because it is here that a vestige of Roman law still holds good in the modern world. According to Roman law, the intertidal is owned by no one, or everyone. As Franklin explains, “[i]t was neither private property nor government property, and therefore, same legal theorists ventured, it was perhaps same kind of return of the commons” (loc. 1923–1928). No wonder, on the one hand, these circumstances foster the growth of cooperatives like the one in the Met Life tower, squats, neighbourhood associations, and other emerging forms of sociality. On the other, however, this situation invites all kinds of legal and illegal operations of the global financial market. Franklin works for the hedge fund WaterPrice, and his area of expertise is drowned coastlines. Perpetual rise and fall of sea level in the whole world is continually measured, meaning it could be invested in or hedged against. Moreover, it joins all the other commodities and derivatives, including housing, in getting indexed and bet upon. This forms a speculative bubble, and its bursting is imminent. Time and again, Robinson lets his characters refer to the 2008 collapse in order to demonstrate that this time the neoliberal global order could be overturned because ordinary people still have power. They could crash the system by withholding

due payments: mortgages, rents, health insurance, and so on. Such a civil resistance is possible because liquidity of the market relies on these steady payments. The most important thing—it cannot be done individually, it must be a collective act. In Robinson’s novel this collective act succeeds, although the voice of “the city” warns on behalf of the author: “Past results being no guarantee of future performance” (loc. 8261). There is no guarantee because Denver, as the new US capital, still exists, and although the government has been outsmarted this time, it still wields considerable power.

By depicting the activities of Franklin, the money man, Robinson juxtaposes two forms of a broader cultural production of futurity: the performativity of a global financial derivatives market and the possibility of connecting to yet-unthought-of forms of commonality. In this way, he shows that financial speculation, extrapolation, and predictions rely on mathematical models and probabilistic logics, thus remaining masked fictions. However, he also demonstrates that speculation becomes a colonising mechanism when it attempts to capture, profit from, and realise the future. Therefore, *New York 2140* could be read as a speculative novel about how to decolonise speculation in the sense proposed by transnational feminist Aimee Bahng (2018). She tries to rethink Western ecological policies from the perspective of the migrant undercommons and their possible futures, which have been often omitted by recent mathematical forecasting. Bahng questions how the (global) narratives about science, modernity, and futurity are intertwined with how we think about race, gender, and sexuality. In her book *Migrant Futures* (2018), in view of a seemingly monolithic financialised future, as conceived by investment banks and international developments funds, Bahng asks “what alternative futurities [...] could emerge from those living beyond the purview of statistical projection?” (loc. 275). Robinson, in a sense, answers this question in *New York 2140* by depicting one alternative futurity. He does it by showing everyday emergent (survival) strategies rooted in and, at least partially, shaped by the present climate change, as demonstrated, for instance, when the big hurricane Fyodor struck New York. These strategies clearly “exceed preexistent representations and meanings,” as Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 117) would have it, offering a glimpse into a future post-economic society.

### **Speculating in a Time of Eco-Eco-Crisis (A Temporary Conclusion)**

Robinson opens his *New York 2140* with a conversation between two coders, Mutt and Jeff, about what is the real value during a time of sea level rise: food, money, code? Their attempt at answering this question is less important than the question itself, to which the whole novel supposedly provides an answer. In such a situation, however, it is the readers who offer their answers—undoubtedly significantly different depending on each recipient’s way of thinking and living. What counts the most in this context, is the fact that Robinson’s novel demonstrates that speculative fiction

can decolonise imagination by performing the work of social change: it “can interrogate systems of labor, kinship structures, and power by shifting assumptions about modernity and technology” (Bahng 2018, loc. 2351). Thus, it can be of importance in such countries as Poland, which is marginalised in the Global North’s approaches to eco-eco crisis. Although such countries similarly refuse to open up to eco-eco migrants, they have nevertheless been haunted by global conflicts about race, class, gender, and sexuality on a local scale. Moreover, their contact zones are still thought of and represented in a rather outdated manner, as I have mentioned in the introduction (see also Sugiera 2018). This hardly allows, therefore, for a pertinent reflection on their situation in a much broader global context. However, by way of conclusion, I would like to raise an even more important issue.

Although Pratt’s descriptive-analytical category has been redefined as a category of speculative design here, this move may turn out to be insufficient as an instrument of social change. As Eva Haifa Giraud rightly points out in her *What Comes after Entanglement?* (2019), it is not only networked local strategies of political and social action that are vital. An equally significant role is played by all kinds of exclusions and former structural inequalities, many of which have already been naturalised, but still define the agency of various parties involved in social struggles and the possession of uneven powers. Therefore, Giraud stresses that an encounter serves as a source of ethical and epistemological *response-ability*. In a sense, Robinson shows it too, when introducing the voice of “the citizen” or “the city” in *New York 2140*. Nevertheless, the voice rather demonstrates the emergent character of local entanglement than its power of exclusion. Yet, a new relational ethics also has to take into account the after-effects of exclusion, particularly in the context local contact zones. Giraud explains: “This form of responsibility is necessary for future transformation, by making exclusions visible and open to contestation by those who are most affected by them” (2019, loc. 3927). Thus, designing new kinds of contact zones should be seen as the beginning of a larger process. After that, we also have to design new forms of response-ability for all humans and more-than humans, whose exclusion has paved the way for the creation of a contact zone—no matter if this is reality or just a speculative fabulation.

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# 3 The Emotional Citizenship of Exile

*Tadeusz Koczanowicz*

In this text, I propose a concept of emotional citizenship which is not based on rights granted by the nation-state but on feelings for the other. I place this category in discussions about the *liquid* and *second modernity* and the figure of a refugee as the modern form of subjectivity. I show how such an understanding of citizenship exceeds the division between global and local and is therefore better suited for the problems of globalisation than national citizenship.

## **Citizenship as a Zombie Category**

*Citizenship* has become a living dead category. Since the decline of the welfare state, it provides much less protection or precise rights to vulnerable individuals or precarious communities; however, it remains the primary unit that organises our lives and limits our political imagination, freedom, and ability to be together. Ulrich Beck, who coined the term *zombie category*, did not refer to citizenship per se, but made an even broader argument with Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim that criticised sociology as a discipline for being based on “nationally fixed social categories of industrial society [...] which have died, yet live on” (2002, 27), such as family, class, poverty, and full employment (202–213). In other words, they decry it for using categories deeply tied to the nation-state as the basic form of institutionalised community in industrial societies. The zombification of these categories is a consequence of what Beck calls the challenges of the *second modernity*. These are centred around individualisation but are also characterised by different dimensions of globalisation, underemployment, and ecological crisis. In the face of such changes, Beck asks “how we live, how we can respond to these changes and how we can analyze them in sociological terms” (206).

These questions became a key challenge for Zygmunt Bauman, who wrote the foreword to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s book. Bauman’s (2002) thoughts circulate around what might seem a simple observation or lesson he learnt from the book: modern troubles faced by individuals might be the same as in the past, but they do not add up to a common cause, everybody is left alone with their problems. This situation poses a challenge not only for social studies but also for humanity. Bauman (2002, XIX) references Beck’s claim from

the book *The Reinvention of Politics* that a society undergoing individualisation needs a “new reformation” or “radicalization of modernity.” This refers to the need to seek new ways of thinking about being together—ways that would replace old institutions which are becoming useless in tackling the challenges of the changing world.

Beck and Bauman’s reflections on the position of sociology in post-industrial society was an ongoing dialogue throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. During this time, Bauman and Beck tried to redefine several crucial concepts. In 2000, Bauman published a book entitled *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* that described the titular concept’s place in contemporary thought with reference to Raymond Williams: “Paradise lost or a paradise still hoped to be found; one way or another, this is definitely not a paradise that we inhabit and not the paradise we know from our experience (Bauman 2000a, 3).” Bauman saw community as merely a dream stemming from the lonely, individual feelings of insecurity and anxiety that are symptomatic of modernity. Invoking Beck, he wrote that we could try to seek “biographical solutions” (144) to these feelings, but this only makes the source of the problem stronger. Growing more distanced from each other makes the feeling of losing control even greater, because controlling the world is not only beyond the capabilities of individuals, but also societies and nation-states. Meeting life’s challenges requires collective action on every level. This is where Bauman (2000a, 150) sees the greatest hope for the return of community:

If there is to be a community in the world of individuals, it can only be [...] a community woven together from sharing a mutual care; a community of concern and responsibility for the equal right to be a human and the equal ability to act on that right.

Bauman’s 2000 book on community preceded his best-known writings on *liquid modernity*, which consisted of several books written in an attempt to reinvent sociology for the second modernity. In these works, Bauman no longer sought to propose new sociological terms, but completely reinvent the discipline. His new aim was to describe the existential situation of the second modernity and seek answers to the constant crisis that marks it.

The metaphor of *melting* was inspired by the famous quote from *The Communist Manifesto*: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind” (Marx and Engels 1969, 114). Bauman uses this quote with the qualification that Marx meant that *melting solids* would dissolve the forces of the capitalist economy, which would destroy the old world and become the ground for instituting the *new order*. Bauman (2006, 4) writes that the new order was supposed to be solid and immune to cultural and social challenges, not because it would colonise every sphere of life, but because “whatever else might have happened in that life has been rendered

irrelevant and ineffective as far as the relentless and continuous reproduction of that order was concerned.”

Bauman follows a different reading of the metaphor for the deterioration of the social and economic structures of a society facing rapid changes it cannot comprehend. It is closest to the reading proposed by the American thinker Marshall Berman in his book *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, which elaborates on the cultural consequences of *The Communist Manifesto*. Berman (1988, 89) places Marx’s work alongside the century’s modernist manifestos and sees it as a cultural critique rather than a prophecy of a new order:

Marx’s second clause, which proclaims the destruction of everything holy, is more complex and more interesting than the standard nineteenth-century materialist assertion that God does not exist. Marx is moving in the dimension of time, working to evoke an ongoing historical drama and trauma. He is saying that the aura of holiness is suddenly missing, and that we cannot understand ourselves in the present until we confront what is absent. The final clause—“and men at last are forced to face...”—not only describes a confrontation with a perplexing reality but acts it out, forces it on the reader—and, indeed, on the writer too, for “men,” *die Menschen* as Marx says, are all in it together, at once subjects and objects of the pervasive process that melts everything solid into air.

(Berman 1988, 89)

For Bauman too, the metaphor of melting serves as a call to reinvent sociology and the concept of community amidst weakening power structures and rapid social change. This transformation is rooted less in the economy than in culture—in life itself. What Bauman is really calling for is the realisation that industrial society no longer exists, but its institutions still organise our life. This demands a reinvention of communal life.

Melting solids were part of Bauman’s own experience and identity, his own life, as Martin Jay, an American historian of the Frankfurt School, observed. In his somewhat critical article, Jay places Bauman’s writings on liquid modernity in the history of émigrés analysing the nature of modernity. Jay references Charles Baudelaire’s contemplations on the *vaporization* of the self to write about the nineteenth century at an age when:

The most perspicacious European thinkers could talk of a “gaseous modernity”, in which the transitional stage of liquidity was being by-passed with the rapid dissolution of the traditional world. The century that followed also experienced the unsettling, often sinister, power of gas, whether in the trenches of the First World War, the extermination chambers of the Second, or the greenhouse effects of climate change at the century’s end. There can be few more chilling examples of the vaporization of the self than the utter absence of bodies in the wreckage of the World Trade Center towers, when the toxic smoke

clouds finally dissipated. And at a moment when we are all too familiar with economic bubbles bursting, it seems more than ever an age of gaseous instability.

(Jay 2010, 96)

This description shows an ongoing process of melting since the nineteenth century, as well as the limits of any grand metaphor. Jay criticises Bauman's writing for overusing the metaphor in a way that creates only binary oppositions. The American historian observes how all the thinkers writing about modernity noticed that the old structures were being melted and immediately replaced by new, solid structures and bureaucracy; modernity, in all its forms, is a dialectical, ongoing process that destroys power structures in order to construct stronger ones. This thought is also present in Bauman's writing, but the problem Jay sees is that Bauman is not interested in hybrid forms between the oppositions he is naming. He does not really acknowledge that the concepts of *melting* and *solid* overlook a whole spectrum of radical development.

Jay views Bauman's writing as full of simplistic metaphors and broad arguments that selectively use examples, quotes and data to support the views of the author, who relies on his pen and polemicist writing talent more than his knowledge as an academic sociologist (Jay 2010, 99–101). Nevertheless, Jay admits that Bauman displays a brilliant talent for observation and wisdom that many careful and systematic sociologists could find envious—a talent that spots change quicker than anybody else. Jay sees Bauman's biography as the source of that modernity wisdom—the biography of a secular “non-Jewish” Jew, as Jay writes following Isaac Deutscher (2017). He frames Bauman's worldview within historical debates about the status of secular Jews in Central and Eastern Europe who were the “harbingers of modernity, in particular its liquid variety” (102). The creation of the Israeli state was an attempt to settle Jews into an “Apollonian” nation, and with it they lost their status of ambassadors of modernity.

When Zygmunt Bauman was hounded out of Poland [...] he tried the Israeli solution, but soon found it unpalatable. Nationalist communalism based on returning to the land was not in his bones. And so, as a good Mercurian, he moved on, mastering a new language, finding a new audience, re-inventing himself once again. The story of non-Jewish Jews from Poland is one of quintessential Mercurian restlessness and uprootedness, with all the attendant dangers and opportunities. Bauman was one of the lucky ones, a survivor who managed to avoid or at least survive the compromises and moral dilemmas of so many of his compatriots. And with his survival went an extraordinary sensitivity—that “unusual life wisdom” [...] that allowed him to formulate his grand metaphoric vision of a modernity undergoing rapid liquidization.

(Jay 2010, 103)

Jay does not think Bauman merely projected his experience onto the world by declaring that now everyone is a nomad. Rather, his experience allowed him to see further through the waves of liquid modernity and point out directions in which we ought to go with the flow (104). This is the deeper message of the last essay in *Liquid Modernity*, entitled “Afterthought: On Writing Sociology,” in which Bauman meditated on the position of exile. These thoughts led him to reflect on the duty of sociological thinking—also the topic of the whole book—in which he tries to grasp the role of social sciences after the *first modernity*. He concludes that a sociology that is not engaged is impossible, and that no matter what kind of political affiliation the sociologist stands for, sociology should make sure that human choices remain free (Bauman 2000b, 216). Bauman sees sociology as carrying the message of liquid modernity that lets everyone increasingly reinvent themselves. This message must be recognised in order to understand the world around us rather than looking at old pictures of a non-existent world of the first modernity. Engagement must take place in relation to contemporary issues, not in closed debates that concern historians rather than sociologists or cultural theorists. Sociologists must see the world as a process that is happening and demands reaction from both individuals and communities, no matter how temporary. In this way they can establish lines of communication and exchange between different groups and individuals.

This reinvention exceeds the distinction between citizenship and new forms of community since it can be realised within both frameworks. It is grounded in the belief that state, citizenship, and nation are not stable or given, rather they are names or concepts that change along with society. This way of thinking transcends the local, egoistic, patriarchal, and nationalistic approach of the nation-state and lets social science abandon its service to the nation-state and develop a perspective for individuals. Therefore, sociologists should be exiles, even if they do not change their place of residence. There is no morally neutral view in social science because sociology is always engaged (Bauman 2000c, 89–90), but the exile’s point of view is one which stands for personal freedom, not in an economic sense, but a moral one. This is the exile’s modernity wisdom which Jay sees in Bauman’s work.

### **Fear Management in the Zombie State**

Soon after the publication of *Liquid Modernity*, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center. September 11, 2001, can be seen as the symbolic beginning of the zombie nation-state’s new era, founded on fear and anxiety of potential threats. We still inhabit this era, dreading an attack by an invisible “them” against “us” and “our” way of life. The danger of international terrorism quickly materialised in the spectre of the refugee. Sara Ahmed identified this process in the silent assumptions of the British Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act of 2001. She referred to the act’s statement that an

appellant cannot acquire international protection if they are suspected of being a terrorist:

The implicit assumption that governs the juxtaposition in the first place is that of *any body in the nation* (subjects, citizens, migrants, even tourists) the asylum seeker is most likely to be the international terrorist [...] They, like terrorists, are identified as potential burglars; as an unlawful intrusion into the nation [...] This violent slide between the figure of the asylum seeker and the international terrorist works to contract those who are “without home” as sources of “our fear” and as reasons of new border policing, whereby the future is always a threat caused by others who may pass by and pass their way into our communities.

(Ahmed 2004, 79–80; original italics)

“Fear management” became the most powerful tool of the zombie nation-state. This situation has framed Bauman’s ideas in a new light, in which the question of nation-state and citizenship poses the most important challenge for the social sciences. Bauman’s (2000b, 6) analysis of the “redistribution and reallocation of modernity’s ‘melting powers’ ” faced a new question: is it possible for zombie categories to rise from the dead in a new form or, failing this, how should they be buried (8)? What forms and tools can we use to tackle the special place that the nation-state has acquired in our imagination to justify its zombie status with the “terrorist threat”?

These questions are rooted in the unholy alliance between the social sciences and the nation-state that has existed since the late nineteenth century (Foucault et al. 1988, 164). Through this alliance, the idea of the nation-state as the objective, eternal basis of industrial society has entered other disciplines and remains on the horizon. One of its most frequently reproduced versions frames the relationship between community and society as contradictory (Tönnies 2001, 3–52). In other words, it de facto defines the community’s natural place far removed from the modern world, among utopian dreams of a lost paradise or the paradise to come.

Developing a new approach to the relationship between the individual and the nation-state or federation of states, or a new form of community that would replace the nation-state, could introduce meaningful changes in political practice. Proof that such changes are desperately needed can be seen in the waves of refugees, refugee camps, and massive migrations, as well as the rising nationalism and need for low-paid workers in developed countries. These have become structural problems of liquid modernity that push the institutions of the first modernity into constant crises and force them to defend themselves with the only thing they still have: the monopoly on violence and fear management. Protection has replaced any other divine, traditional, or democratic legitimisation of power.

According to Bauman, the nation-state and citizenship started to melt because of neoliberalism, which made its way from academia to political

life in the 1980s and 1990s. In *Liquid Fear*, Bauman writes that neoliberal ideology is rooted in the conviction that every domain of human life should be run by the market, which supposedly brings the greatest degree of rationality and democracy. The logical outcome of such thinking was that the state should stop delivering services that would be better provided by private enterprises. Any attempt to counter this conclusion by referring to the common good or equality was therefore seen as a step back from democracy. This notion became the backbone of negative globalisation; under this, citizens of the nation-state cease to be in the hands of lawmakers or executive powers of individual states and give away their freedoms to an international, corporate overclass.

In this regard, Bauman invokes Richard Rorty's (1999) observation that there are now two major, truly global groups. One is the global overclass who make major economic decisions affecting all humans without regard to local lawmakers or voters, while the second is composed of intellectuals who travel to conferences around the world discussing the harm being done by their "fellow cosmopolitans" (Rorty 1999, 233; quoted in Bauman 2006, 146). Less ironically, Bauman adds another global group composed of human and drug traffickers, arms dealers, and terrorists, who could be grouped together with intellectuals, except for the fact that their travels implicitly support neoliberalism. Due to the first and final groups' activities, society becomes subjected to forces it cannot control by means connected to the nation-state. Moreover, these forces start to control the nation-state much more than society ever did. Yet, since the state has to justify its existence, it starts to rely on and expand its only function: security. On an individual (and internal) level, the state "legitimately" replaces protection against social degradation with protection from the threat of a serial killer, burglar, psychopath, beggar—all of which are ultimately masks for the underclass. On a collective (and external) level, "we" fear illegal immigrants and refugees, portraying them as potential terrorists (Bauman 2006, 146–148).

This is probably the only "we" accepted by neoliberal discourse. Since the spectre of collective fear is the strongest nation-building feeling that the nation-state can still generate, it is in high demand in modern politics. Fear is safe; it does not compete with the state in bringing people together. Everybody is alone with their fear, even if it is "our" fear. It can be only experienced alone, but it fuels politics. Borders, walls, and new restrictions are imposed by various defenders of the state in its zombie form. Legitimation through fear has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic; states have closed borders and inwardly fought for vaccines to protect public health and economy in an apparent belief that the virus recognises borders. Some states have even used pandemic regulations to stop migration by declaring a state of emergency.

The zombie-states work for the global overclass and drug dealers but justify their existence to their citizens by pointing out the stateless underclass as the enemy and source of fear (Bauman 2000b, 13). The most privileged and the most excluded remain outside of the nation-state structure. Without a



concept for how to revive or bury the idea of the nation-state, it will continue to acquire new and even more frightening forms based on fear and violence. Some direction has already been provided by the nationalist backlash to neo-liberalism. This backlash takes different forms, ranging from authoritarianism to democracy (or even the welfare state), which all share one thing in common: opposition to any thinking that exceeds the short-sighted perspective of the nation-state's interests. Nationalist leaders only agree to cooperate in matters concerning business and military defence. This zombie nationalism was seen in Trump's United States of America and is still the dominant ideology in Kaczyński's Poland, Orbán's Hungary, Putin's Russia, and Johnson's England. These are walking zombies of first-modernity politics not only in terms of ideology, but also in terms of state administration and political horizons. They are zombies of politics organised around national egoism, which ignores globalisation and social changes happening across the entire world.

Beck foresaw this trend of new state chauvinism, founded in fear and security promises, that could never be achieved but could replace human rights and provide an excuse for a constant state of exception. In the same interview, in which he proposed the idea of the zombie category, Beck referred to Hannah Arendt's view of fascism in Germany as the reaction to the first wave of individualisation or atomisation. He does not fully apply this logic to today, but believes there is a "fundamentalist reaction" in different parts of society to the process of individualisation:

There will be resistance in the second modernity to individualization and to the way globalization deterritorializes national cultures. It will come in particular from religious movements, the revival of ethnicity and counter-modern movements, paradoxically using the information technology of the second modernity to organize themselves globally.

(Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 210)

The nation-state is now the main form of identification for those who fear others and want to organise around common history, tradition, and fear. In the era of falling transnational empires and decolonisation, national identification was a source of resistance to imperialism and capitalism. Now, however, the nation-state is a structure that opposes the formation of new communities as answers to rapid social changes. Cultural theorist and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) commented on this in his book *Provincializing Europe*, which calls for rethinking the image that Europe plays in colonised mentalities and "provincializing" its place. Following that line of thought, nation-states in postcolonial countries accepted institutions developed by the Western Enlightenment as the basis for new political entities, thereby "provincializing" them. In his recent writings, Chakrabarty calls for a return to universalism to acknowledge the lessons of postcolonial, feminist, queer, and subaltern studies, all of whom criticise the vision of the human developed by the Enlightenment as a white male coloniser. New universalism

calls for thinking from the perspective of the planet and species to tackle the problems of climate change (Chakrabarty 2018).

I believe this is impossible if the nation-state, grounded in violence and surveillance, continues to exist. The struggle to maintain the nation-state's power when it is unable to tackle global problems creates a series of contradictions that push the second modernity towards constant crisis and subject human life to social anomie, fear, and anxiety. The neoliberal emphasis on the market excludes the possibility of transforming these feelings into any common cause that would provide a feeling of solidarity.

### The Wisdom of an Exile

Bauman understands sociology's challenge as creating solidarity, as a way of thinking that stands for humans' free choices—a challenge that can be especially addressed by the wisdom of exile. Wisdom has been described in many ways, however, its nature was probably best captured by displaced writer and theatre director Bertolt Brecht. In his *Refugee Conversations* (2020), two exemplary characters—a worker and an intellectual refugee—meet in different sites of exile and try to understand their place and the events that pushed them away from their countries. Ziffel, the intellectual, formulates a credo of exile during a conversation that takes place in Denmark:

Exile is the best possible school for dialectics. Refugees are the sharpest dialecticians. They've become refugees as a result of changes, and they spend all their time studying changes. They see the smallest signals as harbingers of the most significant events.

(64)

Similarly, today the nomadic position of the exile makes them understand liquid modernity and its changes. Bauman writes:

To understand one's fate means to be aware of its difference from one's destiny. And to understand one's fate is to know the complex network of causes that brought about that fate and its difference from that destiny. To work in the world (as distinct from being "worked out and about" by it) one needs to know how the world works.

(Bauman 2000b, 212)

This thought is part of a wider meditation on sociology, in the centre of which Bauman places the notion of *exile*. This is broader than the notion of *refugee*, which relates to some form of forced exile. But what the exile does in thought, the refugee does in practice by challenging the understanding of the world as naturally divided by national borders. Bauman defines exile through the experience of different figures who, during their respective exiles, discovered that all truths are manmade, and that great art has many homelands,

as does great writing and thinking. Most important, is the distance from language and tradition that exile entails. This consciousness naturally leads exiles to be subversive towards the rules of the arrival country, which they often do not know. Therefore, exiles or refugees are always seen as plotters. However, Bauman (2000b, 207) underlines that paradoxically, exiles and refugees bring their host countries the precious gift of questioning received truths and rules. Exile can also be a state of mind which means refusing to integrate, standing up for one's own space and carrying the exile experience without seeking assimilation in countries of arrival. However, "[t]he exile is defined not in relation to any particular physical space or to the oppositions between a number of physical spaces, but through the autonomous stand taken towards space as such" (Bauman 2000b, 208).

### **We, Refugees**

Thinkers carrying the experience of exile frequently return to freedom, as the ultimate goal of thought, in their writings. It is also the experience of freedom that lets them see the world without nationalist sentiments and nostalgia, but at the same time appreciate the friendship community of their peers. Vilém Flusser—a philosopher who spent most of his life in exile in Brazil after fleeing from Prague—called for developing a philosophy of migration (Flusser 2003, 21–24). I believe such writing is already in circulation, beginning with Brecht's above-mentioned *Refugee Conversations* and Hannah Arendt's 1943 essay "We refugees," first published in the American-Jewish magazine *The Menorah Journal*. In this personal text, Arendt tried to make political sense of the forced burden of cosmopolitanism. Arendt did not develop an abstract political idea; rather, she spoke about the persecution of Jews in Europe to demonstrate the incompatibility of categorisation in Western political thought. She meditated on the possible limitations of nation-state citizenship, which apart from giving rights can become a tool of ruthless discrimination. She starts the text with an important remark: "We don't like to be called refugees. We ourselves call each other 'newcomers' or 'immigrants'" (Arendt [1943] 2007, 264). The status of a refugee in this situation is an unwanted one; it assumes that the person had to flee their country of origin due to something they did or believed, which is not true for most of the people Arendt writes about. Arendt refers to a refugee who tried to assimilate in every country they fled to, aiming to forget the past and reasons that pushed them out of their homeland. Arendt concludes: "Apparently nobody wants to know that contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings—the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and internment camps by their friends" (265). Those human beings were driven by the naive optimism that a new land would give them a new identity.

Arendt writes that admitting being a Jew would expose oneself to being nothing but a human being, unprotected by any specific law. Passports, birth

certificates and tax receipts had become tools of modern discrimination. She calls on refugees such as herself to accept the status as a so-called form of *anti-identity* and become *conscious pariahs*:

Those few refugees who insist upon telling the truth [...] get in exchange [...] one priceless advantage: history is no longer a closed book to them and politics is no longer the privilege of gentiles. They know that the outlawing of the Jewish people in Europe has been followed closely by the outlawing of most European nations. Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their peoples—if they keep their identity [...] The committee of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and prosecuted.

(274)

This identity, constituted by a refusal of identities, enabled the strongest philosophical anti-Nazi standpoint, which redefined the existing politics that allowed national socialism and fascism to emerge. Though the position of a conscious pariah has not upended institutional politics, it identifies the existential situation of people who are displaced or not accepted for other reasons by the existing systems of power. The so-called “refugee crisis” has become an inherent part of politics, continually constituted by the logic of nation and nation-state citizenship. Passports are still used to segregate human beings and, as Ziffel’s discussant Kalle notes in Brecht’s *Refugee Conversations*, authority views it as the most noble part of a human being. This leads Kalle to ask a crucial question for modernity which remains unanswered:

I just find it strange that they’re so keen on counting and registering people, especially at a time like this. It’s as if they’re afraid of mislaying somebody. They’re not usually so solicitous. But they want to be absolutely sure that you are this particular person and not that one: as if it made any difference who they allow to starve to death.

(Brecht 2020, 9)

Arendt’s essay inspired Giorgio Agamben, an Italian philosopher, to think about possibilities of burying the category of nation-state in our imagination. He collected his thoughts into a text entitled “Beyond Human Rights,” written when 20 million immigrants were expected to come to what was then the European Union from Central European countries. Drawing from Arendt’s text, Agamben proposed a next step from the individual or group consciousness: towards a redefinition of politics from the perspective of a refugee. This step entails abandoning the fundamental concepts through which subjects were defined in Western political thought, such as the citizen or worker, and proposing a new political thinking that would start from the undefined notion of a refugee as the basic political subject—from wisdom of the exile to

a philosophical figure. This would mean renouncement of human rights or rights of asylum that define the refugee as having a temporary and unwanted status; instead, procedures should be implemented to allow groups and individual refugees to obtain a new identity. He writes:

The refugee should be considered for what it is, namely, nothing less than a limit-concept that at once brings a radical crisis to the principles of the nation-state and clears the way for a renewal of categories that can no longer be delayed.

(Agamben 2000, 21–22)

To illustrate this way of thinking about political communities, Agamben refers to one of the ideas for solving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The solution calls for making the entire city of Jerusalem a capital of two states. The extraterritoriality or aterritoriality of this situation would create a whole new potential for international relations—the two states would be replaced by communities in the state of exodus from one another. The rights of citizens would be replaced by the refuge of the singular.

### **Emotional Citizenship**

Does the wisdom of the exile or philosophy of emigration also provide a positive vision of community? If the nation-state has been reduced to a front for the organisation of violence, is this also true of citizenship? Or one should ask: can there be any citizenship without nation? Bauman's (2000b) answer is not easy to grasp. He writes that in times of liquid modernity, the citizen has become the enemy of the individual. In terms of rights, the individual only expects the state to leave them alone and for its representatives to clean the streets of “pathology” and “dangers” (2000b, 36). The notion of citizenship—as a category and attitude of an active community member, in which they have rights and duties—is vanishing, along with the public sphere. Citizenship mainly serves to divide people into “us” and “them.” Bauman writes:

[T]he other side of individualization seems to be the corrosion and slow disintegration of citizenship [...] The “public” is colonized by the “private”; “public interest” is reduced to curiosity about the private lives of public figures, and the art of public life is narrowed to the public display of private affairs and public confessions of private sentiments (the more intimate the better).

(2000b, 36–37)

This statement is not as conservative as it sounds. Bauman does not oppose bringing issues of structural oppression from the private sphere to the public sphere. He expresses concerns shared by Arendt that due to the state's retreat from different spheres of social life, the public sphere will disappear

completely or serve only to air gossip about famous people. This is happening already, as celebrities who are merely “known for being known” become successful politicians. The problem will only continue to deepen with the emergence of new forms of social media, especially considering their tendency to show the “real and fun personality” of a given politician rather than any ideas they might have. I do not have to add that this process is overseen by corporations specialising in image management and major technology companies that run ads based on algorithms.

This situation contradicts the argument Bauman made about the first modernity in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), in which he described the main approach to society in the age of modern bureaucracy as gardening (18). The garden was the dream of social planners who were often inspired by the early social sciences to plan every aspect of life. The idea that the private would be colonised by the public, and that our entire private life would be part of a bigger plan, caused great fear at the peak of the first modernity. The institutions of *state*, *citizenship*, and *nation* were the most important tools of its planners.

While the categories of state and nation are no longer viable in the second modernity, the zombie life of citizenship is harder to dismiss or bury. In Bauman’s writing, one can sense a kind of longing to critically revive or reinvent a public sphere that could be based on the idea of citizenship. But preventing or stopping the zombification of citizenship will only be possible when it is no longer tied to the nation-state. Bauman writes:

The prospects of individualized actors being “re-embedded” in the republican body of citizenship are dim. What prompts them to venture onto the public stage is not so much the search for common causes and for the ways to negotiate the meaning of the common good and the principles of life in common, as the desperate need for “networking”. Sharing intimacies [...] tends to be [...] the only remaining, method of “community building”. This building technique can only spawn “communities” as fragile and short-lived as scattered and wandering emotions, shifting erratically from one target to another and drifting in the forever inconclusive search for a secure haven: communities of shared worries, shared anxieties or shared hatreds [...] a momentary gathering around [...] solitary individual fears.

(Bauman 2000b, 37)

These fragile and ephemeral communities emerge around the need to come together. Their form is dictated by the disappearance of the common cause that was replaced by fear management (which is used by the nation-state to constantly remind us of the need for its existence). Yet, these momentary communities are the only real alternative to the logic of nation-state-oriented politics. Though Bauman does not elaborate on them, I think that this drive to unite through the search for emotional support and mutual concern is the

strongest form of community available today. If it is rooted in an existential relationship, it can transcend the temporary circumstances from which it arises and become political.

Bauman (2000a) pointed to emotions as the source of reviving the idea of community. In *Liquid Modernity* he seems to be following the same trace, although in a more restrained and less optimistic manner. Yet, I think one could positively develop his thought by using the wisdom of the exile. By positively, I mean the bonds based on the common situation of emotional despair—despair of fear generated by the state, but also anxiety caused by the precarity of working conditions, overwhelming loneliness that marks the modern condition. This situation paradoxically opens chances for new ways of being together, not only as an alliance of all who emotionally identify, but through similar emotional experiences of exclusion or attachment to the national ideal, for example. Long-lasting support develops when willing individuals share worries, develop trust, and become friends. And these bonds of friendship create new forms of being together, built upon ongoing concern for the other rather than a fleeting encounter.

The political meaning of friendship has been debated in philosophy for centuries. The aforementioned philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, revisited this notion in an essay entitled “The Friend” which should be read as complementary to his remarks on the refugee as a new subject of philosophy. Friendship is the basic form of community. When other forms of subjectivity than refugee are forgotten, friendship remains as the source of the political. Agamben refers to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* when writing:

Friends do not share something (birth. law. place. taste): they are shared by the experience of friendship. Friendship is the con-division that precedes every division, since what has to be shared is the very fact of existence, life itself. And it is this sharing without an object, this original con-senting that constitutes the political.

(Agamben 2009, 36)

Perhaps a new politics is already being shaped? The atomisation, isolation, and anxiety of the neoliberal nation-state exclude the possibility of relying on anything apart from other people and their friendship. The new form of being together is paradoxically shaped on the margins of contemporary society by the emotional condition of institutionalised fear. By reducing any form of community and embracing only individual feeling, the old political system is preparing to sow the seeds of its own destruction.

This community of friends is not bound by common ethnic roots, language, religious beliefs, or most importantly, exclusion of the other, but by an existential relationship, or life itself. This vision of community can also revive the universal character of citizenship, which was established in the first modernity as the basis for a political community of equals holding the same rights. In other words, this idea would revive the origins of human rights

that emerged in the Enlightenment around the notion of *fellow-feeling* (Hunt 2008). Yet friendship exceeds the problems of the category of human rights. In *The Last Utopia* (2010), Samuel Moyn writes that human rights became tied to the neoliberal project as an idea to protect only the individual from the state. Fellow-feeling creates bonds of friendship that can replace egoistic thinking, focussed on the individual or national ideal, with a global perspective that provides the possibility of forming relationships based on friendship and compassion. This perspective can tackle mutual problems affecting our fellow-friends.

I call this new form of friendship *emotional citizenship*. It is based on emotions of friendship and compassion formed in the wake of sharing experiences of exclusion and loss. Such emotions, by their nature, are always directed at concrete persons and particular objects, so emotional citizenship makes people immune to any abstract ideology. Though the citizenship itself is not global by definition, as there can be multiple communities of mutual concern that occasionally overlap, the possibility of forming friendship is global. Therefore, the practice of emotional citizenship surpasses the boundary of locality into the realm of globality. An individual can be a citizen of many groups of mutual concern, but these groups cannot be exclusive. Exclusion limits the possibilities of forming friendships.

Such a liberation of citizenship from the national ideal can be a first step towards redefining political community. Emotional citizens do not put national interests ahead of the common good; they are citizens of many groups that have different ideas of good, but for that reason, their experience of being part of humanity is much stronger. Rather than trying to address global problems by reducing their local consequences, they tackle them collectively. Emotional citizenship transcends not only the division between “us” and “them,” but also the boundary between the individual and the collective that grounds what is common in individual feelings and what is individual in the community. This gives the individual a much more powerful feeling of agency. This vision fulfils Bauman’s intentions and hopes in *Liquid Modernity*:

The yawning gap between the right of self-assertion and the capacity to control the social settings which render such self-assertion feasible or unrealistic seems to be the main contradiction of fluid modernity—one that, through trial and error, critical reflection and bold experimentation, we would need collectively to learn to tackle collectively.

(2000b, 38)

This community of emotional citizens provides a chance to overcome the surveillance and security that defines the modern state, which is no longer a night watchman<sup>1</sup> so much as a high-security prison. These feelings of support can eliminate the distinction between “us” and “them” that keep the zombie state alive. Separating citizenship from the nation-state would save citizenship and ultimately bury the nation-state in all its frightening forms.



Bauman describes similar ideas in his 2016 book, entitled *Strangers at Our Door*, in which he comments on Kant's *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* by explaining how the future can be hospitable and habitable:

Let's note Kant's caution—and the circumspection with which he articulates the conditions of the world—wide “perpetual peace” on a globe on which its inhabitants “cannot infinitely disperse and hence must finally tolerate the presence of each other”. What Kant demands is not the cancellation of the distinction between lands [...] but “a right to associate” (to communicate, to enter into friendly interaction, and eventually to try to establish mutually beneficial bonds of friendship, presumed to be spiritually enriching); what Kant demands is the substitution of *hospitality* for *hostility*. In the principle of mutual hospitality Kant gleaned the possibility, and a prospect of universal peace putting an end to the long history of internecine wars tearing apart the European continent.

(Bauman 2016, 74–75; original italics)

In this context, Bauman analyses ongoing debates about ethics in public discourse and how they fail when they turn out to be grounded in the logic of “us” and “them.” Setting mutual hospitality as a basic rule of building bonds between different communities proves an alternative to nation-state politics, in which morality is tied to citizenship. Following Kant, Bauman claims a morality reduced to co-citizens is the opposite idea of ethics, which always have to be universal. Bauman writes that striving for the universality of every moral system while excluding some groups due to ethnicity, religion or citizenship causes cognitive dissonance. This contradiction is solved by conspiracy theories attributing vicious intentions to those who come to “our healthy and visible” world. “We” refuse to provide the care that our ethics demand from us, because the “other” people pose a direct danger to us and our society. Such thinking leads to the dehumanisation of newcomers and not only excludes them from ethics, but also deprives them of human rights (Bauman 2016, 83–86). Emotional citizenship freed from the national ideal does not allow this to happen because it rejects the conditionality of ethics, leaving it universal and making us responsible for our deeds and those around us.

Emotional citizenship has been recognised before by refugees and wandering exiles who were the first to experience the fragility of structures that appeared to be solid. Bauman's contemporary, Vilém Flusser, mentioned earlier, described this process in his autobiographical essay “Taking Residence in Homelessness,”<sup>2</sup> in which he meditates on the experience of losing his *Heimat*—German for the emotional dimension of homeland. He conveys this experience through the journey of a person who has lived in many places and formed different relations to various *Heimaten*. His initial *Heimat* was that of a Jew, educated at German schools in Prague, and later followed by Brazil, where he spent over 30 years before moving to France. For Flusser,

the feeling of *Heimat* is based in “mysterious rootedness in infantile, fetal, and transpersonal regions of the psyche” (Flusser 2003, 4).

The Czech-Brazilian thinker describes how after leaving Prague, he felt the delirious dizziness of freedom and as if the universe had collapsed. Analysing his feelings led him to ask himself not what he was free *from*, but what he was free *for*. His contradictory emotions allowed him to see that

each *Heimat* blinds in its own particular way those who are enmeshed in it, and that all *Heimaten* are equal in that sense, but also that clear judgement, decision making, and action become possible only after one sees oneself clear of this enmeshment.

(2003, 4)

Cutting the Gordian knots of *Heimat* allows for freedom of judgement and choice without loss or nostalgia. Freedom from nostalgia brought further questions; Flusser wondered how the mysterious feeling of *Heimat* is attached to people and things. This question was also connected to his personal history, since all his friends in Prague died: the Jews in concentration camps, the Germans on the Eastern Front, and Czechs in the resistance. This made cutting the knot of Prague’s *Heimat* easier than cutting the knot of São Paulo, where a lot of his close friends continued to live. This led Flusser to conclude that when thinking about our feeling of *Heimat*, we tend to make an ontological error that mistakes things for humans. The first *Heimat* is always imposed by birth, but then we enter one shaped by friendship and relations with humans for whom we choose to be responsible. This is what we often mistake for attachment to nationality, city, or country, however defined. The freedom of exile allowed Flusser to see through differences that are often blurred in our heads (6).

Flusser writes that when a foreigner arrives in a new country, they have two ways of comprehending their alienation. Assimilation is the first, which means consciously learning the secret codes of the new culture and trying to forget the old. This is necessary because otherwise the foreigner will appear to the natives as a caricature, offensive kitsch to the cherished beauty of *Heimat*, which can result in violence directed on the foreigner. The second is sharing the freedom of the exile. This means freeing the natives from the mystical attachment to their *Heimat*, and this freedom is connected to the positive discovery that what we really cherish from *Heimat* is friendship. Flusser discovered that we feel rooted and at home due to the friends with whom we share an existential bond, and not as a result of tradition or language (6–7).

Flusser’s observations describe what I call emotional citizenship, which he gained through being “homeless.” Freedom from his *Heimat* paved the way for friendships with other people, allowing him to understand that such relations transcend borders and languages; things, symbols, smells, sounds and tastes of childhood are praised by poets. This revelation releases the exile from the fear of losing their *Heimat*. We do not have to protect *Heimat* anymore because our

emotional attachments to our friends are our proper *Heimat*. Friends are our emotional co-citizens who acquire residency in homelessness—a residency that is hospitable to everyone and a prerequisite for emotional citizenship.

This anti-essentialist politics, grounded in the wisdom of the exile, calls for radical inclusivity as the basis of imagining the community in times of liquid modernity. The new reformation is really a call to consider the fact that spreading individuality creates the possibility of forming communities beyond any limitations we are used to or see as natural. People are freer to choose identities and form communities based on their own feelings and the attachments they shape towards the other, rather than fantasies about objects and symbols. This freedom of thinking allows us to reflect on our feelings and decide what emotional citizenships we want to claim and what symbolic attachments we want to give away.

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### Notes

- 1 Slogan popularised by Robert Nozick in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974).
- 2 The original title of Flusser’s “The Challenge of the Migrant” essay in *The Freedom of the Migrant* (2003), translated from the German original “Wohnung beziehen in der Heimatlosigkeit” by Kenneth Kronenberg.

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## 4 Past in Common

### Departing from History

*Katarzyna Bojarska*

I would like to begin with the idea of the future perfect, as Jacques Lacan formulated it soon after the end of the Second World War:

What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming.

(Lacan 1981, 63)

Thinking about the memory of past violence, that bind certain collectives of people (collective memory) with the dynamics of the *future perfect*, allows one to problematise the very idea of collective identity founded on a specific image of the past. Lacanian temporality offers a chance for reconfiguring of the coordinates of collective identity, for undermining an intolerable yet commonly felt impasse, or an impasse experienced in common. It challenges the condition of being stuck in time with a specific kind of collective identity, with the fantasies of the collective self and the paralysing fear that these fantasies may be taken away (Laplanche 1999).

This undermining can be done by a transformation of images and narratives whose fixed constellations establish collective memory and determine one's being in history today. It can be done by different agents and in different media or genres. The futurity Lacan describes, and that is of particular interest to me here, seems to be "neither simply backward-looking nor forward-looking," it "gathers the shards of the past as it moves forward in time" (Rose, n.d.). It is about digging deep underneath the common ground and known paths followed together by members of a specific community, in a specific historical present.

To unpack its specificity, let me refer to Lauren Berlant's (2011) idea of affectively charged being in time, characterised with its very specific "historical sensorium" whereby members of a community are forced "to adjust emotionally to the process of living with the political depression produced by brutal relations of ownership, control, security, and their phantasmatic justifications in liberal political economies" (261). The author puts forth the

concept of the “the stretched-out historical present” which is a transitory period (also between different, changing fantasies); a period full of intensities, a “moment without edges,” where “recent pasts and near futures blend” (261). Living in such a period is confusing, messy but also hopeful, as they suggest. Berlant makes us observe that

it slows down our gaze at performatively democratic activity by linking it to a context where solidarity comes from the scavenging for survival that absorbs increasingly more people’s lives, rather than from an anxiety about reasserting the potentiality within the political as it has long been known and exerted pressure on fantasy. The urgency is to reinvent, from the scene of survival, new idioms of the political, and of belonging itself, which requires debating what the baselines of survival should be in the near future, which is, now, the future we are making.

(262)

With the slowed down gaze, one may see the porosity of one’s structures of belonging, and possibilities for including others or even expanding the structures. Nothing may be obvious anymore and yet nothing will fully be established. Many find themselves stuck in their commitments and (oftentimes painful) attachments to the communities of memory and perceive others (with their attachments) as potential threats (see Rothberg 2009). The need to let go, let oneself move, be moved by other memories and memories of the others, may be a result of a crisis which Berlant calls the “infrastructures of collective life” (259). This is a chance for new communities mobilised by the temporalities in the post-crisis historical present.

If the collective of collective memory may seem too stiff or theoretically immobile, I would like to—once these infrastructures are imagined differently—replace it with *communitas*, operating by means of communal memory as something that comes into being beyond the imposed affective and cognitive frameworks, as something emergent, potential, not yet there, but not impossible at all. In order to look at how *communitas* may restructure the *collective* with regard to past violence and its memory, I propose to view an image of the past as something common to people, something participated in, shared, and used in common. To do this, I would like to stage an encounter between two female voices: French writer and experimental filmmaker Marguerite Duras and Polish architect Helena Kurcyszowa. This convergence will contribute to the idea of *communitas* and actually establish it by means of the monument, or rather monumental gesture within and for a community, which, despite belonging to the past can be activated in the present moment for the sake of reinventing life together. This combination might seem obscure or even absurd. In the present, it binds different pasts, attitudes, genres, and politics. Yet, as I will try to show, such an unexpected—and perhaps unwelcome for some—encounter may provide a new framework for a community anchored in the past which can become politically instrumental in the present.

For this encounter to be thinkable one needs to refer to the idea of the *archive as the commons* rather than as an institution related to the past. “The Archive [...] is a modality of access to the commons and not a shrine of past documents,” writes Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019, 229). It allows us to imagine how we share the world with those whom we have abused and those who have abused us. It is important to recognise and embrace the consequence of such a shift: “The contention that the archive is not about the past but about the commons requires a different genre of narrative than the one known as history” (188). This different genre needs to include emotions, personal experiences, and affects. It also requires working out different ways of putting them together and making sense of them with the guidance of imagination which respects the impossible. An energy of inventiveness is necessary for analogies and symmetries (previously overlooked, though present) to discover unthinkable scenarios, claim them as our own, and nurture them for the sake of the shared fantasy of creating a different world and a shared commitment to confronting violence.

When writing about the *historical present* one must also consider the reframing of citizenship as well as violence. Again, I am taking guidance from Azoulay’s work here. In the chapter entitled “Our Violent Commons,” she specifies it quite clearly: “Imperial violence is our commons, our form of being together. Violence in its institutionalized forms has become omnipresent, the ultimate resource held in common” (148). If violence makes community, there is no choice to be made as to how people come together but rather, as Azoulay convinces, people may “share life not by being with but by being against one another” (149). This is the imperial framework operating; and one belongs there by default, but also one can undo it by willing and persistent refusal to be governed and interpellated into collective identities. Undoing imperialism—as a mode of governing and thinking—“entails going backward, revisiting violent conjunctures and their effects and giving these situations a second life, knowing that we live in their wake” (149). To give a second life to something that was, and has been narrated or visualised several times over, resists the logic of binding communities and their collective memory. It is asking for more. However, one needs to acknowledge that these visits and revisits have already taken place. There are instances to relate to, come together with, and respond to.

The second life, as I see it today, can be granted first and foremost outside of the historical narrative and within what I would like to call the dissident of the artistic one. Artistic practices revisit *violent conjectures*, and in doing so they undermine stories plotted by historians or guarded by archivists. As Susan Buck-Morss expresses,

the meaning of the singular, historical event will never be exhausted. Its potential to influence a changing present is infinite. But its afterlife is endangered if the event is so deeply embedded in historical context and cultural specificity that we can consider ourselves to be done with it.

(2020, 31)

By giving up on contextualisation, specificity, and embeddedness of events, gestures, and practices may feel threatening at first for the community formed or transformed. However, it may prove essential for the very survival of the community, for its life. A life built on resilience (in ordinary lives and extraordinary situations), not despair, entails unlearning old political dictionaries and grammars.

One of the terms in this old dictionary which begs for re-definition, and which seems very important for the current discussion of crisis and *communitas* is that of citizen and citizenship. In *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), Azoulay continues to deconstruct the notion of citizenship, first discussed in her book *Civil Contract of Photography* (2008). The latter predominately concentrates on photography and the Jewish-Arab common life under the State of Israel's occupation and the State-made disaster. *Unlearning Imperialism* expands the discussion beyond photography and the Middle East. First, she detaches the idea of citizenship from the model inherited from the French Revolution, which framed it as a property that is unequally distributed by the regime and defined as an act of subordination to power. She counters it with the concept of visual citizenship, or *the citizenry of photography* which begins with an act of spectatorship, born out of the global perspective and a sense of relatedness. One sees and encounters something that touches and concerns them, not by means of identification with those pictured through the experience of violence, but in a moment of recognition. We are governed by the same regime that produced the disaster and suffering. Azoulay convinces her readers that these regimes are not necessarily remote and unfamiliar dictatorships, rather they are the known and celebrated democracies. According to the author, these regimes produce not only disaster but also a specific kind of blindness that conceals the disaster as it unfolds. The control and production of visibility (Mirzoeff 2006, 2011) must be countered and one has to recognise oneself in the image of disaster, not via an act of empathy, but in embracing one's implicatedness (Rothberg 2019)—realising subjugation to the same power which instruments the disaster and blinds us. The task of the citizen is thus, according to Azoulay, to realise that the frames that organise our knowing or remembering are porous and contain only an excerpt, a part of the story that can either be supplemented or complemented by other parts, including parts from others. Visual citizenship, i.e., how one sees the other in the relationship of belonging, dynamic inclusion/exclusion, is viewed as a relationship among various protagonists not necessarily mediated by or identified with the sovereign power (Azoulay 2008, 2012, 2013). As *visual citizens* we need to counter the reductive forms of representation, of seeing the other.

The struggle against these reductive forms is built upon a civic skill, as Azoulay points out. This skill,

activated the moment one grasps that citizenship is not merely a status, a good, or a piece of private property possessed by the citizen, but rather



a tool of a struggle or an obligation to others to struggle against injuries inflicted on those others.

(2008, 14)

This skill should be activated once we see injustice and violence inflicted upon others, regardless of their national, racial, class or gender belonging. This skill should allow one to remain indifferent to the kinship through class, race or nation, a tie which binds some and excludes others (23). In *Potential History*, the author returns to the question of citizenship and situates it within the procedure of unlearning the “imperial timelines, geographies, and political formations” (2019, 38), as well as against the backdrop of the historical narrative of progress and emancipation. Both blur—if not erase—the actual persistence of oppression, violence, destruction, and painful exploitation, which is essential for the foundation of citizenship as a relation of “*belonging* to the state rather than as a shared trait of cocitizens *caring* for a common world” (2019, 39; original italics). Caring is rendered unimaginable, if not impossible, by

the appropriation of the commons by a sovereign power, the transformation of citizens into external users or claimants who approach the commons (for example, the archive) from the outside, and the denial of access to those commons from those who have been made noncitizens.

(2019, 39)

The ones repeatedly denied access have been women; their civic status and belonging to the community of communal memory has long been impaired. This is precisely why I am focussing on women and their labour of *undoing* when looking for resistance to available and fixed collective memory and resilient *communitas*.

### ***Cocitizen Affect***

Marguerite Duras was a French writer and experimental filmmaker, born and raised in French Indochina. In *La Douleur*, first published in 1985 and translated into English as *The War: A Memoir* in 1994, she offers a first-hand, moving and troubling account of the liberation while waiting for Robert Antelme’s return home from a Nazi concentration camp.<sup>1</sup> *The War* was published decades after the end of the Second World War, yet, as Sylvère Lotringer reminds us: “In her newspaper articles and public statements Duras kept taking extreme political positions. She debunked the privileged, rhapsodized the Jews, defended Algerian workers and denounced Communists and trade-union bureaucrats, speaking up for prisoners, castigating the stupidity called justice” (2000, 4). So, come the end of the war, Duras, the narrator, refused to rejoice the official narrative promoted by General Charles de Gaulle in celebrating the unity of the French nation against the Nazi invader. Duras

also refused to celebrate the burning of German cities and their inhabitants, as she saw them as cocitizens. She expressed solidarity with fleeing civilians and reprimanded those who caused their misery. In this incomprehensible, unpatriotic twist of affect, her concerns lie with those cocitizens she speaks of, rather than her compatriots. She allows herself to grieve for others while simultaneously processing her own grief and pain.

Azoulay saw Duras as an ally. As Azoulay observes, a disobedient cocitizen is one who

denies forgiveness to statesmen, including those of the Allied powers, whose priorities were free of concern for the people, or were directed against the people, as de Gaulle implied when he claimed, ‘The dictatorship of popular sovereignty entails risks that must be tempered by the responsibility of one man’.

(2019, 249)

Azoulay acutely tunes in with her ally:

Indeed, one month later, on May 8, 1945, the official day when World War II was ended in Europe, the massacre of tens of thousands of Algerians at Sétif, Kharata, and Guelma would make it all the more clear what de Gaulle’s priorities were. For him, governed peoples with political aspirations were no more than a military front. De Gaulle never seemed to think about the danger to which people are exposed by the dictatorship of statesmen.

(249)

This is the dictatorship Duras refuses to rationalise and defend, just as she seems to refuse to accept the simple fact of there being legitimate and illegitimate violence; the former casts some victims outside the realm of mourning, and grants impunity to some of the perpetrators.

Being against the statesmen and siding with the victims of violence does not make Duras a victim herself. The *we* that she employs in her wartime writing is not at all pure nor innocent. On the one hand she writes, “We are of the same race as those who were burned in the crematoriums, those who were gassed at Maidanek” (1994, 46–47); on the other, however, “We’re also of the same race as the Nazis” (47). In two chapters of *The War*, entitled “Albert of the Capitals” and “Ter of the Militia,” she states it even more powerfully and personally, identifying the main female character as herself:

Therese is me. The person who tortures the informer is me. So is also the one who feels like making love to Ter, the member of the Militia. Me. I give you the torturer along with the rest of the texts.

(115)

The violence is apparent, and it directly implicates the reader; the torturer (also) speaks, *ma semblable—ma soeur*.

Lastly, Lotringer stresses the importance of future perfect in Duras's war-time narrative: "By putting events in the future perfect [...] in such a way that the present partakes of the end, of death, that it is stamped by it" (2000, 10), the author expresses both her concept of cinema and history. This remark seems crucial for my further thinking. Lotringer continues:

The yellow star will have to have been overlooked, and Duras will have to have been blind to the ominous signs for them to become both an individual symbol of shame and a collective symbol of the massive horror that was in the offing. Duras' innocence was of the kind that only guilt can bring about, a guilt meant to repair a crime that she had not committed. Only at that price could everyone be made responsible for everything that has happened—Holocaust, Hiroshima: becoming aware of it after the fact, too late to do anything about it except implicating oneself in retrospect.

(2000, 10)

This temporality of narrative allows for more than the binaries of knowledge and ignorance, guilt and innocence, memory, and oblivion. It touches upon the entanglements of memory and questions the possibility of straightforward recall as much as it deconstructs collective identity formations based on fixed narratives and images of the past. It invites one into the grey zone; not one we know from Primo Levi's writings, but rather a future unknown, arising from our implicatedness in past violence and the innocence-guilt knot.<sup>2</sup> Finally, it opens up a space for analogies, for feeling and thinking about the past *together* rather than in opposition or distinct. This opened space removes them from their context (provided by the professionals dealing with the past and securing its records) and the structures of belonging and attachment.

### **Monumental Disobedience**

Helena Kurcyjuszowa, an inmate of Majdanek concentration and extermination camp, had the idea to imagine, plan, discuss, and negotiate a monument to the female victims of the camp, built within the very camp itself. This idea, during the Nazi genocide upon her home country, Poland, needs to be discussed in relation to *communitas*, and beyond the realm of war memory and the post-war Polish community. In particular, it can be used to look at how one decides to approach *communitas* today in the ever-expanding context of racial hatred, abuses of (white) power, and the limitations and shortcomings of historical narratives that bind the Polish collective. I am treating Kurcyjuszowa's Antigone-like gesture as an episode in the prehistory of Holocaust memory and a lesson (in the Brechtian sense) for the future of Holocaust memory.

Kurcyszowa was the daughter of Zygmunt Słomiński, an urban planner who sympathised with the National Democracy and President of Warsaw between 1928 and 1934 and was executed in 1943. Kurcyszowa was an architect, engineer, graduate of the Warsaw University of Technology, and soldier of the underground Home Army. She was arrested in October 1942, sent to Majdanek in January 1943, and then to Ravensbrück in 1944. After the war, she was a witness at the Dusseldorf trials of Hermine Braunsteiner Ryan and Hildegard Lächert (“Bloody Brigitte”)—female SS officers from Majdanek.<sup>3</sup> She also became the first architect and urban planner (1945–1946) of newly annexed Szczecin, Poland, where she vigorously engaged in cultural and social life alongside her work. Many testify to her restless and rebellious personality; the archives of Polish secret police contain rich documentation of denunciations made against her.

At Majdanek, she was a *Lagerarchitektin* (camp architect) responsible for digging sewage ditches; building roads and paths in the fields, and slopes at barracks; constructing a large lawn by the road at the main camp; and maintaining order between the barbed wire fences. This appointment coincided with the end of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the influx of numerous female inmates at Majdanek. The Jewish women from these transports were transferred in their hundreds to work in the kommandos under Kurcyszowa’s supervision. She witnessed and described in detail their suffering, fear of selection and death (Kurcyszowa 1960; Wiśniewska and Rajca 1980, 54–57; Tarasiewicz 1988). She witnessed the dramatic death of Greek women and fed miserable Belarusian kids.<sup>4</sup> According to her testimony as a camp architect, she was allowed to move around the camp; and she did move a lot and saw what was going on. She wanted to see and record what she witnessed. In the so-called Field III, she noticed male inmates erecting a column-monument.<sup>5</sup>

In the spring of 1943, when the murderous fights took place in the Warsaw ghetto, camp engineer Stanisław Zelent and the sculptor Albin Maria Boniecki worked on the monument. They dedicated it to the victims of Nazism, and it became a heartfelt symbol of brotherhood and faith in freedom during the genocide—an impossible and absurd thing in itself. And yet their idea was realised and it survived. The column was constructed using a five-to-six-metre-long sewer pipe of 50–60 centimetres in diameter, made of concrete mixed with fine gravel. It stood on a pedestal with three steps and was crowned with Boniecki’s sculpture of three connected eagles ready to fly away. The sculpture was made of barbed wire covered with blue cement. Eagles turned out to be subversive figures: on the one hand, they were very in tune with Nazi symbolism and aesthetics, on the other hand, they functioned as a clear message for the inmates by embodying a woman, man and child, and symbolising strength, hope for freedom, and solidarity in suffering. Inside the column, secret from the guards, the makers placed a container with human ashes—a product of this death factory. The presence of human ashes—anecdotal for many decades—was confirmed by a chemical analysis commissioned by the State Museum at Majdanek and carried out at the Maria

Curie-Skłodowska University's chemistry department in 2012 (Olesiuk 2011; Szychowski 2011; Krzos 2012).

The column's commemorative and funeral function, as evidenced by numerous testimonies of survivors, was clear for many inmates. It was a sign of their agency, hope for survival—both spiritual and physical—and a gesture of solidarity. From today's perspective, a column of three eagles—the first monument to the victims of Nazi genocide, a gesture of commemoration, but also resistance and resilience—seems to be exactly what a monument against Nazism (and fascism) should be in order to be truly engaging and powerfully resistant. That is, an offence of the official order, rather than its confirmation, establishing one's agency in the face of almost complete objectification.<sup>6</sup>

This column in Field III inspired Kurcyszowa to act in her own right. She went, as she recalled, to the office of Elsa Ehrich, the *Oberaufseherin* (female guard) and, making use of her “feminist” attitude (yes, that is how she phrased it in early 1960s), proposed an analogous monumental structure in the women's part of the camp—Field V. On the one hand, Kurcyszowa was probably motivated by the fact that female inmates could not *use* or even know about the monument in Field III, the *universal* monument. On the other hand, she may have wanted to specifically commemorate female victims, whose experience, suffering, and death demanded a separate and meaningful gesture (Grudzińska 2020). Thus, it may seem that already at the time she felt the necessity to look at things differently to grasp exclusions and bind *citizens* beyond the sovereign-imposed divisions. The monument in Field V was in memory of the female victims, the memorial practices of the female inmates and—while under construction—was supposed to celebrate relationality. Thus, it served men and women in their need for connection and even momentary return of being together. Uncannily, the camp's gender division is reflective of the Nazi genocide's historiography; male experiences are universal and neutral, and women may feel uninvited and excluded, as the narrative does not reflect their camp experience and survival.

What is striking in Kurcyszowa's testimony is the conversation between her and Ehrich. It reads as if they are indeed discussing the construction of a monument, as if Kurcyszowa was getting permission to commemorate the women murdered by the very same system Ehrich was serving. This is not so much an act of victory of a survivor over a perpetrator, but a victory of a story which manifests itself not only in the act of preservation of the prisoner's life, but also in how she controls the narrative about life and death in the camp. Kurcyszowa finally receives a permit to build the monument, yet from the very beginning there seems to be more to the project than the memorial object itself. First, she gets a studio, where she “employs” elderly and sick inmates, thus protecting them from hard physical work. Then upon the project's acceptance, Kurcyszowa meticulously plans the work,

My monument, unlike the one on Field III, consisted of two columns, topped with a light, 40 cm wide, wavy shape on both sides, topped with

a kind of roof, 40 cm wide. On the pedestal, between the columns, there stood an urn in which the ashes of the murdered women were to be placed.

(Kurcyszowa 1960, unpaginated)

While the monument was designed to serve the deceased victims of Nazism, during its construction, it was also able to improve the lives of living victims. “We must have a men’s kommando to help,” Kurcyszowa claimed to have declared to Ehrlich, and although the guard—a strong feminist—was upset by the need for men (“the entire camp in Ravensbrück was built by women alone”), she finally gave in to Kurcyszowa’s plan. The plan was then quickly developed together with the engineer Zelent; about 30 men were to come to the women’s field every day, and every day those were different male inmates so that everyone could meet their relatives, lovers, friends. The work begun, and every day the *monument-kommando* came to Field V. Boniecki was supposed to make the top element of the monument: the urn. However, the monument was never realised due to an unexpected decision to move women to Field I (an order from the 3rd of September 1943).

Although post-war Holocaust monuments, and those currently under construction, are primarily devoted to presenting or rendering the existing emptiness, factual destruction and the loss that should be felt, in the case of the monuments from Majdanek’s Field III and V, we are looking at an immediate reaction. We observe a tense that is becoming the past tense, looking at people becoming corpses and corpses becoming ashes, and at an active and conscious resistance to the logic of this production. The initial role of the two memorials (one which was materialised and the other which remained an idea) was precisely to announce their own presence as well as to commemorate (and lament) the loss of lives in the camp, mass death, and the events later known as the Holocaust, still occurring when the monuments were conceived. This emptiness was not yet empty; it was filled with one’s own and others’ experience of violence, despair, pain, loss, love, and hope.

It is precisely from this site of horror—but also hope—that memory takes shape, memory that offers itself for a *communitas*, also as a responsibility. So, when I mention *hope* which, I realise, might be rather provocative in this context, I draw from Rebecca Solnit (2016, xiv) for whom “hope does not mean denying the reality but facing it” with one’s need for agency. It

locates itself in the premises that we don’t know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. [...] It’s the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterward either [...].

(2016, xiv)

Again, it is the potentiality that matters—not what was, but rather what one will be as an outcome of the process of becoming, the perspective of the future perfect.

With her gesture, Kurcyszowa establishes a sphere of decision, freedom, empathy, commonality, commemoration, and lamentation, as well as a site where relations can be re-established, even if temporarily or momentarily. She responds to what was happening to the community—a community that emerges from crisis, and whose emergence may be dependent on her actions and deeds to an extent. She responds to the female community of the *field* and not to any authority or power—neither within the camp, nor symbolic, martyrological, or male. I read her decision as recognising the difference and exclusion at the very core of community and history's becoming. And this separation is broad. Her *memorial*, thus, more than many, if not all state monuments commemorating those murdered or who fought, allows one to imagine other ways of experiencing the past together. In a way, she was trying to invent a life together (never calling it an act of heroism), and invent a community of shared remembrance. As hard to accommodate or fictitious as it may seem, it is an episode of a shared history we can acknowledge today if we want a different past in common.

Kurcyszowa's gesture needs to be understood as extremely political at its core: it transforms the sphere of impossibility into that of action. As such, it problematises gender-neutrality memory and commemoration, combines resistance and commemoration, and tests humanism or universalism in the face of genocide. In her testimony, she clearly recognises and embraces her privilege in the camp community of inmates. She was a non-Jew (a mere political enemy to be imprisoned, not exterminated); one who was allowed to move and be able to see, plan, design and control the space to some extent; one who could also communicate in the language of the perpetrator; and one who knew the feminist *trick* and played it. She does not appropriate the story or suffering of the other. Her *privilege* is also that she survived and was able to tell the story, marking it with a necessary difference.

Kurcyszowa's memorial, as rendered in her testimony (and in testimonies of some other survivors of Majdanek), offers the possibility of both individual and shared heritage for today, tomorrow, and the politics of the future.<sup>7</sup> Yet, it is not a gesture that will radically reverse memory politics; it will not transform the conditions of making memory public, alter the past's commemoration or even the attitude towards the murdered others. Perhaps it will not do much, but still, it resonates, and its resonance destabilises collective memory.

### **Destabilising the “We”**

In 1946, the Polish female writer, Zofia Nałkowska, chose an epigraph for her collection of short documentary stories from the Second World War, entitled *Medallions* (2000; see also Gliński 2010). She chose the following phrase: “People doomed people to this fate?”<sup>8</sup> She might have given in to the

seduction of Western universalism and missed or repressed the fact that the idea of humanism, which originated in the European Enlightenment, repeatedly put people outside of humanity: non-whites, indigenous people, women, to name a few. Thus, this reproduced—in Françoise Vergès's words—the “fabricated consent” (2020). As Vergès and many other decolonial thinkers convince us, the idea of the human is not yet equipped with new possibilities of connections and theories of living together, whereby we would seriously approach why we have excluded others and included ourselves. As these thinkers have pointed out, it seems that Europe has not yet fully decolonised or has not followed the introspective path far enough—far enough to discover that racism did not come from outside, but that pogroms arrive with slavery, concentration camps follow plantations, and lynching comes from colonial torture. Decolonial thought, as well as unlearning imperialism of historical knowledge, allows one to further problematise the question of the *collective* in collective memory, as well as the roles played (and legacies left) by various members of the collective, and the possible lines of solidarity and empathy without appropriation.

Critical introspection demands including images and narratives hitherto unseen or misrecognised and working with tentative analogies which mobilise affects crucial for the historical present. Such examples include the infamous lynching photographs and the pictures from Abu Ghraib; the settlers' barbed wire fences in North America; the barbed wire of the Nazi camps in Poland and the Jewish settlements in Mandatory Palestine; the women and children in Majdanek and in forests on the Polish-Belarusian border. Whose common histories do these visual constellations illustrate? Who are the *people* enacting and enabling the violence and who are the *people* suffering? What is the common past that one can relate to in order to respond to this and future crises?

In her *Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love*, the French-Algerian political activist and writer, Houria Bouteldja, attempts to offer an answer to the questions of troubled universalism and the possibility of living together. She convincingly identifies the missed encounters, vulnerabilities, and insecurities at the thresholds between race, sex, and emancipatory struggle. She celebrates Jean Genet, “a radical friend,” as she calls him, “to the two great historical victims of the white order: the Jews and the colonized” (Bouteldja 2016, 49). This “friend” famously asked a question we might reiterate today:

How could one cheerfully rejoice at the end of Nazism all the while accommodating the genesis of colonialism and the pursuit of the imperialist project by other means? Could one recklessly isolate the Nazi moment from all other Western crimes and genocides?

(Genet 2004, 203)

And if one could not, or should not, then what is to be done? Genet, as Bouteldja reminds us, knew “that any indigenous person who rises up against the



white man grants him, in the same movement, the chance to save himself” (Bouteldja 2016, 26). Is this something we take for granted today? The author calls for a “real encounter” between whites and non-whites, a meeting which could take place “at the crossroads of our mutual interests—the fear of civil war and chaos—the site where races could annihilate each other and where it is possible to imagine our equal dignity” (50). Some impossible things might no longer be so, as one is ready to detach themselves from one’s exclusive wounds and stories, one-sided images, and zero-sum games. “Why not rewrite history, denationalize it, deracialize it?” asks Bouteldja (50). And then she makes an offer, or rather quotes one made some years ago by the Trinidadian historian, journalist, and Marxist C. L. R. James: “These are my ancestors, these are my people. They are yours too if you want them” (James 1980, 187).

Once a relationship between the community of memory that one feels part of and its *ancestors* is questioned, opened, and critically examined, that community’s belonging and attachment to values, objects and protagonists might destabilise radically. If James offers the memory of his Black ancestors and their revolt to people who might have had—at least according to the history books and official archives—little to do with it, it might implicate them. In doing so, it could respond to their moment of impasse, allowing them to see a bigger picture with them depicted within it as a different collective to the one they remembered and cherished. When thinking back to Duras and Kurcyszowa’s wartime narratives, one clearly sees that belonging can be negotiated along either unrecognised or forbidden lines; it can be narrated outside of the national, cultural, or other genres. Beyond the historical narratives of victims and perpetrators, there have been various forms of violence and oppression experienced and witnessed, and various attitudes towards them. The structure of imperial violence forced these “minor” forms to remain outside of the frame so that the image was not too complicated, so it remained clear who was who (and with whom one belonged, against whom one defended). Yet there have been people who refused simplicity and embraced the complicated image, further confusing it, expanding the view, mixing the feelings.

Four years after the official end of the Second World War, and six years after the destruction of the Jewish ghetto in the centre of Warsaw, the African-American scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois arrived in Poland to see the image of devastation motivated by racist hatred. He stood in the district of Muranów to look at the ruins that overlaid signs of life and death alike, histories of struggle and despair. It is a very thought-provoking exercise to imagine him standing there, to see him seeing and imagine him reflecting on race, violence, identity, and struggle—questions that would later materialise in a powerful essay entitled *The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto* (1952, 14–15). Returning to W. E. B. Du Bois’s encounter with the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto is yet another opportunity to reframe collective memories and identities, and to challenge the hegemonic narratives of the past, as well

as the alliances and possible solidarities growing out of them. As Michael Rothberg claimed in his *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*,

the lesson of Du Bois in Warsaw is in the end equally crucial for Holocaust studies, postcolonial studies, and ethnic studies in general: the varieties of racial terror that have marked and marred the twentieth century—in everyday as well as extreme forms—leave their tracks on all forms of knowledge.

(2009, 115)

Yet, this lesson can also be taught locally to both the academic community and society that grew on these ruins. Its members have tried—even struggled—for decades now to own these ruins in many different ways and make sense of them in the shape of memory. Monuments have been raised, paintings painted, books written, performances performed. One wonders, however, what it really means to own this site and the time it marks in the history of this collective of memory.

In his essay “People Doomed Jews to This Fate,” from the collection *The Non-Artistic Truth*, the Polish-Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor Henryk Grynberg challenged Nałkowska’s epigraph, its universalistic claim, Polish post-war anti-Semitism, and the memory of the Holocaust in Poland at the turn of the century. The Holocaust, he wrote, was a crime of humanity (hence “people”) but it was not a crime against people (or humanity), as only Jews were selected and excluded from it in an “unheard-of” [*sic*] way and doomed to extermination and erasure (Grynberg 1994). In the 1990s, many responded to this intellectually and ethically provocative stance. By fighting exclusion, Grynberg performed several others; with this statement, he painfully erased the memory of the Roma and Sinti victims of Nazi genocide, homosexual people, and people with mental disabilities. His approach needs to be challenged today; which people did Grynberg have in mind when reformulating Nałkowska’s phrase and questioning the worldview supporting it? Did he include the colonised people of Africa? Did he include the indigenous peoples of North America and Australia? Or did he keep them out of the story, and why? It is time to meet Du Bois in the ruins of Warsaw, zoom out and challenge the above yet again: what if Whites doomed Jews to this fate? This history might as well be narrated along these lines. And then when we decide to zoom out even more, we might even think that *Whites doomed people to this fate*. Can this common past now be reimagined?<sup>9</sup>

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**Notes**

- 1 Antelme was a French writer involved in the French Resistance. He was arrested and deported in 1944 and taken to the concentration camps of Buchenwald, Gandersheim, and finally Dachau where he was found by Francois Mitterand who organised his return to Paris. In 1947, he published *L'Espèce humaine*, translated into English as *The Human Race* by Haight and Mahler (1998). See also Dobbels (2003).
- 2 I refer here to a concept presented in the second chapter of Levi's collection of essays entitled *The Drowned and the Saved* (1988; originally published in Italian in 1986)—the last book he finished before his suicidal death. Levi writes about the need to divide the social field into “them” and “us,” distinct groups with distinct experiences and responsibilities. Yet, he points out that this distinction is completely inadequate in the “social field” of the concentration camp where the network of relations is grey rather than black and white.
- 3 In 1995, Polish television broadcaster Wrocław released a documentary entitled *Świadek* (Witness), directed by Andrzej Androchowicz, which depicts Kurcyszowa giving a testimony from her apartment. Regarding how the testimony of trauma is registered in the body and performed in front of the camera, it would be interesting to compare that film with Claude Lanzmann's *The Karski Report* (2010).
- 4 Kurcyszowa drew portraits of these kids which belong to Majdanek State Museum's art collection.
- 5 There are several narratives about the origin of this column. One states it was the “crazy” Rapportführer SS-Unterscharführer Josef Kaps's initiative, as he was obsessed with commissioning decorations for his field in rivalry with his colleagues; in Field III there was a unit preparing the ground for flowers, planting ornamental shrubs. Another narrative says it was created on occasion of the International Red Cross' inspection, and camp engineer Stanisław Zelen used this excuse to erect a monument to the camp's victims. And in another version, the column was designed to commemorate the anniversary of the NSDAP.
- 6 As James E. Young (2008, 359) put it: “A monument against fascism, therefore, would have to be a monument against itself: against the traditionally didactic function of monuments, against their tendency to displace the past they would have us contemplate—and finally, against the authoritarian propensity in monumental spaces that reduces viewers to passive spectators.”
- 7 At least three other testimonies deposited in the archives of the Majdanek State Museum mention the idea of the monument in Field V.
- 8 As a sidenote, in 2019, the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) produced a film depicting life in Nazi-occupied Warsaw and introduced a correction to Nałkowska's epigraph for use in the film's opening frame: “People (Germans [written in red—K. B.]) doomed people to this fate,” and signed it “Zofia Nałkowska.”
- 9 Dorota Sajewska (2020) frames Du Bois's visit to Warsaw within an interesting context of peripheral racism in her article “Perspektywy peryferyjnej historii i teorii kultury” (Perspectives on Peripheral Cultural History and Theory). She writes: “A fascinating document of the era problematizing Poland as a semi-peripheral space in the context of issues of race and racism is the essay by African-American writer and social activist W. E. B. Du Bois, ‘The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto.’” (My translation.)

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**Part II**

**Bodies and the  
Communal Power**



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## 5 *Affective Communitas*

### Towards a Performative Theory of Historical Agency

*Dorota Sajewska*

If history were recorded by the vanquished rather than by victors, it would illuminate the real, rather than the theoretical, means to power.

Maya Deren ([1953] 1983, 6)

Historical agency as a concept aims to become performance theory as part of a larger onto-epistemological project which distinguishes a genealogy of human rights from the one linked to the development of capitalism and European modernity. In this chapter, I propose an understanding of history which relies not on the dominance of *logos* and the Western historiographic archive, but on close-range anthropology and performative studies who regard bodily transmission as a form of manifesting culture, tradition, and the past. Its starting point, the Bois Caïman vodun ceremony, is now acknowledged as the catalyst for the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) and thus as the formative event in the history of independent Haiti (Buck-Morss 2009). While traditional documentation of the Bois Caïman ceremony is scant, the important role it continues to play in the oral traditions and commutative ceremonies of Haitian society attests to its historical significance, and its interpretation serves both as a mirror in which to inspect methods and selection criteria of Western historical knowledge, and as a legendary scene through which to study the significances of the bodily archive in narratives about the past.

In analysing relations between vodun and history encoded in that specific scene, I will show theoretical consequences associated with the necessity to decolonise performance studies. By using the term *performance* in reference to vodun's political significance, my interest is in framing ritual as a bodily form of cultural memory, and its historical impact despite the discontinuity and hybridity of the Haitian diaspora. Shifting the focus from efficacy towards agency, when considering reflections on performativity, I propose to concentrate less on an event's singularity and more on communal experience, and the dynamic interconnectivity of human and more-than-human agents—on agency's very ability to act, perform, and thereby impact reality. This aspect is of particular importance in the context of groups that are dominated, subjugated, or have been rendered peripheral, making it possible to reinstate the



“ability of post-colonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power” (Ashcroft et al. 2007, 6). In the particular case of the Bois Caïman ceremony, those who were then enslaved people become agents in history.

Historical agency manifests itself in a specific commonality I term an affective *communitas*. I will demonstrate this below using artists from other cultures, including Maya Deren and Jerzy Grotowski who became deeply involved with Haitian culture and vodun ritual. As an alternative to the category of community, fixed to specific social, legal, and economic structures, I propose adopting the concept of *communitas* posited by Victor Turner: “bonds uniting people which are over and above formal social bonds” (1974, 23). The bonds of *communitas* are “anti-structural in that they are undifferentiated, egalitarian, direct, nonrational (though not irrational), I-Thou or Essential We relationships [...]” (1974, 46–47). *Communitas* can be thought of as a shared human experience of spontaneous, creative, and non-teleological coactivity in which fundamental roles are played by emotions, affects, intuitions, and beliefs. It is not tied to the sphere of effects, but rather to affect-generating situations in which interhuman bonds develop. In Latin, *effectus* denotes “execution, accomplishment, performance,” while *affectus* relates to the tension existing between “a state of body” and “a disposition of mind,” between “love, desire, fondness, good-will, compassion, sympathy” and the “ability of willing, will, volition” (LSJ, n.d., a). The affective *communitas* thus becomes synonymous with the experience of being together, of forging collective bonds irrespective of cultural differences. As an invisible force, affect mediates relations between the individual and a collective, connecting bodily capacity with extra-personal experience.

## Vodun and History

Oral tradition firmly attests to the Bois Caïman ceremony’s historical agency on the night of either the 14th or 21st August 1791.<sup>1</sup> It details that in woods near Le Cap in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, slaves from nearby plantations gathered with fugitives, or maroons, for a banned vodun ceremony. In a storm, *mambo* priestess Cécile Fatiman, “a green-eyed mulatto woman with long silken black hair, the daughter of a Corsican prince and an African woman” (Fick 2004, 93), fell into a trance, plunging a knife into the throat of a sacrificial black pig. Rebel leader Dutty Boukman, the *houngan*, or priest, instructed all participants to drink the blood and swear loyalty and solidarity, and made a political speech attacking Catholicism and colonial ideology and urging the people to embrace their African beliefs. This call to arms set off days of vengeance against enslavers; sugar plantations were burnt, and ultimately, it initiated the convoluted arc of the Haitian Revolution.

The invisibility of the Haitian Revolution in global historiography was pointed out by American-Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his seminal book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995).

His interpretation of history as “the fruit of power” (xix) led him to believe that reclaiming repressed pasts can help to reveal the roots of colonial violence as well as to restore political agency of enslaved people. It is inevitable that the Bois Caïman ceremony, as a religious rite and a political gathering imposing on its participants “the imperative of utmost secrecy,”<sup>2</sup> would be remembered and transmitted almost exclusively by oral retellings. In vodun practice, the *houngan* or *mambo* invokes the spirits of ancestors from “mythical” Africa. From a political perspective, the invocations may also be to kidnapped Africans who perished crossing the Atlantic during transport or had been worked to death in the cane fields. In the context of the revolution, the vodun ritual may thus be understood as a demonstration of African culture that had been systematically suppressed yet retained in and performed by the body—as a manifestation of the agency still possessed by the enslaved people brought by force to Saint-Domingue.

During French colonial period on the island, ritual practices played an anti-structural and community-building role and “provided slave rebellions with leaders, organizations, ideologies, and a community of feeling” (Geggus 1992, 34). Vodun’s anti-structural nature lay in the fact that, unlike the Catholicism of the colonists and so-called “mulatto” elites, it was a folk religion cultivated in rural areas. Despite French efforts to eradicate the culture their slaves had retained, vodun survived as “a religion of creation and life” (Hurston 1990, 113) and as “a danced religion” (Métraux 1972, 29). A 1704 ban on nocturnal gatherings was not observed in practice, drawing the Catholic church’s ire and intensifying the masters’ repressions against those who disobeyed. Prior to the revolution, the vodun ritual had been a source of both psychological and existential support among the enslaved, functioning as “escapism for the plantation slaves,” as a “crucial political credo” for the maroons organising clandestine gatherings including the Bois Caïman ceremony, and actively instilling political strength in the ethnically and linguistically diverse participants (Brutus 1973, 1:70). From this perspective, the revolution became a manifestation of their regained sense of agency: the ability, capacity, and freedom of individuals to act.

Despite roots in different cultural and geographic territories, the mixed traditions of enslaved people<sup>3</sup> did not impede the formation of “a new syncretic religion” (Métraux 1972, 29) in the form of a highly organised and relatively complex ritual.<sup>4</sup> Vodun is a comprehensive, diversified system combining beliefs, religion, knowledge, philosophy, and art. At its heart lies communication with deities and ancestors by means of the human body.<sup>5</sup> With worship ensconced in music, rhythm, song, and dance, this strictly bodily expression and its transmission from body to body played a role tantamount to orality in the process of preserving vodun traditions among the enslaved. The cruel and violent voyage of the Middle Passage, followed by brutal exploitation in the colony’s lucrative sugar-cane fields, played an incontrovertible role in this process of bodily archiving, transmission, and transformation of their African heritages. During the forced passage to the Caribbean,

what transpired was a “generalised instrumentalization of human existence” and the “physical destruction of bodies” (Delices 2016, 211). The history of vodun’s arrival in Haiti is aptly summed up by Patricia Marie-Emmanuelle Donatien (2016, 156), who writes of this *de- and reterritorialization*: “Vodou as a religion, but also as a system of representation, has developed a poetics and an aesthetics that derive from both a heritage preserved through struggle and from the chaotic, violent and defective history of the Caribbean [...]”

In acknowledging the lengthy impact of bio- and necropolitics on the development of local religious practices, it is possible to underscore the sheer ritual violence constituting an active force in Haitian history as well as in the later period of decolonisation in new African nations. Maya Deren, the cultural researcher, ethnographer, performer, and film director, wrote about active violence in vodun in her anthropological study *Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti* ([1953] 1983). Deren makes apparent the two sides of the ritual, which preserve the tradition of worshipping both the gentle *rada* and the malevolent *petro* (*petwo*). *Rada* traces back to Allada, the holy city in Dahomey (now Benin), with ties to the Yoruba people. The cult of *petro* is more local in character, capacitating the few surviving natives’ vicarious revenge on colonists through slave actions (11).

Petro was born out of this rage. [...] It is the crack of the slave-whip sounding constantly, a never-to-be-forgotten ghost, in the Petro rites. It is the raging revolt of the slaves against the Napoleonic forces. And it is the delirium of their triumph.

(62)

Through *petro*, reclaiming historical agency entailed violence, a constant in the ritual and over the course of revolution, through years of massacres and counter-massacres.<sup>6</sup> In this cycle of revolutionary violence is an indispensable means of shedding the effects of colonialism. In Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), first published in French in 1961 and written during Algeria’s fight for independence, the social philosopher depicts violence as a ritual form of cleansing the psyches of colonised subjects. As exploitation is fraught with repressions and aggression, revolution must mirror those transgressions.<sup>7</sup>

The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world, which has ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms and broken up without reserve the systems of reference of the economy, the customs of dress and external life, that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters.

(Fanon 1963, 40)

Fanon clearly equates violence with redressing centuries of frustration plaguing the colonised subjects, previously channelled “by the emotional outlets of

dance and possession by spirits” (58) and now leading towards political action and reclaiming historical agency.

### Historiography and Anthropology

Western historiography, in which traditional documentation determines, proves, and identifies facts and confirms the veracity of evidence, is ineffective in areas of study such as rituals. The ritual, a practice in which religion, aesthetics, philosophy, and history are manifested together, is too hybrid for most Western disciplines to acknowledge its equal value alongside accepted documentation and archival sources in the study of history. From their perspectives, living communal archives based on a repertoire of corporal forms of action and memory—including dance, song, ritual, and orature—appear to defy rationalisation and scientific verification. Such is not the case with anthropology, in which the sphere of ritual practices offers crucial insight into a given culture, its history, and its social structures. Anthropology, in emphasising that rituals convey religious ideas while being treated by participants as actions in and of themselves, acknowledges efficacy as their fundamental characteristic. Efficacy is thus inextricably tied to agency,<sup>8</sup> though the latter is not confined to human agents alone but embraces virtual and supernatural agents as well. By way of ritual, a change transpires in the very understanding of time: non-linear, cyclical, it can also rupture the human dimension of space. Rituals establish dynamic relations between individuals and collectives, present and past, divinities as creators of tradition with ancestors as its mediators and living participants as its recipients; they constitute a kind of history in action. What is key in ritual action, however, unlike in historiography, is not the event (and its interpretation) but the experience of togetherness; over the course of a ritual, this either receives affirmation of its stability or is transformed into a new form of being together. As ritual is a series of symbolic actions within a given community, it often facilitates the confronting of a crisis that a collective may be facing.

The topic of ritual in crisis management was discussed in depth by Claude Lévi-Strauss in “The Effectiveness of Symbols” (1963, 186–205), first published in French in 1949. Lévi-Strauss elucidates *l’efficacité symbolique* and finds a parallel between the social function of rituals and psychoanalysis. By analysing a magic-religious text of the Cuna people of Panama, affirming the role of song in shamanistic healing, he worked out a theoretical model of how personal crisis is overcome with the aim of achieving social consensus and psychological integrity (Lévi-Strauss maintained a fundamental scholarly distance from the case being studied). Here, the song relates a woman’s experience of complications in childbirth, for which the midwife requests the intervention of a shaman. Lévi-Strauss describes the song as “a *psychological manipulation* of the sick organ” (1963, 192; original italics). It imparts a detailed account of a real experience which taps into the essence of oral tradition, preserving an occurrence in memory through constant repetition of the story.

Underscoring the role of verbal manipulation and storytelling techniques in non-Western healing methods and occidental therapies alike, Lévi-Strauss proposed the objective model of *symbolic effectiveness*. His model makes manifest the vital link between collective ideas and individual psychology, while expressing the body-structuring process. Combining the approaches of anthropology and psychoanalysis, he introduces the affective sphere into the study of community and its rituality, which animates not the intellect but the body. Psychoanalysis understands affect as bodily action and reaction, transpiring without conscious representation or conscious perception of the experience. The activation of memory triggers the affects, which are subsequently discharged, with a reduction of the ailment's symptoms. Shamanistic healing, as Lévi-Strauss believed, renders bodily experience (e.g., pain) accessible to the consciousness by placing that experience within a greater whole—through utilising myth. “The shaman provides the sick women with a *language*, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be immediately expressed” (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 198; original italics). Lévi-Strauss makes note of bodily mediation in replaying past experiences, interpreting the healing ritual as a series of events observed by the ailing body. Yet he also denies its autonomy, arguing that corporeal processes must always be expressed through symbols and language to achieve harmony between the experience and the myth.

Focussing on the act of stimulating real effects through symbolic actions allows ritual to be interpreted as a cultural performance: as a bodily form of memory based on the repetition of cultural patterns, beliefs, and behaviours. The notion of effectiveness also reveals an understanding of performance as a discipline of human activity utilising symbolic forms and living bodies of a specific culture for affirmative or critical and transformative manifestations. In this context, the anthropologist and historian John J. MacAloon (1984, 1) cites the definition of cultural performance put forth by the organisers of the 1977 Burg Wartenstein Symposium (Barbara Babcock, Barbara Myerhoff, and Victor Turner): “They are occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others.” Effectiveness thus constitutes and upholds the existence of cultural continuity, making it possible for a society to manifest itself as a defined *we*, finding justification in myths, shared history, and the dramatisation, performance, and embodiment of symbolic forms.

### **The Effectiveness of Theory and the Crisis of Practice**

The anthropological notion of ritual effectiveness has played a key role in the development of contemporary performance and performativity theory. The performance theorist John McKenzie (2001, 29) even states that the challenge of efficacy shaped the paradigm of performance studies, “its interdisciplinary origins,” and “its practical and theoretical models.” In the

historical development of the notion of *performance* in the study of efficacy, a specific tension between recognising the stabilising function of performance in renewing or affirming existing structures is observed, along with the transformative and/or subversive potential of performance.<sup>9</sup> This polar oscillation indicates the varied semantic shades of the English word “effect.” In the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (n.d.), it “inevitably follows the antecedent” as a necessary consequence of an action; is “designed to produce a distinctive or desired impression” as an action predicated on a specific objective; has “the quality or state of being operative” as a predictable function ensuring a system’s utility; and contains “the power to bring a result,” its immanent potential to influence reality. Its many meanings, I believe, have shifted attention in the key category of efficacy in performance studies away from action and towards result. This is compatible with its etymology, from the Old French *efet*, meaning “result, execution, completion, ending,” and from the Latin terms *effectus*, or “execution, accomplishment, performance,” and *efficere*, “to work out, accomplish” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.; LSJ, n.d., b). The latter term provided English with “efficacy.”

One condition, as performance studies became a distinct academic field, was a shift in the understanding of theatre. It transformed from a field of live communal action, akin to ritual, to one of a *Denkfigur* (figure of thought), a metaphor facilitating a transition from practice to theoretical generalisation. The feedback loop between theatre and anthropology that ensued, most pronounced in the intellectual friendship of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, led to the formulation of numerous cultural-performance models. Between theatre and ritual, as McKenzie (2001, 38) argues, “the challenge of efficacy took on a particular form—the theatrical body, the physical presence of actor and audience—and a particular function—the transformation of society through liminal transgression.” Schechner, in his 1979 text “From Ritual to Theatre and Back,” traced dynamic interrelations between ritual’s efficacy and the entertainment of theatre. Although the two are contradictory, as he also pointed out, they constitute a common system enabling broad study of cultural performance, and he analysed “a dialectical tension between efficacious and entertainment tendencies” (468) that characterise every cultural performance and cross one another throughout the history. A decade later, in *Performance Theory* (1988), Schechner executed a fundamental shift in his research, from reflecting on theatre and ritual as bodily forms of action and towards the existence of performance theory inspired by poststructuralist theory. As McKenzie (2001, 41) notes: “[t]his shift from theatre to theory, however, itself marks an even more profound passage, for there has been a passage in the passage itself. The efficacy, the transformative potential of cultural performance has itself been transformed.”

The function of theatre and ritual “as a general model of efficacy” (McKenzie 2001, 42) was exhausted in the 1980s and 1990s, giving rise to a multitude of performance concepts. Yet, the notion of efficacy adapted from anthropology was being applied by many in postmodern performance studies as they analysed Western societies, bringing a change of perspective and shifting the centre

of gravity towards issues of relevance in those societies—power, institutions, social roles—and pushing out the relations of art and politics with magic and religion. Ritual became a handy metaphor for forms of political protest as *ritualised* social performances and a means of interpreting individualistic social behaviours, as in the performance concept of *habitus*.<sup>10</sup> In contemporary performance studies, ritual and theatre do not survive as a practice and experience reflecting on Otherness, but as theoretical points in studying domestic culture. In my view, a crisis of and a retreat from practice as an object of study occurred, and this founded performance theory's efficacy as a scholarly paradigm.

The fact that the study of ritual and performance turned into a scholarly paradigm created something of a paradox: cultural studies that had originally been anti-structural produced the effect of authority. This confirmed Judith Butler's thesis that institutions of power rely on tactics based on "a magical efficacy" (1999, 120); her words on magic proved symptomatic of the metaphorisation of anthropological language. The developmental peak of the performance-studies paradigm in the US came in the 1980s and 1990s as capitalism branded its victory over communism. *Efficacy*, *efficiency*, *effectivity*, and *effectiveness* tie in deeply to the capitalist economy's historical development, with its ideals of productivity, quality control, increase in capital-accumulation potential, and with objectified interpersonal relations and the replacement of social interaction with the goods-exchange process. From the machine-based model to the systemic (McKenzie 2001, 55–94), management and labour organisation in the twentieth century has always been governed by principles of high performance and maximised efficiency. The radical extreme of capitalism's efficacy remains the imperialism and slavery with which it opened its history: the utter dehumanisation of humans, the purposeful shattering of social bonds within colonised communities.

"Try as we might to rid ourselves of it, in the end everything brings us back to the body," writes the political theorist Achille Mbembe (2020). Always at stake in capitalism is the body or, more precisely, its transformation into a body-object, a body-machine, a highly functional tool shorn of the right to freedom. The subordination of human life to capitalist principles of productivity led to colonial laws built on violence—on territorial occupation and the control of local peoples saddled with foreign social relations and cultural rules. Economic calculation was the sole factor in colonists' thinking about human life and their primary tool. From slave ships to domestic slave breeding, colonial rule, and the profitability of plantations were, in turn, foundations for the implementation of Western rationalism, in which racist postulates became practical applications: the capitalist rules of ownership, production, and... efficacy.

### **Post-Colonial Agency**

In postcolonial studies, the term of key importance has not been "efficacy" but rather "agency," as it relates to "the ability of postcolonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power" (Ashcroft et al. 2007, 6).

A significant role in critical analysis of relations between imperialism and neo-liberalism is the study of local forms of agency in opposition to globalisation. Indigenous knowledge can be understood as resistance to global capitalism by proposing an alternative political practice which includes more-than-human actors, such as animals, mountains, plants, ghosts, and gods, in the political arena. Thus, as Marisol de la Cadena argues (2015, 334), this interrelationship of “earth-beings” transcends Western understandings of the political which is limited to humans and the material world. The term *agency* also invites renewed reflection on notions of subjectivity, exploring relations between possibilities of sovereign activity and limitations resulting from construction of the subject. Postcolonial studies and performance theory share this study of the ability or inability of a subject to undertake action and perform. From the postcolonial perspective, however, the accent is placed differently. As Ashcroft et al. point out, even postcolonial theorists who are sceptical of a subject’s freedom of action—including Homi Bhaba and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—emphasise that “although it may be difficult for subjects to escape the effects of those forces that ‘construct’ them, it is not impossible. The very fact that such forces may be recognized suggests that they may also be countermanded” (Ashcroft et al. 2007, 7).

The postcolonial concept of agency goes back to Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), originally published in French in 1952, in which he argues that dehumanisation due to capitalist imperialism is responsible for the loss of faith among colonised peoples in themselves and their own agency. Through his psychoanalytic training, Fanon studies racism’s effects on the possibility to act and shows its impact on the “self-perception of blacks themselves” (Sardar 2008, viii). He analyses mechanisms by which Whites create a discourse of racial superiority in all areas of culture, art, and science. Writing about “the effect of my being a Negro,” Fanon treats his self-identification as “a Negro” as a consequence of (anti-Black) racism (Fanon 2008, 128). As a psychoanalyst, he emphasises that this construct affects a Black individual to such a degree that it creates a desire to be white:

As a psychoanalyst, I should help my patient to become conscious of his unconscious and abandon his attempts at a hallucinatory whitening, but also to act in the direction of a change in the social structure. In other words, the black man should no longer be confronted by the dilemma, turn white or disappear; but he should be able to take cognizance of a possibility of existence.

(74–75)

Conquering a fear of one’s Blackness implanted by white culture will make it possible to regain agency, Fanon believed, which relates to the individual’s sovereignty while transcending individual psychology and crossing into the field of social change. Fanon also recognised the role that is played in regaining agency by relations between repressive effects of racism and



affects in mediating the individual with the collective, the conscious with the unconscious, cultural determinants with free will, and, finally, the past with the future.

In the final chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, “By Way of Conclusion,” Fanon reflects on relations between the past and the future and arrives at a kind of theory of memory and history based on “the lived experience of the Black Man,” which can lead to humanity’s rebirth knowing no differences. “I am a man, and what I have to recapture is the whole past of the world. I am not responsible solely for the revolt in Santo Domingo” (176). Fanon points out the need to reject a historical determinism responsible for entrapment in racism, rendering all humanity enslaved to the past. Meanwhile, he implores us to embrace the future’s undetermined nature and the resulting choices which equate with freedom, including freedom from constructed identities. Not being determined by history will be the foundation of action, which also means the ability to regain one’s subjectivity as well as to transcend it. “Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the You?” (181). With these words, Fanon recognises freedom’s meaning as the possibility of sharing oneself with others. In his concluding thoughts, Fanon builds a foundation for a theory of community based on experiencing another human being beyond historically determined cultural differences. In this *communitas*, strongly reminiscent of Martin Buber’s (1937) concept of the *I and Thou* (originally published in German in 1923), Fanon deems the human body to be the key medium. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, this conciliation of being together with bodily experience comes through most profoundly in the “final prayer” (181): “O my body, make of me always a man who questions!”

### Theory of Lived Experience

In her activity as a researcher of Haitian culture and as a filmmaker, Maya Deren also identified a community transcending established patterns of cultural, social, or ethnic identity, around the time Fanon had projected the potential to tap into bodily experience to create a community without human-imposed boundaries. Deren begins her 1953 study *Divine Horsemen* with words of solidarity with the local inhabitants, pointing out “the peculiar and isolated position of the artist in Occidental culture” resulting from not accepting “certain beliefs which have so long been the premises of Occidental thought” ([1953] 1983, 9). Deren, as an “artist-native” (8), rejects the duality of spirit and matter and the prevailing conviction about bodily experience: the “belief that physical, sensory—hence, sensual!—experience is at least a lower form, if not a profane one, of human activity” (9). This Otherness within her own culture made it possible for Deren to step beyond its notion of subjectivity towards a totalistic conception of human existence, providing her with “an alternative mode of communication and perception” (8) rooted

to a far greater degree in emotion and affect than in intellectual analysis, and welcoming subjectivism and intuition, immediate experience and emotional expression into the cognitive process. Her artistic sensitivity allowed her to find integral elements of the metaphysical system in seemingly unrelated details; she discerned that “Haitian dancing was not, in itself, a dance-form, but part of a larger form, a mythological ritual” (10). Yet, in her study of vodun ritual, Deren did not rely on anthropological theory or any methodology of fieldwork established by professional ethnography. In interpreting local rituals, she opted for direct lived experience so close to the culture that Haitians “began to believe that [she] had gone through varying degrees of initiations” (9).

Deren’s Otherness in Western culture, a consequence of her position as an artist, also came from her life experience. A Ukrainian Jew, born Eleonora Derenkowska in Kyiv in 1917, she began assuming her new identity while still a child. Her family fled brutal anti-Semitic pogroms in Ukraine in 1922 and settled in the US.<sup>11</sup> Her father, the eminent psychiatrist Salomon Derenkowski, shortened the family surname after their naturalisation in 1928. Eleonora Deren, upon the success of her film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) with Alexander Hammid, changed her name to Maya Deren. A more apt chosen name for a dancer from the far edge of the Western world, an experimental filmmaker, and the soon-to-be researcher of Haitian ritual, would be hard to imagine. The word *māyā* in Buddhism denotes illusion, pretence, deceit; as interpreted in Hinduism, it is a powerful appearance that creates the illusion of the realness. Deren never took a strictly biographical route in her work, though in *Divine Horsemen* she assumed a perspective from her dual experience of alienation as an artist and as an Eastern European Jew. Traces of the past glint as analogies between Haitians and Slavic peasants’ hardships, and in a digressive thesis on history as an account of her own artistic failures: “If history were recorded by the vanquished rather than by victors, it would illuminate the real, rather than the theoretical, means to power; for it is the defeated who know best which of the opposing tactics were irresistible” (Deren [1953] 1983, 6).

Deren first travelled to Haiti in September 1947 for a project on ritual songs and dances performed in vodun ceremonies. She was already something of an icon of avant-garde cinema. Her groundbreaking films, including *At Land* (1944), *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945), and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1945–1946), were influential in experimental filmmaking due to a radical subjectivisation of the experience of time and space, and for their dynamic means of depicting movement as fundamental to human life and an immanent quality of motion pictures. These black-and-white shorts employ hard cuts, multiple exposures, superimposed and repeated images, techniques of slow- and stop-motion, with Deren creating dispersed, multi-layered narratives fusing into poetic-philosophical film essays. *A Study in Choreography for Camera* explores the body in motion and the process of filmmaking in a vision of liberation from the constraints of real space. In *Ritual in Transfigured*

*Time*, the subject is motion and dance again, this time as forms of cultural expression in social norms, behaviour patterns, and the possibilities of their creative reinterpretations manifest. Due to her work on this film, Deren formulated her definition of ritual:

A ritual is an action distinguished from all others in that it seeks the realization of its purpose through the exercise of form. In this sense ritual is art; and even historically, all art derives from ritual. In ritual, the form is the meaning. More specifically, the quality of movement is not merely a decorative factor; it is the meaning itself of the movement. In this sense, this film is a dance.

(Deren 2005, 252)

For her first trip to Haiti, Deren had a clear concept for how to photograph and film events she would witness: since the religion of vodun is a mythology, she believed that only a *poetic structure* could capture its expression in the ritual. The poetic form would avoid ethnography's symbolic violence, the objectification of the Other by detached scientific observation. She realised that her project must combine its poetic layer with a realist one to reflect fundamental relations and equivalences of the religious sphere and daily life. In her correspondence with Gregory Bateson, Deren described her film project as a "fugue of culture" (Deren and Bateson 1980, 16) intended to integrate voices, gestures and objects in order to produce an image of something invisible and impossible. Vodun, an unofficial religion largely practised underground, was suppressed by the government and the Catholic clergy, making it extremely unlikely to photograph or film a ceremony that was not done for tourists. This drove Deren to integrate with performers and participants, to take part in rituals, and ultimately to become a vodun practitioner. She would describe the act of surrendering to ritual possession as an encounter with a "white darkness" in which a pure form devoid of any meaning appeared, inhabiting absolute time, with everything existing simultaneously (Deren [1953] 1983, 260–262).

The experience of Haiti became something of a rite of passage for Deren, which she underwent as an artist and individual:

I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my creative integrity; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulations.

(Deren [1953] 1983, 6)

Four years after first visiting Haiti, Deren secured the raw footage from ceremonies in a fireproof can, which she stashed in a wardrobe, some 18,000 feet of film still on the reels. The photo rolls landed in a drawer labelled to

be printed (Deren [1953] 1983, 5). Though she left the film incomplete, her Haitian experience generated a heterogeneous body of work: many hours of film footage, a huge collection of sound recordings, a photo series documenting life in Haiti, the music LP *Voices of Haiti* (1953), her anthropological study *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953), a montage of film excerpts for television, and a series of interviews and lectures given upon her return to New York City in 1955. She demonstrated the impossibility of editing traces gathered of the ritual into a cohesive film on vodun ceremonies; she also showed the possibility of communal experience through ritual participation despite social, ethnic, and cultural differences.

### More-than-Human Agency and Affects

Deren's experience-bred art project casts light on distinctions between effectiveness and agency, a difference constituting this chapter's chief theoretical concern. The impact of vodun mythology did not produce an effect in the form of an artwork—in fact, as Deren wrote, it ended in artistic failure. Yet it also changed her life entirely. This change transpired because of contact with Haitian reality and vodun rituals, proving that agency is not teleological and defies both an individual's planned actions and influence from social norms. According to vodun spirituality, agency is not limited to actions of living humans, and that which is material is only significant in the metaphysical context. In the ritual, the tension between visible and invisible is negotiated by *loa* spirits, known as *les Invisibles*, which appear when an individual or group enters a trance or possession state: they are rendered visible through the body in motion. It is said that the *loa* ride their horses and that a *loa* enters a person's body and their presence is announced through an intense dance. The *loa* are immaterial, invisible and a very real phenomena<sup>12</sup>; “the actions and utterances of the possessed person are not the expression of the individual but are the readily identifiable manifestations of the particular *loa* or archetypal principle” (Deren [1953] 1983, 16).

The essence of the vodun ceremony lies not in the existence of the archetype or spirit but in its actions, rendered detectible at the moment of possession. The onset of the trance state is indicated by a characteristic bodily quivering, hysterical motions, exaggerated facial expressions accompanied by rapid breathing and a specific tone of voice. Alfred Métraux (1972, 120–121) writes that though the possessed may appear to have lost control of their motor functions, this stage of crisis manifesting in symptoms of a psychological nature passes relatively quickly. Ceremonial drumming facilitates the onset of a full trance state, which then takes the form of a dance. The ritual dance is a kind of bodily meditation in which physical actions and the state of mind are in constant negotiation. The poses of the “horses,” as the *loa* mount them, are the most visually spectacular moments of the entire ritual. The entry of a divinity into the human body is not an act of self-expression but a sign of the individual's psyche having been supplanted by that of the

*loa*: in vodun terms, the soul—more precisely, the part known as the *gwo bon anj*—has given way to the *loa*. When writing about the particular moment of activating the *loa*, Deren notes: “This, which is a major function of ritual, is something to be experienced only in participation” (Deren [1953] 1983, 229). Here, she indicates both the depersonalisation of the individual participating, and that the acting entity has become the community as a whole. The rhythm imposed by the drums is responsible for participants melding into this uniform whole, and they are physical objects, but also ritual subjects, making it possible to activate the immaterial *loa*. The drumming communally joins dozens of individuals governed by a single pulse and moving in a rolling motion as “a single serpentine body” (257). Deren treats the real time of the ritual as collective timelessness experienced through participation: “The entire collective over time [...] here is comprehended, here becomes intimate and feeds and comforts” (247). In the shared rhythm, all become part of the community: not a blend of individuals but a collective abandonment of self (the I) in order to serve one another and that which unites them all. The experience of the invisible is the abandonment of real space-time and immersion in the “white darkness” in which contours, shapes, meaning, and familiar notions of space-time cease to exist. From there, one can begin to imagine a different order of memory and history. There, from the bodies of people propelled by a common pulse, emerge the monumental *loa*, and from there “surges this lavish arterial river of ancestral blood which bears all racial history forward into the contemporary moment and funnels its vast accumulations into the denim-dressed serviteur” (247).

Métraux noted that the variety of drums, rhythms, and dances conducive to the audibility of voices from Dahomey and Congo, from the Igbo people and the local Petro cult, results from the diverse traditions from which the divinities hail. In *Le Vaudou haïtien*, he also argues that more-than-human agency manifests due to the power of affects responsible for forming a reciprocal relationality between those possessed and the divinity:

Dancing is a ritual act from which emanates a power that affects the supernatural world. Drum rhythms and dances attract the spirits. That is why they are assigned a predominating role in nearly all ceremonies. If the music and dancing pleases the spirits to such an extent that they are affected, even against their will, then it is because they themselves are dancers who allow themselves to be carried away by the supernatural power of rhythm.

(Métraux 1972, 188–189)

Affect plays a key role in the experience of possession: it is something between the visible and invisible, between presence and absence, experience and memory, movement and mannerism, feeling and emotion.<sup>13</sup> Affects are transmitted between people gathered in a given time and space, and are always born in the collective, with the community-building function being

played—as Deren so emphatically noted—by the rhythm, the breathing, and the atmosphere.<sup>14</sup>

The experience of possession Deren describes in *Divine Horsemen*'s final chapter demonstrates togetherness mediated by the body, movement, and rhythm during ceremonial participation as an affective communitas. In her effort to experience a non-identarian communitas, Deren made a certain self-sacrifice to transcend “all particular cultural definitions and normative orderings of social ties,” as Victor Turner (1974, 68) noted. This included sacrificing theories for describing experience, forcing one to re-evaluate analogies to one's own culture. Deren compares possession with hypnosis: while the two states share aspects—tension, rhythm, atmosphere, desensitisation to physical pain—they are undeniably different, with hypnosis “going inward and downward” and possession being “an explosion upward and outward” (Deren [1953] 1983, 321). Possession is simultaneously an individual and collective experience; unlike hypnosis, it does not lead to “self-negation” but to a state of “the ultimate in self-realization to the point of self-transcendence” (321). Exposing the inadequacy of psychoanalytic terminology for interpreting rituals, Deren indirectly responded to Lévi-Strauss's concepts of *l'efficacité symbolique* in the form of her own theory of agency recorded in *Divine Horsemen*.

### Historical Agency

Deren's unfinished film project constitutes a practical manifestation of the theoretical difference that this chapter proposes between the concept of agency and the performance-studies paradigm of efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness. While her endeavours in Haiti cannot be described in categories of efficacy, they do show practice verifying theory, turning lived experience into a meaningful cognitive pathway. Rather than being the product of premeditated action and the sphere of effects, the communitas arising from Deren's interpretation of vodun ritual belongs to the realm of affects that engender situational formation of interpersonal bonds. And though Deren's cognitive practice has not become a prominent component of performance studies, it has influenced other artists testing the significance of rituals as bodily means of transmitting tradition, memory, and culture, and others exploring the impact of affects on community formation. One such artist was the theatre director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski.

In Grotowski's inaugural lecture as the head of the *Anthropologie théâtrale* department at the Collège de France, delivered at the Bouffes du Nord in Paris in March 1997, Grotowski discussed Deren's decision to forgo her film project on ritual dances in favour of participation in the ritual. Screening two blurry excerpts from the surviving footage (edited posthumously in 1977 by Cherel Ito [Winnett] and Deren's husband, Teiji Ito), Grotowski (1997) argued that Deren had “filmed what she could film—without interfering in the ritual” and pointed to the impotence of film images in the face of

the “stream of impulses flowing through the body of the possessed.”<sup>15</sup> He continued, “On my multiple trips to Haiti, I had heard stories about her from an old vodou priest—he recalled her as a human vodou phenomenon of great worth.” In the mid-1970s, Grotowski left theatre, having found its processes ultimately preoccupied with achieving an effect: the production of a performance. Having long been fascinated by the body and its capacity for affecting or being affected, for generating a sense of belonging, Grotowski ultimately focussed his research interests on the processuality of human actions: the dynamics of togetherness, direct experience, and bodily transmission. These traits come across as brilliantly in paratheatrical experiments as they do in traditional rituals.

Grotowski encountered vodun rituals during trips to Haiti in December 1977, May 1978, and late November/early December 1978. A subsequent visit in July and August 1979 brought the most impactful event: a meeting with a vodun community in Saint-Soleil and with the *houngan* Eliezer Cadet. That August, Grotowski and Cadet travelled to Nigeria, the land of the Yoruba (Osogbo and Ifé), acknowledged as the cradle of vodun. In 1980, he took Cadet, Amon Frémon, and a group of 12 performers from Saint-Soleil to Poland for the *Theatre of Sources*, his intercultural project (Kolankiewicz 2012), which sought universal sources for a human being “who precedes the differences” (Grotowski 2001, 259). Convinced that extra-bodily aspects are always deeply present in the production process, Grotowski brought together those producing “from traditions and techniques far from one another” (265), whose objective was not sharing or acquiring specific techniques but instead the suspension of habitual body techniques. Grotowski believed that a full suspension of cultural and social determinants ought to lead to “a deconditioning of perception” and a rediscovery of body-technique sources that are “something received from God or printed on one’s genetic code” (261), depending on the viewpoint. Following in Deren’s tracks, he probed differences, absorbing from a foreign culture and exploring what makes it unique to find common forebears: universal human traits that precede social, cultural, and ethnic differences.

While Grotowski developed his project in a secluded location outside a city, in a natural environment isolated from daily political life, Amon Frémon had a different interpretation of why Grotowski brought him to Poland in 1980. After the *Solidarity* strikes that August, came the establishment of the first legal, independent labour union in the Eastern bloc. This independent opposition was then countered by the imposition of martial law in December 1981; however, it catalysed the global political shift that took place in 1989. Frémon, in a 1996 interview with Riccardo Orizio, suggested that Grotowski was endowed with magical powers, and said that his arrival in 1980 was wholly unrelated to anthropological or theatre-related motivations:

Jerzy knew that I was the one man who could bring peace to Poland. The country was up in arms and needed someone with magic powers. Jerzy took me all over the place, to one city after another, and organized great

festivals of magic. Every city we went to, we would take at least twenty-five white men with us into the forest and perform the rites together.

(Orizio 2001, 144)

By attesting to the vodun ritual's historical agency, Frémon became the link connecting the *Theatre of Sources* project—initiated by Grotowski and orchestrated with a multicultural group of performers from India, Japan, Mexico, and, above all, Haiti—to political changes sweeping the countries of Europe's Soviet sphere.

The idea of historical agency thus materialises through the formation of transversal forms of community, relating not to a single culture or a common history but rather to an affective communitas. It is born out of lived bodily experience—for it is precisely the body, as the site where affects manifest, that enables a sense of togetherness to be generated. An affective communitas arises where different cultures meet within similar conditions. As we can see with Maya Deren's involvement in the Haitian vodun ritual, as well as how Jerzy Grotowski's built on Deren's experience in his anthropological activity, what these conditions have in common is alienation and dispersal in time and space. It is dispersal and not communion, distinctiveness, and uniformity that lie at the core of affective communitas. I believe that, as a locally, ephemerally emerging bond between disempowered minorities, affective communitas does not hinge on the choice between affirming or changing cultural values, nor does it attempt to surpass categories of nation, society, and identity. Its essence is a situational sense of togetherness, a collective sensibility facilitating shared experience while relating a capacity to influence reality by animating remnants of history in the body and activating its potential to project the future. The affective communitas stands in opposition to defined identity, for in such a fixed identity it recognises tools of control and domination over the Other. Yet it can occur in various, often remote, time and space configurations, challenging the notion of linear history as the necessary foundation for building a collective identity. The affective communitas, which I propose treating as a transversal form of community with transformative potential, is thus an essential form of historical agency made manifest.

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## Notes

- 1 According to Dorsainvil (1958, 66), the ceremony took place on the 14th of August. Alfred Métraux (1972) also cites this in his *Voodoo in Haiti*. Carolyn Fick (2004, 93) argues that the 14th was in fact when slave leaders convened to set political plans for the revolt to occur on the 22nd of August, with the Bois Caïman ceremony on the 21st of August. Today, commutative ceremonies



- usually take place on the 14th of August, with this date also appearing on Haitian postage stamps.
- 2 Fick (2004, 93) cites this as a reason for the scant documentation of the event.
  - 3 Haitian vodun is rooted in the religion of the Fon people of Dahomey, while encompassing a pantheon of spirits and deities of various provenances: local and African, pagan, and Christian. Scholars often emphasise vodun's dynamic, multi-stage evolution, with early creolisation already taking place in Africa, and beliefs drawn from the peoples of Congo, Nigeria, and Angola.
  - 4 Métraux (1972, 30) argues that priests were among the enslaved people.
  - 5 Patrick Delices (2016, 100) outlines an analogy between Haitian vodun and the system of spiritual beliefs practised in Ancient Egypt.
  - 6 Saint-Domingue, in becoming Haiti, went through an exceptionally brutal power struggle between its majority population, which comprised the enslaved, colonists, Haitian free people of colour, and the governments and expeditionary forces of France, Great Britain, and Spain. The Haitian Revolution created the world's first nation founded by former slaves; the price of that transformation cannot be overstated and its impacts—including harsh international sanctions—have continued to afflict Haiti to this day. For the course of that brutal struggle, see James ([1938] 1989).
  - 7 This mechanism is described by Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963, 17): “[...] the only violence is the settler's; but soon they will make it their own; that is to say, the same violence is thrown back upon us as when our reflection comes forward to meet us when we go toward a mirror.”
  - 8 Angelos Chaniotis et al. (2010) write about the correlations between the notions of “efficacy” and “agency.”
  - 9 Philip Auslander (1992) discussed the difference between transgressive and resistant efficacy. McKenzie (2001, 43) argues, “transgressive efficacy posits itself as a presence outside an alienating power,” and “resistant efficacy arises from within,” while Auslander proposed two different strategies of being political in and through performance.
  - 10 Judith Butler (1999, 113–128) explains the performativity of *habitus* by emphasising the dialectical interrelationship between the norm production and reproduction. *Habitus* is not only producing the norm, but also it is “formed through the mimetic and participatory acting in accord with the objective field.”
  - 11 As the historian Lloyd P. Gartner (2001, 86) writes: “The Ukrainian pogroms of 1917–1920 were the bloodiest mass killings of Jews in history until then. [...] Their savagery and mindlessness registered in Hebrew literature, inspiring such works as Saul Tchernikhovsky's virtuosos sonnet cycle, ‘On the Blood’ and Isaac Lamdan's impassioned ‘Masada.’ [...] Jews were in danger, it was now held, not of disappearance by assimilation as in the West, but by assault on their lives.”
  - 12 Deren ([1953] 1983, 88; original italics) states that the “Haitians did not so much ascribe divinity to matter as deduce the spirit of matter from its manifestations. Moreover, these principles which have been abstracted from the phenomena in which they are manifest are not less real than the phenomena, but merely non-physical and invisible; and this fact may illuminate the *Voudoun* concept of *les Invisibles* as real.”
  - 13 Brian Massumi (2015, ix–x) also formulates his conception of affect this way, noting that the very “concept of affect is ‘transversal,’” which means it transcends the dualism of subjective and objective, individual and collective, intellectual and emotional. The transversality of affect manifests in the body, always in movement, in passing, in transition.

- 14 Contemporary theorists accentuate, as Maya Deren did, the agential nature of affects and the community-building role of rhythm: “Rhythm is a tool in the expression of agency,” writes Teresa Brennan. “The rhythmic aspects of behaviour at a gathering are critical in both establishing and enhancing a sense of collective purpose and a common understanding” (2004, 70).
- 15 I kindly thank Leszek Kolankiewicz for providing me with a copy of the transcript of Grotowski’s lecture.

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## 6 Towards Ephemeral Communities of Care

AIDS, Political Transition,  
and Crisis

*Dorota Sosnowska*

It was 1992. [...] I was nine. Capitalism was new. I didn't feel like anything new was coming or anything old had ended and you know, I wasn't afraid of disease or politicians back then.

Ania Nowak in Michał Borczuch's *Untitled (Together Again)*, 2019

### Power of Secrets

In November 2019 in Warsaw, one could spot a particular poster advertising a new exhibition in the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art. It was composed of the word AIDS written with letters from a Donald Duck alphabet sticker set. Multiplied, it became kind of pattern-like on the fabric. The tension between childish, funny letters and the word itself bearing the weight of illness, death, politics, and art history, was striking, and provoking even while passing by on the street in a hurry. The poster was a part of Karol Radziszewski's exhibition entitled *The Power of Secrets*, presented between November 2019 and March 2020.

Radziszewski is one of the most renowned queer Polish artists. He is also a founder of the para-institution called Queer Archives Institute, which gathers documents on the lives of excluded or living-in-secret communities, mostly from Eastern European countries. At the heart of this collection are the Ryszard Kisiel's archives. Kisiel is an activist and founder of *Filo*, a gay magazine which first appeared on the underground scene in the 1980s. He is also the creator of the Donald Duck AIDS composition, first printed in *Filo* in 1986 and then reused and multiplied by Radziszewski for the first time in 2012 as a series of silkscreens referring to General Idea's travesty of Robert Indiana's *Love*. The power of this artistic gesture lies not only in the original, playful, and provoking idea of contrasting a fatal, sexually transmitted illness with childish stickers, connoting innocence and naivety, but also in the time gap that divides those two moments—the time of democratic transition in Poland. The Donald Duck stickers also connote Western imagery, framing the understanding of AIDS in Poland as well as the desires and imageries of transition.

This connection—between AIDS and transition—signalled by the poster and a tapestry work covering one of the exhibition walls, was further reinforced by *The Power of Secrets*' construction where Radziszewski's works became a backdrop for pieces by other artists like Wolfgang Tillmans, Natalia LL, General Idea and Ryszard Kisiel himself. The most important part of the show was Kisiel's archive, mentioned above, which framed other works as referring to the past and its experience. The first room gave the whole project the most personal meaning; entitled *1989*, fairy-tale sketches from Radziszewski's school notebook were enlarged and painted on the wall. As stated in the exhibition leaflet, at the turn of 1989 and 1990, the artist was nine years old and "was not entirely aware" (Radziszewski 2019, 10) of the transition shaping the new Polish reality at that time: "The fall of socialism, the budding capitalism, and the abrupt development of consumerist culture on the one hand and, on the other, abducted princesses, good fairies, and sexy temptresses" (Radziszewski 2019, 10). On the next wall, those fairy-tale "transitional images,"<sup>1</sup> which I understand as marking the changing epoch and queer identity, are accompanied by the photo series *Barbie*, also from 1989 (enhanced and professionally printed in 2019), depicting boys' games with plastic dolls. In the background, a 1990s reality looms—in the form of curtain, lamp, or desk—creating a sensual experience for all those who lived through this period.<sup>2</sup> It becomes clear that those childhood memories from the turning point of Polish history are also part of queer identity staged by the exhibition. Hearing about AIDS on TV, learning about it from Western pop culture, gossiping about it, not understanding what it really means, as well as being "not fully aware" of the transition happening before our own eyes is a part of Eastern European experience.

Intentionally planned to fall one day after *The Power of Secrets*' opening, visitors to Ujazdowski Castle could also attend a performance by Polish theatre director Michał Borczuch (the last of a three-evenings set). Titled *Untitled (Together Again)*, the performance is a kind of tribute to the AIDS-related art of Félix Gonzales-Torres, imitating his way of entitling works. Borczuch—together with choreographers and dancers Ania Nowak, Paweł Sakowicz and actress Dominika Biernat—first prepared the performance for the Berlin theatre HAU Hebbel am Ufer for *The Present Is Not Enough—Performing Queer Histories and Futures* festival in June 2019. Three people on stage take different sexually charged poses in changing configurations. Ania presses her head into Dominika's chest in the gesture of caressing her breast. Dominika kneels in front of Ania with her head between her legs. Paweł rhythmically rubs his bottom against Ania's bottom, both kneeling. This strange and beautiful dance, held in the lazy rhythm of music and a luminous pendulum moving at the back of the stage, creates an atmosphere of closeness and intimacy. At the same time, they tell stories beginning with childhood memories: first love and first (queer) sexual experiences in the Polish 1990s landscape. In a story told by Dominika, AIDS appears as an image she prepared for a school competition. She "fucked up the spelling" (Borczuch 2019) and wrote "ADIS"

instead of “AIDS,” which resulted in the work’s rejection. Ania remembers watching a Wembley concert in memory of Freddie Mercury on TV. Paweł tells a story about his journey through fields to meet his first lover. The field changes into a jungle with a hairy monkey spitting into the ground; “And it all begins.” The performance’s narration ends with the suicide of Milo, who, as a transgendered person, unable to live in conservative, Catholic and more and more undemocratic Polish society, jumped from a bridge in Warsaw in May 2019. It is hatred more than the disease which kills people. But in the 1990s, the fear of death was not real; the changing reality was not real either. AIDS and transition—as words heard on TV, in school, from adults talking—somehow blend, producing this strange constellation in which the deadly disease coming from the West is indiscernible from Western goods, pop culture and changing worlds. As a result, both symbolise desire and fascination, as well as fear and a sense of foreignness. By 2019—when the emancipatory hopes of transition expressed by queer activists at the beginning of the 1990s (Szcześniak 2016) were long gone—this symbolisation could serve as a powerful metaphor to reclaim that historical moment and that specific, forming experience in order to build new, unobvious, temporal communities, suddenly recognising themselves in the memories of dolls, fairies, school competitions, first kisses and TV news haunted by disease and new capitalism. As clearly seen from the unobvious perspective of the queer community’s experience in Radziszewski’s and Borczuch’s works, the communal, unofficial, and intimate memory of transition is infected with AIDS.

As Jakub Janiszewski shows in his 2013 book *Kto w Polsce ma HIV? Epidemia i jej mistyfikacje* (Who has HIV in Poland? Epidemic and its mystifications), AIDS was, and is, something rather collectively un-lived; from the very beginning it was defined as non-existent and not even successfully beaten. No important, well-known, recognised, or celebrated person died of AIDS in Poland. The country was spared the epidemic, according to government agencies and the Ministry of Health. As the author shows, this is obviously not true, but it shapes a common image of the illness as something external to Polish society, driven into the domain of anonymous gay people and drug addicts, cruel criminals, Black people, and prostitutes—all arising from urban legends rather than reality. But people still die of AIDS in Poland. In 2019, according to the National Institute of Public Health, 1,615 people were infected with HIV, 100 developed AIDS, and 18 died. In 2020, 810 people were infected, 47 with AIDS, and 10 died. As Janiszewski showed (already in 2013), it is due to the extremely low level of testing and social stigma accompanying the infection—something that only got worse from the moment he published his book. The 2020 informational campaign prepared by the Polish Ministry of Health propagated marital fidelity and sexual abstinence as preventions against infection. Public institutions dealing with the disease and its prevention are politically and ideologically biased; and social consciousness of the illness is low and there is no suitable language to talk about it. It is still a powerful secret.

The story of Polish HIV/AIDS, reconstructed by Janiszewski, begins in the late 1980s under a communist government and its extremely bureaucratic institutions who were doing the first steps towards a system of care and prevention around the disease. As a country devastated by totalitarian rules, planned economy was dysfunctional at a social institutional level. Thus, HIV/AIDS was relegated to doctors and the Health Ministry's clerks, who, without much power and amidst a landscape of dominating ignorance, struggled to provide infected people with treatment and care. In the 1990s, after the political change from communism to democracy, HIV/AIDS entered public discourse and consciousness following activist fighting for homes and therapies for HIV-infected people. This provoked conflicts, battles with angry neighbours and police interventions were shown on every TV channel in Poland. In 2000, Arkadiusz Nowak—a Catholic priest working with seropositive people—obtained a United Nations Poverty Award from the hands of Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations at the time who established a Global AIDS and Health Fund. In fact, this became an alibi for claiming that Polish strategy in fighting AIDS brings great results. However, Janiszewski shows that the story of Polish AIDS is a permanent and unresolved crisis. At the same time, his account of the story engages well-known political actors and draws upon all important changes introduced by post-communist governments: financial, healthcare, educational and administrative reforms. Alongside stories of AIDS, he reconstructs and documents particular events, for example, the introduction of religion to public schools in 1989; the total abortion ban called *compromise* in 1993; rising unemployment; strikes and protests of shipbuilders, miners, farmers, and nurses; and Poland entering the European Union in 2004. Reading the story of Polish AIDS makes it clear that whole transition is in fact a notion of a permanent political and social crisis. That is why the epidemic, and the large social change, from a totalitarian communist state to a liberal, capitalist society, are entangled in the imagination as well as memory. It also explains why queer experience in particular was relegated to the same margin of Otherness as the collectively repressed epidemic.

In the final chapter of his book, Janiszewski tries to diagnose why educated people and those aware of the risks—even anti-HIV activists—still do not inform others about their infection; why they assume irresponsible roles; and why HIV infection is still seen as something that does not happen here and now and is relegated to the world of vampires and zombies.<sup>3</sup> He states:

In Poland [...] next to the traditional, Catholic sex-negativity, which on a declarative level eagerly place bodily pleasures as the culprits of many miseries, new forms of sexual expression appear. They are often oppositional to the monogamous paradigm and bring new challenges, mostly undiscussed. From the prison to the gutter—this is the situation of many Polish sexual experimenters, who do not tolerate the myth of monogamy

but didn't learn how to build less durable relations, more shallow, based on a different kind of contract [...].

(Janiszewski 2013, 370)

This “different kind of contract,” outlining how to establish shallower, but nevertheless meaningful and respectful, caring relationships outside of the martial model of monogamy, could be viewed as a much-needed new community—or communities—considering the AIDS crisis. In this text, I will search for images, glimpses, and possibilities of such communities—especially those present in Polish art addressing AIDS—within the experienced or memorialised context of the Polish political transition crisis.

### **“Welcome to the AIDS Club”**

After June 4, 1989, when the first semi-free elections were held in Poland, Dionizjusz Czubala—a Polish folklorist working in the region of Silesia—noted that people started to tell themselves frightening stories about the HIV/AIDS epidemic (1993). New kinds of urban legends were born. In gossip, in short stories, longer narrations or even press articles gathered by scholars, “drug addicts” were circulating with deadly syringes in buses, cinemas, and mostly shopping centres, ready to attack and infect by stinging innocent people. Syringes with infected blood were left on the beach to kill children. Prisoners were infecting themselves with HIV purposefully; that is how they were able to leave prison, as other prisoners and guards did not want to be in the same building. They were expelled and walked free with their illness. One of the most popular stories, present also in Western urban legends about AIDS, was about beautiful women—sometimes a student but more commonly a female prostitute—who after a night spent with a male client, would leave a message on the mirror in red lipstick: “Welcome to the AIDS family” or “Welcome to the AIDS club.” The test, taken the next day, confirmed the infection (Czubala 1993).

Czubala interprets this sudden appearance of HIV/AIDS panic in urban legends as a result of fights between activists from an organisation called Monar, who provide help, care, and accommodation to seropositive people and their unprepared, uninformed, and uneducated neighbours (Czubala 1993, 60). In 1989, the Polish mass media broadcasted about protests, fights, and demonstrations against infected people. Czubala explains how some media channels were providing accurate information about HIV/AIDS and its way of transmission, whilst others were just regurgitating urban legends and fuelling the panic (Czubala 1993, 72–73). What the researcher did not point out is that all those stories were staged in spaces most characteristic of the newly introduced capitalism: shopping centres, cinemas, and night clubs. By expressing fear about one's own health, fear of death, they also expressed fear of Otherness, embodied by drug addicts and female prostitutes, and their vengeance for the exclusion and violence they were suffering from society



(Czubala 1993, 80). At the same time, expressing the threat of infection was also expressing the fear of becoming the Other—the seropositive—oneself. Suddenly it was very easy to lose orientation and fall into a trap of difference by becoming someone excluded. By telling and repeating those stories, people were describing the crisis of their trust in capitalist reality—a beach was not a thing of holidays, a cinema was not a space of entertainment and a shopping centre was not a place to cater for consumerist dreams. All of those places were hiding a different dimension of a new reality: its dreadfulness. At the same time, the red lipstick caption was a paradoxical invitation to a new community born out of this crisis: a frightening but also desired club where one is always already included.

In his book, *Strefa przejścia. O końcu postkomunizmu* (Zone of Transition. Of the End of Post-Communism), originally published in German, Croatian scholar Boris Buden shows how the feeling of dreadfulness and fear can be understood as deeply embedded in the experience of transition. He starts by stating that constant confusion exists around the term *transition* itself. In the Polish case, this can be seen with the example of dates. Although the famous Polish Round Table Talks of 1989 between the communist government and the Solidarity-led opposition—which led to the first semi-free elections and final fall of communism within the country—is a strong political and social caesura, from the economy or culture’s point of view, processes of capitalist transition began much earlier. Some historians believe they started in the late 1980s with economic reforms of the communist government; others think the 1970s, with the introduction of some Western goods and consumerist imagination to Poland. From the point of view of art history, transition could be seen as a process of disassembling the socialist system of supplies and workshops for the registered artists, as well as disintegration of the network of galleries subsidised by the state which started in the 1980s and resulted in the 1990s neoliberal model of the art market (Banasiak 2020). The shifting dates, and (mis)understanding of transition itself—deepened by the fact that it never officially ended or was finalised—fundamentally troubles the formation of contemporary Poland.

As Boris Buden shows, this confusion around transition is valid for the whole Eastern European region and stems from the fact that, as a term, it comes from Western political studies and was coined to describe changes of political systems in South American countries in the 1960s and 1970s. Buden writes: “Political studies were always looking at the cases of regime changes retrospectively. They were trying to draw their conclusions from the historical experience *ex-post*” (Buden 2012, 34; original italics). But in the case of Eastern Europe, the notion of transition, as coined by liberal transition studies scholars and politicians, was no longer used to describe political changes but rather project them. Buden states: “The political process of transition is predetermined this time. Its purpose is clear. It is to adopt a global capitalist system along the lines of Western liberal democracy” (Buden 2012, 35). The logic is clear: the communist system, with its past, politics and ideology is

bad; the only possible direction is capitalism, free market, and liberal politics. The path is also very well known, and it should repeat the path of Western countries. To “be like in the West” is the definition of transition—and by the same token, impossible.

Reflection on the failed post-communist project, and the constructed, teleological and oppressive—rather than experiential and emancipatory—notion of transition, leads Buden to attempt to build another narration about lived-through changes. He asks: what has actually happened to post-communist societies? Referring to the post-foundational social theory, he states that no society has real fundamentals but historically changing imageries of such a basis—so called *void signifiers*, in the form of nation, freedom, revolution or simple order, play a crucial part in society building and its politics. As Buden states:

There will still be attempts to build a society on something, which are doomed to failure in advance. It is precisely these attempts that form the foundation of society; however, they always elude us and will never be finally established—society cannot be justified completely and once and for all. [...] Which of these [political, cultural, ideological] figures is hypostasized as the basis of society in a particular historical situation depends solely on the effect of real political clashes, and thus the hegemony established as a result of those clashes.

(Buden 2012, 69)

After the fall of communism, new fundamentals must be established. Contrary to the hopes of Western observers, they are not liberal and capitalist values but nationalism and religion. The author comments that “it did not raise any questions about the historical mission and ideological supremacy of liberal democratic capitalism. On the contrary, it only reinforced its claim to power” (Buden 2012, 70). It has resulted in the constant need for correction in the democratic order of “new” Europe.

However, before the new fundamentals appeared in the social and political consciousness of the East, the end of communism opened a crack and society was “hanging on the edge” (Buden 2012, 71). For Buden, this moment is not defined by politics (a set of rules, institutions, political parties) but by *the political*—the experience of having one’s own society’s fundamentals questioned. The 1989–1990 breakthrough opened an abyss resulting in the “historical crisis of the social fundamentals” (Buden 2012, 72) allowing the political to pour into the sphere of politics, marking this historical turn as a beginning of the epoch of “post-foundationalist condition” in which the search for the common social basis is at the same time necessary and futile. This is the real meaning of transition which describes the moment between the rebuttal of the old fundament and construction of the new one. This is also the moment of the political, which is experienced as a loss of society. Buden proceeds to show how this situation, how this specific historical moment creates a

subject, the one *not-feeling-at-home-anywhere*, borrowed from Paolo Virno (2004). This subject has lost society's support and is also far away from the *substantial community* consisting of repeatable habits and customs. As a result, the uncanny state of not-feeling-at-home-anywhere, is also an experience of the existential dread because

the community itself is a response to a feeling in which the fear of a concrete danger is manifested, such as unemployment, impoverishment in old age, illness or simply the uncertain future of children. It is a fear that is experienced within a community, that is, within established, stable and familiar forms of life and social relations [...]. But outside, outside the community, this fear loses its concrete and well-defined causes and becomes omnipresent, unpredictable, and permanent. In short: outside the community, fear becomes dread.

(Buden 2012, 76)

I claim that this feeling of fear described by Buden, caused by the lack of a reliable community, appears in the urban legends from 1989. Czubała (1993) notes that those stories stopped circulating so intensively, and became, as he calls it, "dead" around 1990. But it is possible to see the anxiety, and the condition of not-feeling-at-home-anywhere, in the artistic renditions of the HIV/AIDS epidemic showcased in at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in the 1990s.

### ***5000 Elements and Me and AIDS***

In 1992, the Warsaw gallery Appendix, located in the same building as the Academy of Fine Arts, presented Antoni Grabowski's work entitled *5000 Elements*. The possibility to prepare the show was a prize he won in the Competition of Young Polish Artists organised by the representative office of the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Polish Government Plenipotentiary for European Integration. Grabowski—a sculptor—found inspiration for his piece walking on the street long before he won the competition.<sup>4</sup> He saw a couple of young people kicking a cardboard sign stating "I have AIDS. Please help." They were laughing, but at the same time visibly fearing to touch it. The artist remembers his own feeling of deep fear. He picked the sign up using plastic bags. In Linnet Myers's review for the *Chicago Tribune*, the author states, quoting Grabowski:

It was the first of his collection, which would grow to thousands. "My first reaction was the most important for the exhibit", he said. "In that moment, I decided that if I multiplied this sign, I'd be able to let people in, to let them feel the same moment I felt... I wanted to create a space that everyone could walk inside of and be afraid of. It would threaten."

(Myers 1992)

People sitting on the streets and asking for money with those kinds of signs were common in the Warsaw of early capitalism. They were mostly homeless, drug using, and sleeping at Warsaw Central train station. Sometimes they were truly infected, but it was also not uncommon to find they were just using AIDS as a term: in some paradoxical way, fashionable and dreadful at the same time. Grabowski collected the cardboard signs from people using them to beg for money on the streets and at the same time he created relations with them. "As he began his quest through the city streets, his fear faded, then disappeared" (Myers 1992). The artist imagined installing the exhibition in the approximately 20,000 square metres underground passageway linking the Academy of Fine Arts and the University of Warsaw, where it was not uncommon to meet people begging for help. But he was stopped by financial limits; he was unable to rent a guard who would protect the exhibition from fire. At the time, the fights with Monar were still happening and the threat of arson was very real. Finally, he collected around 1,000 signs and proceeded to make more by copying them by means of a screenprint technique. By winning the competition, Grabowski was able to wallpaper the whole gallery—floor and ceiling included—with signs begging for help and stating an AIDS infection. The installation made an even bigger impression because—as the artist himself and viewers underlined—the whole room was filled with a specific odour emitting from the collected cardboards. On the windowsill, the author placed a can for money. Like one of the reviewers stated: "We put the money into the can to leave the exhibition without remorse. This exhibition is not only about AIDS" (Jabłowska 1992).

Following Jabłowska's review, one could say that Grabowski's work was even more about the transition crisis than illness. Homelessness, dread of death, relations destroyed by addiction, and feelings of exclusion and alienation are expressed in the installation without really showing anything, yet they make this condition present, touchable, felt with senses. The feeling of fear he wanted his viewers to confront, materialised itself; the artist remembers that, because of the odour in the context of a fatal illness, invited Polish representatives of EEC countries were afraid to enter the room at the vernissage and preferred to stay outside.

Grabowski's project confronted the viewer with the crisis, reality of transition and epidemic—themes which strongly overlapped in his work. By delving deeper into the exhibition's documents, one can find a brochure with a photo of a young man, his face covered by the cardboard sign held in his hands. This is Tadek, according to the brochure's text. Grabowski did not know much about this man: "Tadek's father is dead, his mother is an alcoholic. I know he used to live in a cellar, and he used to live in the attic of an abandoned house. [...] When he's conscious, he's a very nice guy. But he's mostly unconscious and there's no way to talk to him" (quoted in Myers 1992). Grabowski is angry that Tadek is not doing anything to change his condition, not getting any treatment or rehab. At the same time, in the

space of fear he created for the viewers, and by accompanying a lived crisis of another person, without agency, Grabowski introduces an unsuccessful, abnormal, unsatisfactory relationship as a glimpse into the not-yet-possible social relations, modes of being together in short encounters. In doing so, he makes the public aware of the sudden power of such a gesture.

Four years later, in 1996, Artur Żmijewski and Grzegorz Kowalski curated a student show at the pop-up gallery Czereja, located in one of Warsaw's cinema halls. Titled *Me and AIDS*, the curators were accompanied by 11 young artists from Kowalski's workshop at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw—famous for experiments, surpassing media barriers and social engagement. Surprisingly, the cinema's director ordered to close it just one day after the opening show. He claimed that 13 works on show in this unobvious space, still marked by the aesthetics of the former communist regime (wall paneling, ferns in the flowerpots), were not suitable for the young public visiting the cinema during the day.<sup>5</sup> It seemed that naked bodies—be it in videos, sculptures or photos—were shocking and disturbing. Luiza Kempnińska (2021, 254) points out that the director's censorship was informed by fear, which was, paradoxically, the main subject of the exhibition; it confirms the power of the artworks.

The artists addressed AIDS as a social condition rather than an illness, i.e., as a social condition of those who are not sick, but fear infection. Malina Weiss—an alias for Artur Żmijewski—wrote:

*Me and AIDS* is an answer of the exhibiting Authors to the existence of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. That's all they were capable of and let's not expect anything more. They were dealing with the imagined subject not the experience of the illness. Presumably, none of them is infected. [...] The theme was formulated in such a way that it assumes a distance of the Self from AIDS [...] The exhibition is a form of making public one's own cowardice, admitting one's fear and showing its cause: the virus and contact with another human being. Fear dictates actions, fear is unformed—an awkward quiver, thus the artists, accustomed to pacifying phenomena and giving them form, FORM THEIR OWN FEAR, giving it a visually attractive shape.”

(Weiss 1996)

Those who did manage to see the exhibition at the cinema, for instance Andrzej Przywara—now an owner of one of the most important Polish private art galleries, then the author of a review in the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*—described the opening sculpture of a male nude by Krzysztof Malec as “exaggerated beauty” (Przywara 1996). Weiss aka Żmijewski defined it as constituting “a monstrosity of the male body designed for adoration” (Weiss 1996), making it impossible to think of sexual abstinence as a credible answer to the AIDS crisis. Next the viewer's eyes were drawn to Paweł Althamer's sculpture *Adam and Eve* (1996): two mannequins made of wire mesh for

building fences, a man and a woman. He, in white pants and dark glasses, stands in a concrete flowerpot. A watch ticks on his wrist. She, in white underwear and a blonde wig, lies on a field bed. Beneath her stands a small transistor radio; it is turned on and beeping. They look like “caged people” (Przywara 1996) condemned to vegetation, or like the remains of human bodies after a bomb explosion or some other catastrophe, the faint outline of a human silhouette framed by objects, signs of the new capitalist reality, counterfeits of luxury and comfort. Fear almost literally lurked in the tent made of black matter by Jacek Markiewicz. In entering the total darkness that reigned inside the tent, the viewer risked an encounter with the Other, with Markiewicz, who waited in that space—according to the description—naked and open to every form of interaction. His invisibility, warmth, and awareness of the presence of another body in this limited space became disturbing and difficult. Monika Osiecka-Leczew prepared three tin containers fixed to the wall at different heights. One could dip one’s hand into all three them, but, as Przywara writes, in one of the three cases “not without consequences” (Przywara 1996). Artur Żmijewski presented a video, which later functioned under the title *Me and AIDS* (1996). The film shows two figures colliding with each other like cars during crash tests. Their movement is in slow motion, and often close-up. Naked bodies violently merge and bounce off each other; the bodies deform in this movement and deform in ways that are elusive to the viewer. One observes two configurations: two men, and a man with a woman. However, there is no intimacy, closeness, or even erotic tension in either of these encounters. Rather, it is the impossibility of meeting, the lack of a relationship, the body that becomes a source of danger rather than pleasure, whose nudity is brutal rather than beautiful. As Przywara writes, “the image resembles a simulation of car crashes, used to construct a safe, healthy model of a vehicle” (Przywara 1996), or a vehicle that will sell well as healthy and safe. The exhibition also featured Katarzyna Kozyra’s work—a photographic triptych entitled *Krzysztof Czerwiński* (1995), which depicts a man lying naked, beaten, and deformed by a visible disease on his skin (although from the history of this work’s creation, we know that it was not necessarily AIDS), whose image has been inscribed with the red and white colours of the Polish flag. Katarzyna Górna also prepared a photographic triptych entitled *Carriers* (1996). The artist took photographs of seropositive people she met at Warsaw Central train station. She transformed their nudes by adding bird masks—a sign associated with the epidemic. “I wanted to create the trinity with bird masks, which were used by doctors in the Middle Ages during epidemics. I didn’t manage to do those masks well,” Górna stated in an interview with Luiza Kempieńska and Szymon Adamczak (unpublished). “HIV was a huge taboo in Poland. I kept the negatives from that time. However, I am unable to identify these people, let alone get permission to use their image, looking at it from today’s perspective. The trinity is the first version of this work. In the second one, prepared for the exhibition *Me and AIDS* in Bydgoszcz, I decided to make completely

different figures out of pieces of bodies, figures mixed together. I think it had queer overtones, although at the time this word was not yet used” (Adamczak and Kempieńska, unpublished). Other works were prepared by Edyta Daczka, Andrzej Karaś, Grzegorz Kowalski, Ryszard Lech, Małgorzata Minchberg, and Jędrzej Niestrój. All the artworks boldly used the body and embodiment as an artistic medium. By speaking of illness and fear of contagion, they simultaneously set corporeality as the stage for this thoroughly contemporary drama which in the post-communist, Catholic Polish society could be seen as obscene and provoke the act of censorship. Nonetheless, looking from the perspective I propose here, one can see that the inseparable connection of epidemic and transition has been covered up by an act of censorship. This connection is present in the works of Paweł Althamer, for instance, where consumerism in the form of desirable status symbols such as an electronic watch, portable radio or dark glasses describes bodies and their fearful emptiness, or in Katarzyna Kozyra’s work where the national colours symbolising the newly won freedom cover a beaten and socially excluded sick, male body. However, the greatest fear lurks in the intuitive combination of transition and epidemic, present in the urban legends and art. This fear is reproduced, repeated, and transmitted—like a virus—with the premature closing of the exhibition. But following Górna’s statement, one can see how *Me and AIDS*, by offering “queer tones” was also addressing new communities emerging from the dominating dreadfulness of the crisis, and this is especially shown by the exhibition’s continued circulation in provincial galleries. “We are all positive,” was the slogan, signalling this new kind of community, as recalled by Andrzej Przywara at the very end of his review.

### Unmarked

In 1993, when the subject of AIDS was still a part of everyday news in Poland, and the transition was in its full swing, on the other side of the ocean in New York, Peggy Phelan, a performance scholar, published *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance*. The book became one of the most important theoretical texts for performance studies. It enabled the discipline to extend its theatre-limited field and also to engage anthropological perspective to analyze the radical contemporary art. It became fundamental in defining the political power of performance. From the famous statement that “[p]erformance becomes itself through disappearance” (Phelan 1993, 146) and that “[t]o the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology” (Phelan 1993, 146), the conclusion was drawn that performance based on the rule of ephemerality and disappearance is anticapitalistic and political by its nature. That thought sparked an important critique. Philip Auslander (1999) and Rebecca Schneider (2011), for example—limiting their discussion with Phelan to the last chapter of her book—showed that it is exactly ephemerality that allows capitalistic ideology to invade performance. Defining performance as authentic, unrepeatably, and genuine makes it a perfect commodity.

Underling disappearance as the logic of performance denies both the performer and viewer's body its political power to remain and remember. But what is missing in understanding Phelan's proposed concept of ephemerality is the context in which she formulated that notion. In the framework of what I want to propose here, this context should be the crisis of community that took the shape of transition in Poland. Perhaps it is possible to turn the overlapping of AIDS and transition around, and see the symptoms of the post-foundationalist condition that shaped post-communist societies in the visibility crisis described by Phelan. This time the abyss of the political would be opened by the HIV epidemic's experience and the conservative reaction to it. This intellectual gesture also allows us to see how Phelan's thinking, rooted in the late capitalist context, could be revisited and reclaimed from the perspective of post-communism in Poland and other Eastern European countries. This shift of context, going against transition's logic in requiring an adoption of its Western context—not recontextualisation—can uncover ephemerality's potential, which had been covered by its critique and further global reinforcement of capitalism.

Phelan's main concept shares its name with the book's title: *unmarked*, defined as the political potential of the unseen and nestled in Lacanian psychoanalysis, poststructuralist philosophy, and feminism. She wrote: "By locating a subject in what cannot be reproduced within the ideology of the visible, I am attempting to revalue a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable. This is not the same thing as calling for greater visibility of the hitherto unseen" (Phelan 1993, 1). What is rarely underlined is how *Unmarked* offers a fervent critique of the politics of visibility, dominant in cultural theory from the 1980s, with its implicit assumption that to be seen means to be politically agent. For Phelan, who focussed on gendered and racialised Others, it is quite the opposite: to be visible means to be named, fixed, and arrested as representation. Representation in her text holds a double meaning. After Judith Butler (1990), representation is understood as what stays constant, confusing its relationship with the real: the real is read through representation, and representation is read through the real. At the same time representation is the logic of politics. But seeing Black people in public spaces does not mean acknowledging Blackness; showing more women in the television does not mean introducing feminism. One representing others is not a transparent and innocent strategy. That is why the kinds of representation which always produce a certain surplus (show more than intended) and are never totalising (fail to show everything) need to be ruptured and destabilised by what is not given to be seen. The unmarked are the subjects impossible to name. By not being represented and not representing anything, they truly gain political potential. The unmarked are bodies at play between identity and gaze. (Trans)sexual, double bodies in theatre and through pregnancy, mirrored, repeated, dressed up and naked, those bodies in Phelan's text escape the marking power of image and word, gaining the right to be unseen. This is what she defines as performance—the act of being actively unseen, disappearing and disabling the representation. When she states that "Performance becomes itself through



disappearance,” she defines ephemerality as politically charged. In contrast to visibility, ephemerality allows the unmarked to appear in their un-visibility; by appreciating the passing of time and movement, ephemerality allows to us stay in the present without referring to any representation.

In his book *How to See the World* (2016), Nicolas Mirzoeff returns to the 1990s, giving yet another insight into the global meaning of transition: “It was in 1990 that this visual culture of performance became visible in the United States, extending from the avantgarde to academia and the mainstream” (Mirzoeff 2016, 56). He uses the examples of Jennie Livingston’s documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990), extensively analysed by Phelan as politically false, and Madonna adopting its voguing for her hit “Vogue” that same year. He states: “In a related vein, the philosopher Judith Butler published her classic book *Gender Trouble*, which showed how drag reveals gender itself to be a performance (1990). And in both the United States and United Kingdom, degrees in visual culture were offered at the University of Rochester and Middlesex University for the first time” (Mirzoeff 2016, 56). The institutionalisation of visual politics and visual studies required the image to be fixed in representation, like in Livingstone’s film and Madonna’s rendition. At the same time, this representational visual politics becomes fixed as emancipation, as the reference to Butler’s book in Mirzoeff’s text acknowledges. More and more identities need that representation to be seen and have agency. For Phelan, this is the source of danger. She states: “Under the ever-growing shadow of the politically powerful New Right in the United States, I am writing against the perpetual fracturing of disciplines, specializations, and identities progressive political and critical theory has wrought” (Phelan 1993, 27). The Left is weakened, and identity politics anchored in the logic of representation does not work. She postulates new politics aware of the traps brought by such an understanding of image. Unmarked is an answer to the circulation of image-commodities, the escape from capitalism, but not just because performance breaks with artefact production and gets lost in time. Phelan discovers ephemerality is underestimated by practice and theory immateriality—immateriality that is not directed against the body and embodiment but used to discover what cannot be seen or shown. She states:

But what would it take to value the immaterial within a culture structured around the equation “material equals value?” As critical theories of cultural reproduction become increasingly dedicated to a consideration of the “material conditions” that influence, if not completely determine, social, racial, sexual, and psychic identities, questions about the immaterial construction of identities—those processes of belief which summon memory, sight, and love—fade from the eye/I.

(Phelan 1993, 5)

Between the artistic practice of Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman, Mira Schor, Yvonne Rainer, Tom Stoppard, Angelika Festa; between photography,

paintings, video, dance, theatre and performance art, the idea of political art is created. Ephemeral, immaterial and unmarked performances that disappear and escape from view are the answer to the visibility crisis and capitalism, but also societies in crisis and late communities.

In his 1996 text *Ephemera as evidence*, José Esteban Muñoz demonstrated that such a meaning of ephemerality is possible and useful. Published in the same year as the censorship of the student exhibition *Me and AIDS*, he builds on the fundamentals of queer theory in writing:

Thus, I want to propose queerness as a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality. Queerness is often transmitted covertly. [...] Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility.”

(Muñoz 1996, 6)

What is that mode of sociality and relationality that queerness brings to life? Muñoz opens his text with an image: a photograph by conceptual artist Tony Just depicting a men’s room, a “run down” (5) toilet, place where “public sex flourishes (5).” Before taking photos, Just cleaned the space and “made it look pristinely, shimmeringly clean (5).” For Muñoz, the invisible presence of past sex acts haunting the image, the labour of cleaning, as well as the sole act of taking the photo and documenting this space, together constitute the exemplary *queer act*. While it provides access to hidden queer history, it simultaneously builds upon the cleaning’s gesture of erasure as Just refuses it to be archived or owned by any kind of artistic, memorial, or social institution. But what strikes me in Just’s performance, recited by Muñoz in his text, is that cleaning the men’s room is not only an act of erasure—it could be also seen as the act of caring. In moving, touching, stirring around this place with a rag and detergent, I see the gesture of establishing a different kind of community: a community of care. It consists of small gestures—like cleaning, marginal rituals, short meetings, and unimportant events. It is not substantial; it does not produce any norm of being or code of behaviour. Like the exemplary queer act, it is ephemeral, difficult to grasp and impossible to see for those who are unable to squint and break with normativity. This kind of community can spontaneously establish itself, for a moment, around embodied presences, sexual relations, performative gestures, moments of invisibility, haunted spaces or—most important for Muñoz’s concept—acts of witnessing, stating one’s own identity with one’s own voice, body, and image without representing it or fixing it to any kind of evidence. Analysing the late Marlon Riggs’s works, which Muñoz sees as “a powerful and calculated set of deployments of ephemeral witnessing to black queer identity” (Muñoz 1996, 9), the author shows how ephemerality goes against the archival need

for *real* evidence and how the act of “fleshing out” (9) identity, instead of proving it, provokes an emotional reaction—a flow of feelings I would see as dynamic, moving, and a fleeting fundament of the ephemeral community of care. In the same vein, I understand Phelan’s statement: “Performance uses the performer’s body to pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body *per se*; performance uses the body to frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body—that which cannot appear without a supplement” (Phelan 1993, 150–151; original italics). In the ephemerality of a performative act, the relation between the performer’s body and their identity dodges the logics of representation. As something that is “fleshed out” and witnessed, performed identity becomes a gesture directed towards a community which is simultaneously created by the very act of performing. From the perspective of the unmarked and ephemerality, identity is never singular—that is why the politics of visibility betray it and make it a commodity rather than a powerful tool for change. When building her theoretical standpoint, Phelan suddenly tells the story of her family and the trauma of losing her sister. She states: “The incorporeal presence of my sister mattered to us I think because we were so bounded by the strange body we were—not octagonal and no longer pentagonal we were a nine-headed creature with a distressing sameness to our features” (Phelan 1993, 12). The author describes the way to her own identity as plural, interrelational, communal, informed by (un)presence and possible to see as such in the ephemeral acts of care she also describes. “We recognized that distinct identities would not emerge from names which we were so often misapplied, nor did we believe that within the tight resemblance of our physical bodies a singular image would tell who we were” (Phelan 1993, 13), she states, underlying the concept of identity as ephemeral community.

As Muñoz (1996) recalls, Marlon Riggs, especially in his film *Black Is... Black Ain't* (1995), offers many moments of caring. The film was finished posthumously in 1994 by Riggs’s friends following his AIDS-related death in the same year. By documenting his illness, hospitalisations, changing body and loss of force, he also built a testament-narration about being Black and queer and, as he states, as way to show that there is no one way, no one meaning to it. This is his gesture of care, and his way of building community: acknowledging its heterogenous, complicated and diverse character, its momentous, ephemeral, and ungraspable nature. The crisis of AIDS makes those communities, those moments of communality in acts of caring, crucial for the possibility of a new, imagined, society.

### ***Plus/Minus***

As I have described, works by young Polish artists about AIDS from the 1990s established new aesthetics, and searched for new artistic strategies that put the body and its (un)presence at the very centre against the power of visibility. In Grabowski’s exhibition, the only visual representation of Tadek

remains nevertheless hidden, his face concealed behind the cardboard sign. Górna's work from the group show adopted the same gesture, although the invisible presence also framed the whole exhibition *Me and AIDS*. In materialising conditions of fear, both exhibitions established a space of unresolved crisis, where transitional society constantly brakes, holding the moment of being on the edge of the abyss described by Buden (2012). They also reached the level of political radicalism, provoking a very interesting tension with the crisis of visibility as diagnosed by Phelan (1993). In those works, the unmarked do not so much slip from the image's oppression, but rather constitute a space of the political in questioning common social foundations in the unconstructed and fluid visual field of early capitalism. At the same time, the artists' care towards the fate of infected people they met on the street; the traces of the short encounters with the HIV/AIDS reality; and the queer tones present in the art at the time are all evidence that point towards the possibility of another way of being together—a hidden, (un)present community.

In the late 2000s—as the generation born in the late 1970s and early 1980s ascended to the artistic stage and AIDS became treatable—this possibility opened by AIDS-related art was revisited. In 2006, Karol Radziszewski made a video entitled *Plus/Minus*. The work is a recording of phone calls the artist made while waiting for his HIV test results in anticipation of meeting a newly acquainted man who he is very fond of. He remembers some risky moments from before, and demonstrates care for his new, future lover. The camera shows the artist in his flat from a close distance; he is in his bed, in the kitchen making himself coffee, and taking shower. He is almost constantly on the phone to a friend to whom he recounts the whole story of the encounter, love, memories of risky behaviour, fear, decision to take a test, and the process of testing. With the tension rising, while waiting for the result, Radziszewski's flat becomes more and more claustrophobic. The camera looks out from the window like someone who cannot leave their prison cell. But the result is negative, and the story has a happy ending with the awaited meeting. Crucial in this work is not only the fact that AIDS becomes a matter of lived experience, that Radziszewski assumes the role of witness to his own story by sharing his own fears and hopes and not attributing the condition to others, but also that this experience is nested in the relation with another. The other, on the phone, listening and caring, is also a placeholder for the viewer. This is how the story of testing, confronting the fear, the healthcare system, and society with its aggression towards infected people, becomes a trigger for ephemeral community. At the same time, Radziszewski uses this story to state his gay identity, to flesh it out, to unmark it. In this historical moment, the relationship between visibility, politics and identity is already constructed and the crisis Phelan diagnosed has become global and reinforced with the appearance of social media, making images and representations even more oppressive. Radziszewski breaks with representation. He tries to grasp and perform, rather than show,

his identity. The moment of waiting for the result, the moment of having his status and the status of his body questioned, becomes a moment of celebrating the unmarked. Ephemeral care appears between the plus and minus, in the void created solely for bodily presence.

This video, within the framework of the story I am telling here, could then be seen as the end of transition or transition exhaustion (because it never ended). The newly established fundamentals of society—in the form of religious and national radicalism sealed in 2005 by the first government of the conservative right-wing party that (again) rules Poland since 2015—made it clear that transition is not necessarily emancipation, and that emancipatory practices must search for new modes of community, new ways of being together against an oppressive and exclusive society. Reformulating the place of AIDS in arts, not as an epidemic but as part of identity practices and lived experiences, becomes a way to build an ephemeral community without fundamentals.

Today, with the exhibition *The Power of Secrets* and performance *Untitled (Together again)*, the relationship between witnessing the experience of AIDS and witnessing the experience of transition gains another dimension. Childish, innocent memories surface and return to the abyss, the nothingness of the society of the 1990s has been shown by the very first attempts to work artistically with epidemics. In doing so, they not only open the possibility to reformulate history, to tell it anew using the “set of deployments of ephemeral witnessing” (Muñoz 1996, 9), but they also evoke the political and question again the conservative fundamentals of post-transitional society. Because, like Ania Nowak states in Borczuch’s 2019 production, and is repeated once more by Paweł Sakowicz: “It was 1992. [...] I was nine. Capitalism was new. I didn’t feel like anything new was coming or anything old had ended and you know, I wasn’t afraid of disease or politicians back then.” The nothingness of transition not only raised fear and dread but it also briefly brought to light the near-impossible freedom from politics and social institutions, from fundamentals and norms. To go back to this experience, to grasp it, requires a change of perspective, a queer act of care, a discovery of an ephemeral community witnessing crisis today and in the 1990s. AIDS became a powerful metaphor of this crisis as well as this possible and (un)present community. AIDS in Polish art allows us to see the unexpected political potential of the infected body, of the body in transition, in-between health and illness, of the body doubled by the invisible virus—of the unmarked.

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## Notes

- 1 I am using this notion after Katarzyna Bojarska (2020) but with a slightly different meaning to underline the historical context rather than the psychological mechanism which Bojarska constructed following Donald Winnicott's (1953) notion of transitional objects of analysed images.
- 2 This specific presence of 1990s reality in the memories, images and perception of the generation is very well described and analysed by Olga Drenda in her 2016 book *Duchologia polska. Rzeczy i ludzie w latach transformacji* (Polish Hauntology. Things and People in the Years of Transition). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
- 3 Janiszewski (2013) details how narration about vampires and zombies in Hollywood productions from the 1990s and early 2000s were in fact telling the story of a virus spread by gay people (vampires) and drug addicts (zombies).
- 4 Unless otherwise noted, all memories of Antoni Grabowski are based on my interview with the artist held on the 2nd of March 2021.
- 5 In fact, the exhibition did not disappear. It was moved from the capital city to other places in Poland. It was shown in Płock, Bydgoszcz, and Gdańsk and became quite well documented. Even if from today's perspective it is perceived more as a student exercise, it was still a meaningful event. Paweł Althamer, Artur Żmijewski, and Katarzyna Kozyra who took part in this exhibition became the most known and recognised contemporary Polish artists, representing what is called *critical art* in Poland—the most renowned, even if still controversial, artistic current in post-1989 reality.

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# 7 **Inventing Skins. Reinventing Community**

Writing, Performance, and  
Theory in Brazil (1960–2020)

*Eduardo Jorge de Oliveira*

## **A Collective Skin: Intimacy, Inoperative Community**

Considered a cultural phenomenon, skin is a site through which community is enacted, and can be understood as part of a collective invention. Artists invent skins with elaborate sensibilities so that they become responsible agents for changing the skin of the world. Skin is not only a biological metaphor that provides an organic and unhistorical dimension. It is also a determining factor in expanding our understanding of images, texts, and actions that spread from art to culture and from culture to society. It is a plastic and semantic field of forces in constant interaction and tension. Inventing a skin implies unfolding intimate aspects to the point where they lose their purely personal interest. Inventing a skin denotes a communal image-making procedure. The skin gives an account of detail and the ambivalent totality of touch and feeling, of inside and outside. Then, once invented, it loses even its biological and mimetic condition as an organ of the human body, because the procedure is mobilised in a critical perspective. It becomes a lens through which to perceive contact between the most diverse artists and their relations with society.

Images are not closed objects with fixed content. They have a porosity that sometimes absorbs the world, and sometimes let itself be absorbed by the world. Understanding images, texts, and artistic actions as part of the world's skin removes the skin from metaphors about depth and literacies.<sup>1</sup> Artists do more than make skin; they invent sensitive ways that are equally constructive. Because of this, the skin becomes a complex network of knowledge, and contact strategies: the intimacy of the community is on this surface. Adhering to the surface value of the community, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, this text presents a set of groups, artists and practices developed in Brazil. These presented forces and dynamics expose relations between the avant-garde and the tradition, and between aesthetic and political challenges that keep this community of intellectuals, writers, and artists in dissenting practices, either among themselves or between state and nation. Dissidence, spreading due to Brazil's historical factors of constant upheaval, will be viewed in terms of asymmetrical developments and in the face of imagined utopias.



This text is therefore divided into three parts. The first deals with the phenomenological meaning of invented skins, testing the surface and contact points of this community of artists. The second concerns the dimension of words, the literary force that animates this community's intimacy and puts the surfaces in contact, semantically, syntactically, and graphically. And finally, the third part sheds light on artistic procedures both historical and involving a way of being-in-common. On the one hand, the theoretical dimension of Jean-Luc Nancy (1983) and his debate with Maurice Blanchot (1983) about the community will be read in more detail. That is, since the 1980s, Nancy (1983, 1991, 1993, 2008, 2020) has invited us to rethink the sense of community, of skin and of the conception of meaning itself. On the other hand, several artists have continued to invent skins and reinvent the community, so that these starting points sometimes touch and sometimes move apart. Now, to reinvent the community is above all to talk about the community, to put it at the centre of the discussion when the individual is an epiphenomenon, that is, a force that disappears with physical death. This is the argument with which Jean-Luc Nancy begins the essay *The Inoperative Community*. In Nancy's words, "the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community" (1991, 3). He further highlights that "community is at least the *clinamen* of the 'individual.' Yet there is no theory, ethics, politics or metaphysics of the individual that is capable of envisaging this *clinamen*, this declination or decline of the individual within community" (3–4; original italics). It is at this point that Jean-Luc Nancy criticises Sartre, in the sense that there is no moral outfit or sociological cloak with which to cover the classic individual. Nancy criticises *personalism* and individualism in the sense that each human being is *being-in-common* (3–4). In that sense, a sensitive reading of the skin prolongs the sense of being-in-common. Inventing a skin is an exercise of desubjectivation, of undoing individual depths and of building a relationship space, enlarging the surface and contact zones. It is an erotic ethic because it affirms the dimension of life in common,<sup>2</sup> while at the same time emphasising the feeling of separation. And, it seems, several artists, writers and intellectuals have been inclined towards this practice of disposing of themselves. This movement inspires us to closely look at artists such as those observed by Guy Brett (2008, 60) in Brazil:

The avant-garde was in a period of exceptional vitality, both artistically (Sérgio Camargo, Mira Schendel, the Noigandres group, Lygia Pape, Antonio Dias, Oiticica, Clark and others) and theoretically (Mário Pedrosa, Mario Schemberg and Ferreira Gullar). They were able to debate and reinvent the age-old advanced understanding of form and formal innovation.

From Guy Brett's critical observation and participation in the Brazilian art scene of the sixties and seventies, and from Jean-Luc Nancy's thoughts about the community, one can observe the formation of a large collective skin,

which could be called a communal action of artists to change the world's skin. Nancy's perspective is important when underlining that the communal way of existence of these artists does not imply any associative perspective, as each worked individually, but the effect is collective. This is an era that is still very current in present artistic practices, as the works find resonance very effectively in contemporary Brazil. In this case, one can speak of an *inoperative community*. This community does not share individual subjectivities, but they expose emotions, communicate affections, and develop a collective sensibility that is not always captured by the historiographical networks of art and cultural criticism. Reading the issue of community through skin helps to understand the boundaries of the group and individuals, because skin itself is a unique trait that delimits an individual. Read from the perspective of community, skin can be a collective phenomenon. This is why its invention is part of a network. In Brazil, this network that historically grounds movements' names, captures styles, and classifies works has yet to develop a common ground for figures such as Nuno Ramos, Rosangela Rennó, Lenora de Barros, Ricardo Aleixo, José Leonilson, and Arthur Bispo do Rosário. The shape of Nancy's community dimension can be discerned as the works of these artists, writers and intellectuals are approached. We can name here a community of inventors of skins, that is, of artists who invent sensitive membranes capable of connecting each other to understand a cultural sensibility. This dimension involves the aspect of the community's "inoperability," its existence or *ek-sistence*, which is, above all, a broad network of relationships.<sup>3</sup> Nancy phrases it as follows: "The relation (the community) is, if it *is*, nothing other than what undoes, in its very principle—and at its closure or on limit—the autarchy of absolute immanence" (1991, 4; original italics). Nancy considered community as relation, and marked the *no relation* as a category that determines what is absolute, thus creating a logic that alters the absolute itself. Artists know this in practice, and with this they invent skins and make community. Due to this absolute immanence of community, the first step in the reading of it consists of a phenomenological approach.

### **Phenomenological Meaning of the Invention of Skin**

We note an important fact. In abstraction, we are left with a uniformly coherent layer of the phenomenon world, the transcendental correlative of the continuously unanimous experience of the world. Despite our abstraction, we can continue continuously in the experienced view, remaining exclusively in this layer. This unified layer is further distinguished by the fact that it is the one that is essentially grounded, i.e., I obviously cannot have the foreign as experience, i.e., cannot have the sense of objective world as sense of experience, without having that layer in real experience, while the reverse is not the case."<sup>4</sup>

Edmund Husserl, "§ 44. Reduktion der transzendentalen Erfahrung auf die Eigenheitssphäre," *Cartesianische Meditationen*.

(1991)

Phenomenology was an important issue for Brazilian avant-gardes such as concretism<sup>5</sup> and neoconcretism<sup>6</sup> because the perceptual proposals of the body, the limits of the visible, found an immediate resonance in artistic practices. In this sense, phenomenology in Brazil,<sup>7</sup> beyond its philosophical field, has provided new encounters and interpretations that have resulted in works and artistic practices. That is true not only of the development of Edmund Husserl's propositions, or even Jean-Paul Sartre's and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's, but of the dimension of the surface and its development in the space. In other words, this is true of the body of words, of objects to the carnality of the body in space through actions, which leads us to understand the significance of skin developed by poets, theorists, and artists. Although at the time, artists did not precisely speak of invented skins. In *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, Marjorie Perloff (2012, 13) wrote that "the concretist program is best understood as a revolt against the transparency of the word, which had dominated the discourse of the 1950s and 1960s."

Even with the subsequent reaction, that is, neoconcretism, concretism in Brazil was a movement that presented the sensitive structures of poetics and ways of thinking about and making art beyond the representation of Brazil. Facing crises of artistic representation, these two movements dispersed ideas of nationality in new structural networks, such as through the diversity and combination of several artistic currents. Here, the community faces the crisis, which implies establishing new relations that pass through the performativity of images, bodies, and senses. This is the balance between *communitas* and crisis. In Haroldo de Campos *et al.*'s 1958 manifesto, entitled "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," there is mention of the organic form and phenomenology of composition—a term invented by him to paraphrase Edgar Allan Poe's essay, "Composition Philosophy."

The "Neoconcrete Manifesto" of 1959 also mentions the phenomenological dimension, but includes Maurice Merleau-Ponty, thus making both movements not the radiating centres of Husserl or Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Instead, sensitive geometrical practices reinvented the use of surfaces, attributing other meanings to what was unimportant, such as the white of the page—referring to Stéphane Mallarmé's 1897 poem *Un coup de dés*,<sup>8</sup> and the extrasensory dimension of painting outside its two-dimensionality.<sup>9</sup> Both movements used phenomenology to "read" crises of form in poetry and visual arts with different aims. If, on the one hand, the words acquired mobility then, on the other hand, the bodies became support for the colours and geometric shapes, as will be seen in the third and last part of the text concerning procedures. The invention of a skin makes both movements part of a much greater plural singularity, mobilising vocabulary, procedures, and ways of life that are important to other artists. Thus, a phenomenological analysis implies presenting some missing links between these ideas and concrete acts until the skin itself becomes a procedure or, rather, a lens for reading those artistic practices. Pauline Bachmann (2019), for example, understands the dimension of neoconcretism from *pure corporeality*, adopting

Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as her starting points for analysing artists such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark among other Brazilian neoconcretists.<sup>10</sup>

Nancy contributed to the elements of a skin's invention, and we should consider the following two dimensions. Firstly, he develops the dimension of the common and the community with the inoperative community concept. The dimension of this inoperability can be visualised in Nancy from the notion of *sharing*, which, according to the philosopher, is always incomplete. He writes,

There is no entity or hypostasis of community because this sharing, this passage cannot be completed. Incompletion is its “principle,” taking the term “incompletion” in an active sense, however, as designating not insufficiency or lack, but the activity of sharing, the dynamic, if you will, of an uninterrupted passage through singular ruptures. That is to say, once again, a workless and inoperative activity. It is not a matter of making, producing, or instituting a community; nor is it a matter of venerating or fearing within it a sacred power—it is a matter of incompleting its sharing. Sharing is always incomplete, or it is beyond completion and incompletion. For a complete sharing implies the disappearance of what is shared.

(1991, 35)

The dimension of inoperability does not constitute an activity, and, at the same time, it activates that which is not completed, or which has not been formed or entered into activity.

Secondly, Nancy refers to the invention of a body, in *Corpus*,<sup>11</sup> an invention that would be nothing more than the insertion of the body into a juridical and international space. From these considerations, the passage through phenomenology produces a space for the invention of skin.

The community is reinvented because the artists, working separately and simultaneously in a given period, elaborate new relations with bodies, texts, and images. At the same time, this liberates from the collective and political body a deep meaning supposedly placed inside the community. To liberate a meaning from the political body implies abandoning the sense of a closed body which one must penetrate to obtain a profound meaning. The history of medicine and the whole pictorial tradition of anatomy lessons is founded upon this idea. Paul Valéry wrote that “skin is the deepest thing” (1934, 74) and it was this *ritornello* that animated Gilles Deleuze in the *Logic of Sense*, published in 1969.<sup>12</sup> This implies that phenomenology is not “pure” because the artists do not intend to reduce art to phenomena, but they mostly consider it as expanding body into space. In this sense, the skin becomes a body of space. This is a phenomenon unheard of in Brazil in the sixties and seventies, for there were several artists who explored the phenomenon of surface. Beyond any linguistic-national unit, Brazilian art is read here at the community level. It is defined less by the nation or by a country in its socio-political

unity and much more by its *becomings*. Affections and disruptive elements are vectors that allow the production of surfaces for the arts and for literature.

One of the most striking examples is Lygia Pape's work *Divisor* (1967–1968). Using a huge piece of white fabric, numerous people—the public itself in fact—were invited to participate in a big, white, collective body, moving through the public space. The collective body in motion was held together by a large white cloth with numerous holes through which the participants placed their heads; the cloth both united them in being of one material and separated them by imposing white spaces. *Divisor* is a work that deals with the theoretical dimensions elaborated and developed by Nancy, serving as a discussion of the philosopher's concepts. The common-being, the participation—a word that has a precise meaning in the art of the sixties and seventies—and the very heterogeneous force of the bodies in one large and unique moving body. They make the “skin” the first anatomical-organic element by its immediate association with the fabric. The methodological question that arises from these aspects is twofold: how can one leave the mimetic-organic dimension when there is a reference to the skin? Also, how can the invention of this surface be a desubjectivation of those individuals who wear the work and, moreover, of the artist who conceived it? However, as Félix Guattari (2007) demonstrated, the process of desubjectivation is not simple, and subjectivation itself is a moving result from a series of historical layers. According to Guattari,

a subjective fact is always engendered by an assemblage of heterogeneous semiotic levels. The historic modelizations of the unconscious corresponds to a tremendous drift of the modes of subjective territorialization. Some modes of subjective reference, or modes of production of subjectivity, were literally swept away from the planet with the rise of capitalist systems. One could say that there is a general movement of deterritorialization of subjective references. Until the French Revolution and Romanticism, subjectivity remained bound up with territorialized modes of production—in the extended family, guild systems, castes, and social segmentarity—which didn't make subjectivity operational at the individual level.

(2007, 49)

In order not to be faced with a large temporal discrepancy, there are determining factors in this process in Brazil which can be seen with reference to the work of Lygia Pape, namely *Espaços imantados* (*Magnetized Spaces*) from 1982. Following the idea of the “invention of a skin” and the “reinvention of a community,” something in common appears, which is to say, instead of being classified by art or literature, they are inscribed through experience without being squeezed by historical frames. Ephemeral interactions such as *Espaços imantados* tests this reading. The artist seized a concept from several momentary interactions in urban spaces such as those of street artists or

vendors. These people come and lay out all the objects to sell on the sidewalk, yelling, sometimes in unstructured speech, and then, they attract people to look at or buy something. Once they finish, they leave. According to the artist, *Espaços imantados* came from her experience driving through the city of Rio de Janeiro:

While driving around the city—I use the car a lot—I became aware of a new type of relationship with the urban space, as if I were a spider of sorts, weaving space. After all, I start from a certain point, then go across, and turn, go up and down overpasses, go in and out of tunnels—me and everyone in the city. It was as if we now enjoyed an aerial view of the city that was like an enormous cobweb, a huge entanglement. I have called them “*espaços imantados*” (“magnetized spaces”) because the whole thing seemed alive, and I moved inside it, pulling up a thread to be woven and wound into an endless skein.

The hawker may also be viewed as magnetized, in the sense that he comes to a street corner, sets up his stall and starts calling out. In no time, he produces a magnetized space to which passerbys flock, attracted as they are by the erratic loquaciousness that is at times shorter, at times, longer. Just as suddenly, he stops talking, folds up his stall, and the space ceases to exist.

And there are other spaces that I view as naturally magnetized, like for instance the Baixada Fluminense (lower-income suburbs of Rio de Janeiro), which I consider to be violent, dreadful, frantic, and constraining in its rage: the tragedy of the lonesome, lost, anonymous individual.  
(Pape 2011, 285)

From the *skein* seized by the artist, we pass to the skin she invented. Firstly, from a phenomenological perspective—the techniques of the bodies, their movements, their performative acts in public life, caring for precarious social activities—all these elements are webbed by Pape. She is an artist proceeding like a social spider. The invisible skin or “an endless skein” portrays the suburban and downtown life of the Brazilian metropolis. The physical dimension present in Pape’s work expands to the perception of these collective gestures of everyday life, but also to cultural memory. The artist allows us to see some “insignificant gestures” that have become autonomous as techniques of existence in Brazilian public spaces. Street vendors and artists manage a repertoire statistically inscribed in the informal economy which perpetrates a sharing of gestures from suburban life. In addition, this informality becomes more formalised in terms of magnetised spaces. Community could be read in two ways: how Brazilian art history presents those artists, and how they can be arranged by other sensitivities, such as skin and the concept of skin’s invention. In general, inventing a skin is an exercise of observation, allowing us to consider the materiality of the artworks and teaching us to arrange and rearrange texts, objects, performances, and images in a critical manner.

Artistic practices should include essays written by artists, as well as notes, studies, schemes, poems and letter exchanges.

### **Philological Turning Point: “It is Necessary to Write Squeezed and on Both Sides”**

It is the task of philology to perceive, realize, and actualize in every ‘and so on’ a ‘not so on,’ a ‘not so on,’ a ‘not and,’ and an ‘other than thus.’ That is the smallest gesture of its politics.

Werner Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*.

“It is necessary to write squeezed and, on both sides, because the airmail to Brazil is very expensive,” wrote Lygia Clark to Hélio Oiticica on the 19th of January 1964 (1998, 16). The compact writing on paper exchanging a wide range of information about exhibitions, the world of art, readings and ideas are part of a community invented by Clark and Oiticica—a reinvention that was not the result of a project, but an extreme need to share their participation in the world. The two artists also dealt with the invention of skin in the broadest sense: Clark with the *psychic skin* and Oiticica with the *social skin*, developed through their letter exchange and observation of their respective works. Clark’s phrase about the connection of both skins sums up their communitarian position appropriately: “Hélio was the outside of a glove, the connection with the outside world. I, the inside. We both exist from the moment a hand puts on the glove” (1998, 8).

The exchange of letters between these artists can be read as the passage from phenomenon to text, in which the text prints the vital translations of shared experiences inside and outside Brazil. In that sense, Brazil was a glove for both, that is, a territory of experiences. In addition, the whole image of nation that a country like Brazil accumulates disintegrates into *becomings*, experiences and ways of *being-in-common*. The country becomes a vast zone of experiments for various artists, writers, and intellectuals. This is a central motive for the invention of the skin, since, on the one hand, it is the condition of history and, on the other, it is a set of specific actions that modify—even, unintentionally—cultural aspects. So, the works let themselves be moved by such conditions. The exchange of letters between Clark and Oiticica corresponds to the decade 1964–1974. Moreover, this decade was radial for other artists whose poetics have spread into today, even if the echoes and resonances take another road to other artists.

Reading their correspondence in detail, we can see, based on what they wrote in terms of criticism and perception of the artistic environment, that the exchange of letters becomes a huge laboratory of the construction of common—or the *being-in-common*. At the same time, it objectifies their enunciating voice, rendering the dimension of structures and zones of contact between art and social life capable of escaping from the predominance of one of their explanatory mechanisms, be it artistic or social. This perception

that passes through Mondrian and Picasso's readings made Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark also move through "abstract structures" to reach the act, the moment itself, that is, the dimension of intimacy that could be shared. They made skins, inventing forms of the visible not because objects have been activated by their works through the plastic grammar of visibility. Instead, they achieved a "virtuality" and an "expressive force" (1998, 21), to use two expressions that Hélio Oiticica wrote in response to one of Lygia Clark's letters.

In a way, this proposition is in the thinking of the community. More specifically, this phrase finds resonance with what Jean-Luc Nancy meant when he wrote "Un *avenir* sans passé, ni futur," meaning a state of present time attentive to shards of an immediate "to come" owned by the community (2020; italics added). The philosopher's perspective is different from the artists' because he points out the need to decode the messages of *origin* and *end* of community. He puts at the heart of the discussion the upsets of history and every resulting unlikelihood—a shock of particles, the birth and death of living beings, our meditations and our daydreams—which he, quoting Clarice Lispector, calls the "unconscious creator of the world" (2020, 28). This perspective confronts the future's doubt, which includes the past, suspending it with a feeling of immobility. After all, in the past, a future (*avenir*) dimension is maintained because rereading the gestures of these artists situates us in this dimension; namely, the conditions of writing, existence, creation and reflection are kept tight with small handwriting on both sides of a page. There is a message in this present condition of Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, making their works project the future (*avenir*) within them. The "philological character" (Contini 2014, 7) is still highlighted by the mode of analysis of artistic paradigms such as isolating works by analysing their formal structures.<sup>13</sup> In Lygia Clark's letter to Hélio Oiticica (1998, 17–18; italics added) one can read:

I am more than convinced about the crisis of the plan (rectangle)—Mondrian, the greatest of all, did with the rectangle what Picasso had done with the figure. He exhausted it for good. But for the time being, the crisis "bent" by Mondrian is a thousand times more serious and bigger than the "bent" by Picasso. It is the crisis of the structure—not *formal structure* as there always was but total structure—it is the rectangle that no longer satisfies as a means of expression. It is enough to be *placed* on the wall that it automatically establishes the subject/object dialogue (representation) by its own position.

What deserves to be pointed out in this aspect of the artist's writing is that there is a factor capable of escaping even the most rigid analytical criteria of art historians. They sometimes place artists such as Clark and Oiticica outside the constructivist or rational parameters because these are inscribed as innate characteristics of concretism or constructivist *démarches*. Even more so because the aesthetic of neoconcretism is usually understood as more sensitive



than rational. Another aspect of Lygia Clark's proposition is that she lists the crises "bent" by artists such as Mondrian and Picasso and such crises help to strengthen ties between artists located in the most diverse currents, lands, and periods. The crisis mentioned by Clark helps to establish a community that is constantly being reinvented and shaped by crises and artists who want to live together or have found themselves in a specific space.

Investigating the writings of the artists reveals this community aspect of sharing the crisis of forms. Luciano Figueiredo, Lygia Pape and Waly Salomão organised the writings of Hélio Oiticica (1954–1969), *Aspiro ao grande labirinto* "I Aspire to the Great Maze" in 1986. In this diary, there is a quotation by Mondrian dated from Christmas 1959 that symbolises Oiticica's vision rather well, including what was "to come" (*avenir*) in his work. Preceding the quote, he writes "I read these prophetic words of Mondrian":

What is certain is that there is no escape for the non-figurative artist; he must stay within his field and march towards the consequence of his art. This consequence brings us, in a future perhaps remote, towards the end of art as a thing separate of our surrounding environment, which is the actual plastic reality. But this end is at the same time a new beginning. Art will not only continue but will realize itself more and more. By the unification of architecture, sculpture and painting a new plastic reality will be created. Painting and sculpture will not manifest themselves as separate objects, nor as "mural art" or "applied art," but being purely constructive, will aid the creation of a surrounding not merely utilitarian or rational, but also pure and complete in its beauty.

(1986, 17)

Although Clark and Oiticica differ, many of Oiticica's works, especially those he called "environmental art" (Pedrosa 1986, 9–13; *arte ambiental*), come from Mondrian's "prophetic words" that found fertile soil in Brazil. Mondrian represented a limit, namely that of the painting itself. This will be the key point of dialogue, almost ten years later, between Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. The crisis of the frame and figure gave Oiticica enough abstract structural elements to go through the favelas' hills in Rio de Janeiro, to deal with the movement of bodies, blocks of colours and the participation of the public in his installations, or even outside them. Oiticica (2011) emphasises that the "museum is the world."

The work becomes part of a great membrane invented by the artist, something similar to Pape's *magnetized spaces*, but which takes on another rhythm, because, with the movements of bodies, people are mainly living their lives, walking up and down the hills of Mangueira. With this rhythm, he goes beyond the bidimensional painting. Oiticica called this new art form *parangolé*. This slang word describes social phenomena in popular communication within the favelas, inventing a new skin, and could be linked to the philological turning point in Oiticica's use of *parangolé* as the title of his work.

Oiticica's parangolé is an art-form strongly inspired by both Mondrian and samba. For the artist, dancing samba was inseparable from parangolé because it freed him from intellectualism. The word's invention and the dance of Rio's slums resolved the integration of crisis and community in Oiticica's work. Moreover, this allowed him to solve the problem of the picture and figuration that Mondrian formulated. From this dynamic, the parangolé is a kind of outer skin that gives body to colour and movement. It can reinvent the community dimension from Western painting's crisis as posed and staged at the beginning of the twentieth century. Oiticica proposes a dance of this crisis, establishing other links with painting and social life, without representing it in a new painting.

In *Theories of the Nonobject*, Mónica Amor explains the word parangolé through "[t]he writer Waly Salomão, a friend of Oiticica, [whom] noted that the term was slang from the favela and had multiple meanings," like "What's going on?," "What's up?," or "What's the deal?" (2016, 139). By naming the project thus, Oiticica neutralises the negative connotations of the slang word. With this work, he is resizing the semantic field of the word. The lexicographer Antonio Houaiss attributes an uncertain etymology to this word. He explains that it has a local and informal use in Rio de Janeiro where it implies a conversation with "neither head nor tail" (*sem pé nem cabeça*), which is "unattractive" (*desinteressante*), which "leads nowhere" (*que não leva a nada*). It often represents "dishonest conduct to mislead someone" (*comportamento desonesto para ludibriar alguém*), "roguery" (*malandragem*),<sup>14</sup> "craftiness" (*astúcia*), "cleverness" (*esperteza*), "a guy full of *parangolé*" (2004, 2130). When we pay attention to the meaning of the word parangolé, our senses collide and create a new surface when looking at Oiticica's works. All these meanings shed new light on crisis and community; the praise of roguery has become a fundamental element in Oiticica's poetics and, therefore, parangolé has become part of the skin of his body of work.

In addition to Oiticica, another artist who radically understands the issue is Cildo Meireles. In the artwork *Introdução a uma nova crítica* (1970; *Introduction to a New Criticism*), he digresses from those works developed by Clark and Oiticica. Meireles also distances himself from the misunderstood dimension of participation in some neoconcrete artworks that is interpreted as a behavioural play of stimulus-response. Separately, the materials are simple; Meireles has achieved critical frequency through the architecture of the work where a dense, translucent, black net hangs from a square frame over a white wooden chair with numerous upwards-facing white nails in the place of a cushion. *Introdução a uma nova crítica* is 160 cm in height, and 50 cm in length and width. It also addresses the problem of figuration and painting that Oiticica had identified in Mondrian's writings. However, unlike Oiticica, Meireles establishes a negative space in which it is the physical force of the object that stands out, and he also captures the symbolic dimension in this concreteness. Meireles's *Introdução a uma nova crítica* does not fail to introduce a dimension of mourning to the invention of the skin through the black shroud. This takes

the shape of a political mourning that extends to a whole generation of artists who had to produce works while Brazil was under a military dictatorship (1964–1985). For that reason, the plastic dimension was a field of action for those who, even without a literal engagement, entered the critical frequency of language, reinventing configurations of the visible from verbal situations. Reality became an encrypted, hyper-coded semantic field. Therefore, the constructivist dimension gained a communitarian and political strength. Thanks to reality, artists were able to disrupt the modes of creation and life in society simultaneously, in the underground of the nation's discourse. Thus, the third and last part of this essay will deal with language, with the “phonic skin” (Coccia 2010, 133), which is the voice that takes shape through artistic and poetic procedures. Voice is a threshold phenomenon between crisis and community. The absence of a body in this work by Meireles—or rather, the work presents the measures of the average human body and marks its absence—is still an invitation to rest. However, it's impossible to rest on a chair of nails, making the work paradoxically attractive and repulsive. *Introdução a uma nova crítica* brings to light the anonymous history of these bodies. Meireles's work gives an account of the history of the circulation of bodies through its objects, and their sounds, limits, and borders. The artist touched the heart of the critical skin by means of his works' plastic dimension.

### **Procedural Value: The Acting Force of the Voice in the World's Skin**

The procedural dimension in art is a fundamental fact in the relations between crisis and community. The proposal of the invention of skin considers the procedures of being-in-common (Nancy 1991). The skin even figures as a mesh of absences, of marks, of surfaces that draw other people in—those with whom the works will meet. The artists discussed so far reinvent the use of words through new syntactic arrangements, imprinting rhythm with graphic and auidial complexity. In the broadest sense, the act of inventing skins can be considered a space for the most diverse procedures. In addition, the artists remember that words are not only guided by grammatical norms, but they occupy the space with rhythmic, visual, and even tactile resources. In these artistic practices, there is a re-education of the senses, a pedagogy that is open to reading practices and not always institutional; artists teach us to read the world from the most elementary levels of language. The historical avant-gardes have opened up structured forms to expose microstructures of language, namely, the expressive force of syllables, the displacement of letters, and the physical and vocal dimension of the tongue.

The voice, in its significant condition, will also be analysed in a broader sense as a “phonic skin,” as Emanuele Coccia wrote in *La Vie Sensible* (2010, 133). Coccia describes that a “human is the animal capable of making a dress of all things: of making the skin of all things. And vice versa, to transform his skin into a mundane object: language” (133). This procedure is an endlessly

expanding process of objectification of the world in terms of meaning and surface dimension. For this reason, the voice, through its ability to give body to words and produce words practically in a sculptural way through sound, acquires the characteristic of a phonic skin. The community comes into existence through minimal signifiers including voice. With its material dimension, the voice gives a timbre to the crises. The voice is a phonic skin, that is, a relation between exteriorities. Thus, the vocal dimension and the representation of the voice and tongue can be drawn out of the works of Ricardo Aleixo (b. 1960) and Lenora de Barros (b. 1953). Voice and tongue are procedural elements in the work of both artists. They are part of their grammars of crisis and communal practices.

The precariousness of the means must include a disposition towards using the voice, especially with artists for whom the voice is an indispensable structural element. This includes for written text which becomes a revealing element of procedures. The written element takes on a structuring function which the instability and mutability of speech does not allow. While writing conveys some guarantee and evidence, the spoken form is liable to suffer the most diverse fluctuations. Unlike text, or a certain notion of text associated with permanence, which usually occurs in the literary context, the body has mortality; its signs do not disappear with all gestures and meanings (Sajewska 2019, 66). Regarding this aspect, Judith Butler stated that

the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well.

(2006, 26)

Therefore, the performance will also produce an environment, a temperature and even a critical frequency between the artistic dimension and the social reality. Strongly based on voice frequency, the poet and artist Ricardo Aleixo uses a wide and vast archive of Afro-Brazilian traditions, his own family memories, and vocal and bodily techniques to rhythmically assemble fragments of contemporary public opinion. These are taken from newspapers, reports of violence, failed acts, and popular sayings, thus making the poetic language deal with the daily practices of composition. Afro-Brazilian traditions are constantly being challenged and put in crisis, but Aleixo's work is a brief example of re-articulation; their organising and agential force emerges with his voice and montaged voices.

Aleixo's performance *poemanto* (2010; *Poemantle*) creates new relations with all the procedures mentioned before: he moves as Oiticica's parangolé, but only uses black and white. These colour choices are very close to Meireles's *Introdução a uma nova crítica* with the difference that Aleixo's work depends on your body and your voice. However, in Aleixo's poem-essay, "O poemanto: ensaio para escrever (com) o corpo" (The poemantle: an essay to

write (with) the body), he says “that in order to compare the (poe)mantle with the parangolé, they need a body to wear them and keep the mantle in movement” (2018, 116). This mantle and the poem-essay about it, which is a kind of mental score, come together as a single skin inscribing a particular story. Still, each invented skin involves a singular segment of history about the artist and of the violence suffered by Afro-descendants in Brazil. Broadly speaking, these stories share a political meaning with all the violence suffered by the one community.

Aleixo’s perspective of community is also linked to countless descendants of slaves who have already died. This includes the genealogy of the poet himself. The poem “Álbum de Família” (Family Album) exposes a fracture in Brazilian society:

My father watched Casablanca three times (two  
in the cinema and one on TV). My  
grandfather worked at the muzzle of the mine. My  
great grandfather was, at very least, a trusted slave.

(2018, 46)

The dimension of the skin assumes a literal force carried in prosaic simplicity. The skin, in this sense, assumes the role of transmitting factors outside the body, including politically chained stories, memories and affections. The poemantle includes these aspects, especially when the black fabric and white text are moved by the performer’s body and voice. Singing and reciting, Aleixo creates a kind of magnetised space. With the voice, Aleixo mixes memories and depicts a transmedial perspective. It is a negative form of writing, literally situated at the opposite end, “without body,” with black letters on white paper. In short, even if the poet makes use of this resource, the page supports the voice and the voice produces a body that the poet’s own body seeks to follow. For Aleixo, skin is a huge procedure because by an ensemble of textualities, poetry is a complex structure: photography, performance, radio art, books, exhibitions, cultural journalism, cultural traditions, gestures, and dance. Every single activity has a place in his voice.

Another artist who deserves to be considered in this reading of skins in a procedural role is Lenora de Barros. Using the language of posters, Barros made a photo-performance *Poema* (1979; Poem), which entailed another confrontation of language with lyrics, declining the muteness and action of the tongue’s physical presence. *Poema* is a sequence of six photos where, from top to bottom, an open mouth shows a tongue, that then licks the keys of a typewriter until, in the third image, the end of each type hammer is in contact with the tongue. The fourth and fifth images show the keys extending themselves towards the tongue until, in the final image, the hammers are amassed while the keys have vanished. It can be read as a kind of grid for the artist’s work, at least in the visual aspect and the performative dimension she has with photography. The poem is a mix between the tongue’s performance and

the act of writing. For de Barros, the tongue is a surface, like paper, for the performance of the speech, in its linguistic and Saussurean sense of *parole*. The procedural and poetic aspect deal with the clearer dimension established in Roman Jakobson (1977). All this shows that the artist dominates the passage from language to the word and that her artistic practice consists of exposing this passage or showing the interferences and interruptions when this passage occurs.<sup>15</sup> The physical dimension of language gains autonomy in its photo-performance, making the mouth a theatrical space that expands to the artist's mouth.

Finally, these three approaches of interpreting invented skins proposed here—from a phenomenological, philological, and processual perspective—are not unrelated to some practices of reinventing community on different levels or in varying rhythms of existence, with a lot of comings and goings. These are artistic practices that go beyond more formalistic reductions or exclusively social enlargements. That is why the skin, in its phenomenological, philological, and procedural dimension maintains the levels of tension not only between crisis and community. It also connects the aspects inherent to the very notion of community as proposed by Jean-Luc Nancy (1983, 1991, 2014), namely, the being-in-common, the absolute of the relationship, and the constitutive being of the community. This is just one way of reading the dynamic in Brazilian Art from the second half of the twentieth and the earliest years of the twenty-first centuries. It is a process of reading, because there are several agents who participate in the invention of skin and who can feel and think with one or several skins. This sensitive path, whose prolongations follow through art, culture, and social life to the extent where it is difficult to discern where one begins and another ends, exists because the imbricated dimension of writing, performance and theory is inseparable from life. The result is a common place in which there is a whole field of presentation of forms and acts.

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## **Notes**

- 1 “Skin is the deepest thing” (Valéry 1934, 74; *La peau est ce qu'il y a de plus profond*). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
- 2 Jean-Luc Nancy uses Georges Bataille as proof of the radical experience of the community and its relationship with uniqueness, which has another meaning beyond individuality. According to Nancy (1991, 6), “behind the theme of the individual, but beyond it, lurks the question of singularity. What is a body, a face, a voice, a death, a writing—not indivisible, but singular? What is their singular necessity in the sharing that divides and that puts in communication bodies,

voices, and writings in general and in totality? In sum, this question would be exactly the reverse of the question of the absolute. In this respect, it is constitutive of the question of community, and it is in this context that it will have to be taken into account later on.”

- 3 *Ek-sistence* is a Heidegger term. Jean-Luc Nancy, however, brings it to its metaphysical limit. Let us consider Ignaas Devisch’s (2014, 162; original italics) comment: “The openness Nancy has in mind—thinking insofar as it is this opening—involves an openness that precedes free choice and cannot be appropriated by anyone. This means the openness of being that is always thrown into sense and opened to the world as an *ek-sistence*. Nancy thinks the social as pluralistic in the most radical manner. *All that is, is only as plurality and all that is plural is always singular*. In this lies, among other things, the singularity of his thought of community. The singular plural condition Nancy describes and which constitutes our sociality goes well beyond anything that has been claimed in this field so far.”
- 4 “Wir konstatieren dabei ein Wichtiges. In der Abstraktion verbleibt uns eine einheitlich zusammenhängende Schicht des Phänomens Welt, des transzendentalen Korrelats der kontinuierlich einstimmig fortgehenden Welterfahrung. Wir können trotz unserer Abstraktion kontinuierlich in der erfahrenden Anschauung fortgehen, ausschließlich in dieser Schicht verbleibend. Diese einheitliche Schicht ist ferner dadurch ausgezeichnet, daß sie die wesensmäßig fundierende ist, d. h. ich kann offenbar nicht das Fremde als Erfahrung haben, also nicht den Sinn objektive Welt als Erfahrungssinn haben, ohne jene Schicht in wirklicher Erfahrung zu haben, während nicht das Umgekehrte der Fall ist” (Husserl 1991, 127).
- 5 Concrete Poetry in Brazil was a particular movement that went beyond the pure fact of producing visual poems. The project of the Noigandres group was a complex machine of cultural war involving translation, literary criticism, semiotics, visual arts, music, not to mention some aesthetic affinities between Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari. As Marjorie Perloff (2012, 67) wrote: “Haroldo de Campos, following Augusto’s lead, explains that the concrete movement began as a rebellion—‘We wanted to free poetry from subjectivism and the expressionistic vehicle’ of the then-dominant poetic mode.”
- 6 On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1959, the *Jornal do Brasil* brought out a literary supplement titled *experiência neoconcreta* (neoconcrete experience) by a group of poets and artists in Rio de Janeiro. Within it, the group published their manifesto. In the manifesto, Ferreira Gullar (1959, 5–6) quotes Merleau-Ponty, Cassirer and Susana Langer to criticise modern biology, the “mechanisms” and the relation between Man and Machines.
- 7 In terms of theory, however, names like Mário Pedrosa and Ferreira Gullar had an approach inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phénoménologie de la perception* ([1945] 1976). According to Paulo Herkenhoff (2008, 51), it was by these means that art in Brazil was in contact with the canon of Western art. In an exhibition entitled *Poética da percepção. Questões da fenomenologia na arte brasileira* (Poetics of perception. Questions of phenomenology in Brazilian Art), Herkenhoff also connected Mário Pedrosa’s writings and curatorial works with *Gestalt* theory, and Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer’s works. Brazilian art, due to its early adherence to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception (in the 1950s), created a singular experience in procedural art, guaranteeing it a place in the canon of Western art. Mário Pedrosa was the main actor of the neoconcrete group and its philosophy. He was engaged deeply in Gestalt’s theory and Ernst Cassirer, Merleau-Ponty and Susanne Langer’s works. To speak about phenomenology in

Brazil in terms of art leads us to Mário Pedrosa's writings and curatorial works at the earlier Biennial of São Paulo.

- 8 Quoting the manifesto "plano-piloto para poesia concreta" (Augusto de Campos et al. 2006, 125–216): "precursors: mallarmé (*un coup de dés*, 1897): the first qualitative leap: 'subdivisions prismatiques de l'idée'; espace (blancs) and typographic resources as substantive elements of composition. [...] (mondrian and the *boogie-woogie* series; max bill; albers and perceptual ambivalence; concrete art, in general)."
- 9 The "Neoconcrete Manifesto" was signed by Amílcar de Castro, Ferreira Gullar, Franz Weissmann, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Reynaldo Jardim and Theon Spanudis. The text of the manifesto dedicates practically one paragraph to Mondrian: "If we want to understand Mondrian's painting by his theories, we will be forced to choose between the two. Either the prophecy of a total integration of art into everyday life seems possible and we see in Mondrian's work the first steps in this direction, or this integration seems more and more remote and his work shows us frustrated. Either the vertical and horizontal are the fundamental rhythms of the universe and Mondrian's work is the application of this universal principle or the principle is flawed and his work proves to be based on an illusion. But the truth is that Mondrian's work is there, alive and fruitful, above these theoretical contradictions. It will be of no use to us to see in Mondrian the destroyer of the surface, the plan and the line, if we do not pay attention to the new space that this destruction has built" (Gullar 2007).
- 10 Merleau-Ponty's ([1945] 1976) theory of perception proved to be related to the lived experience of artists, poets and theorists in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1950s, because "the artistic practices and theoretical considerations in the neo-concretism found in Merleau-Ponty and a philosophical and scientific reason for their rejection of the conception of man as a machine or apparatus, and the associated downgrading of the sensual perception, which is inherent in Max Bill and thus also to the *Ruptura group's* early understanding of constructive/concrete in São Paulo" (Bachmann 2019, 24). This is at least Ferreira Gullar's perspective, given that the 1952 Manifesto Ruptura, the conceptions of Gestalt theory would find other solutions on Brazilian soil. The pilot plan for concrete poetry, in turn, will cross some notions of the group break with phenomenology, while considering *What is literature?* by Jean-Paul Sartre and the dimension of engagement. About Waldemar Cordeiro, see Nelson (2020).
- 11 "This world of bodies—or rather, *the world = bodies = "us"*—properly offers us our chance and our history. Which also means that it still precedes us, and that we have yet to discover it. Up until now, to state it once again, a wound, first of all, is what's presented. Since the First *World War* (in other words, the simultaneous invention of a new juridical space for an inter-national political economy, and a new combat-space for a whole new number of victims), these bodies, crowded wherever they go, are bodies primarily sacrificed" (Nancy 2008, 79; original italics).
- 12 "Everything happens at the surface in a crystal which develops only on the edges. Undoubtedly, an organism is not developed in the same manner. An organism does not cease to contract in an interior space and to expand in an exterior space—to assimilate and to externalize. But membranes are no less important, for they carry potentials and regenerate polarities. They place internal and external spaces into contact, without regard to distance. The internal and the external, depth and height, have biological value only through this topological surface of contact. Thus, even biologically, it is necessary to understand that 'the deepest



- is the skin.' The skin has at its disposal a vital and properly superficial potential energy" (Deleuze [1969] 2004, 103).
- <sup>13</sup> "Philology is, therefore, even at a modest level of culture, at least in those civilizations that have benefited from a good grammatical equipment, a daily event, even if scalar; philology in the technical sense is differently distributed in cultural moments and enjoys a variable prestige." (Contini 2014, 7; La filologia è dunque, anche a un modesto grado de cultura, almeno nelle civiltà che hanno fruito d'una buona attrezzatura grammaticale, un evento quotidiano, se pur scalare; la filologia in senso tecnico è diversamente distribuita nei momenti culturali e gode de un prestigio variabile.)
- <sup>14</sup> Furthermore, this can be linked to a seminal text on Brazilian literature, "Dialética da malandragem" (The Dialectics of Roguery), 1970, by Antonio Candido, in which he identifies the figure of the rogue as a central character in the Brazilian literary imagination. This text provides us with a useful prism through which to read Oiticica's work. In addition, we could analyse Oiticica's work from this new point of view, that is to say, through the lens of the philological turn. A skin can also be created with movements of readings, from the signifier (parangolé) to the signified (roguery), allowing us to web a skin word by word. For the specific development of this proposal, see Oliveira 2021.
- <sup>15</sup> Lenora de Barros's work, read in this context, draws attention to two aspects: the community dimension of languages and, with more intensity, an observation by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. Regarding the notion of parole and how it deals with Lenora de Barros's perspective, Saussure (2016, 78–79) defines it in this way: "La parole est au contraire un acte individuel de volonté et d'intelligence, dans lequel il convient de distinguer : (1) les combinaisons par lesquelles le sujet parlant utilise le code de la langue en vue d'exprimer sa pensée personnelle ; (2) le mécanisme psycho-physique qui lui permet d'extérioriser ces combinaisons."

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# 8 Maria Janion's Frenzy

## Transgressing the Crisis of 1968

*Nina Seiler*

The year 1968 is seen in many societies all over the globe as a symbol of political turmoil and social change, as a call for community and freedom that plunged the old societal order into a state of emergency and crisis. In most Western societies, 1968 is understood as a turn towards a more (neo)liberal, (post)modern society, and the achievement of a generation in its struggle for individual and collective freedom. The struggle for freedom and political change was fought in some countries of Central and Eastern Europe as well, but those calling for a liberal and just socialist system were silenced shortly after they voiced their concerns. In Poland, moreover, the repressive power of the bureaucratic nomenklatura was linked to an ethno-nationalist propaganda campaign that mobilised a fierce anti-Semitic social backlash. Thus, while in France, for example, *May 1968* not only stands for street riots, but also for change and hope for a better future, in Poland, *March 1968* marks a post-war crisis of the engaged intellectual spheres. In the latter case, a socialist-turned-nationalist system of empty slogans and opportunist functionaries brought not only social fear, but also the death of hopes for a truly communist project.

With dwindling possibilities for political dialogue, social atomisation in Poland grew, as people sought “immunity” (Esposito 2011) from social or intellectual connections that potentially jeopardised their own position. Yet in this atmosphere of immunisation and monologic party propaganda, some voices or strategies of resistance remained, such as literary scholar Maria Janion’s transgressive epistemology of ecstatic contamination and immersion. Her work was inspired by French thought and the French manner of re-introducing politics into academia, but unlike her “cool” French structuralist peers, Janion introduced an erudite frenzy into her work, creating a “hot,” personal yet multiple, affective and eclectic epistemology that was closely tied to the crisis Janion lived through due to the March “disaster.”

### **“A Disaster Is Drawing Near”: The March Impact**

In Poland, March 1968 has come to symbolise the violent state repression of youth protests for political and social reform and an officially promoted

anti-Semitic campaign, both linked to power struggles within the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR). Its backdrop was the growing petrification of the party system and increasing economic shortages that widely affected parts of Polish society. Thus, while the political protests are often perceived as rooted mainly in student and young academic circles, supported by a few intellectuals, young workers engaged in the protests in even greater numbers. However, the media slander targeted mostly the intelligentsia, and responsibility for the so-called anti-socialist riots was laid at the feet of a fictitious Jewish elite. Many people, especially in the party apparatus and academia, lost their positions to conformist, ethnic Polish party members and were forced to emigrate. Intense propagandist re-definitions which sketched a paradoxical nationalist "socialism," and official silence regarding the brutal repression of the youth protests and their demands, led to a monologic culture that only permitted the reproduction of the official party narrative and produced an atmosphere of dissonance and political farce. Thus, ambiguity surrounding what actually happened, and anxiety about their own integrity and career prospects, led many intellectuals and academics to renounce solidarity with the repressed and to refuse political engagement.<sup>1</sup>

Maria Janion (1926–2020), a Polish historian of literature, culture, and ideas, and a specialist in Romanticism, was affected by the March campaign. However, she did not suffer discrimination as severe as others—mostly Jewish academics, intellectuals, functionaries, or employees. She had been appointed the head of the Department for the History of Literature of the nineteenth century at the Gdańsk Higher Pedagogical School (Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna, WSP) in 1968, but lost her employment there in the same year, as the authorities were sceptical of the growing popularity of her engaging and critical lectures among students. After the founding of Gdańsk University in 1970, she began to work in its Institute of Polish Philology, where she earned full professorship in 1973. As an engaged Marxist, she had been a party member since 1949. Unlike other "bothersome elements," however, she was not expelled from the PZPR in 1968 and remained a member until 1979. Furthermore, she was able to continually publish her texts without relevant interference by the censorship, which might have been due to her ambivalent, not openly political writing. Nonetheless, her work had a decisive critical impact on Polish studies, and, after the political transformation of 1989, became relevant for feminist critique, critical culture studies and the Polish human rights and anti-nationalist debate.

The generational shift in the wake of the March 1968 events brought about a new elite that differed from the old nomenklatura. This was not only in terms of its class, social and often ethnic background, but also in its ideological approach towards communism, which it treated not as a political project but mainly instrumentally as a given system of dependencies (Szacki 1988). Nationalist narratives joined communist doctrine as a means of wielding power. Janion's own recollections of the March experience reflect the "warmongering" atmosphere in society and academic institutions. She noted how the official media

constructed a social schism that separated intellectual, allegedly cosmopolitan spheres from “the socialist nation”—ethnic Poles of working class or peasant descent who were loyal to the Party (Janion and Szczuka 2012a, 143, 146–147). An incident that took place in March 1968 reveals how closely this distorted image of socialism was intertwined with the construction of ethnic identity and the importance of *lineage*. Janion had heard “anti-Zionist” propaganda aired on the radio and was deeply alarmed. The very same day, she spoke to her students about the horrors of anti-Semitism, which she had witnessed as a child in Vilnius during the Second World War. She recalls that because of her solidarity with the Jewish–Polish population in 1968, her students instantly “came to the conclusion that [she] must be Jewish after all” (Janion and Szczuka 2012a, 141).<sup>2</sup> Incidents like these motivated Janion to increase her *cosmopolitanism* and mobilise scholarly erudition and engagement against a nationalist narrowing of Polish discourse and mentality:

When the March horror struck, I threw myself into French and German books with redoubled force. Of course, earlier I had also busied myself with Western Marxism, but the whole book then called RRM (Romanizacja, rewolucja, Marksizm) for short is a product of revisionist thought, in defiance of the great downfall of Marxism in Poland. That was some sort of attachment or loyalty to a lost cause.

(Janion and Szczuka 2012b, 33)<sup>3</sup>

Is Marxism the lost cause of the Polish socialist system and academia, despite its nominal dominance? Compared to Marxist ideas that were reviving in the West following the 1968 generation’s interest in critical social thought and forms of collective being-together, Marxism in Poland appeared to many—especially after March 1968—to be a fossil beyond reform. Historical materialism was gradually undermined by structuralism. Yet Janion, who was in close contact with contemporary French thought, criticised the dehistoricising tendencies of French structuralism of the 1960s, which in her eyes crippled political Marxism. Despite the tempting prospect of joining France’s intellectual circles, Janion said in interviews she decided to stay in Poland after 1968 for the benefit of the students she could reach in her lectures. She wanted to counter the nationalist distortion of Polish socialism in March 1968 by fighting for openness and tolerance in the minds of the youth (Dziurdzikowska 1993, 18–19; Janion and Szczuka 2012a, 145–146).

I was under the impression that a disaster was drawing near, a catastrophe greater than the one that had already happened. And that this catastrophe had to be prevented by mobilising the forces in the youth, that you could not abandon them like that. The coming catastrophe would be the end of Poland, a final drain, emptiness. So I had to save myself and whatever still remained.

(Janion and Szczuka 2012b, 31)<sup>4</sup>

The uncanny atmosphere of a latent, growing catastrophe in 1968 had an enormous impact on the work and political engagement of the iconic Polish scholar, even if it did not result in an epistemological turn in her work so much as in an affective intensification of her academic efforts. The unspoken experiences beneath the bleak propaganda language, intensified by the re-surfacing spectres of the Second World War, put her in a state of emergency and frenzied work to keep the awakening distrust in humanism and the humanity of mankind itself at bay. Janion felt an urge to position *her* words against the looming barrenness of official language, to fight for an inclusive society and against the dangers of racism, hypocrisy and ignorance. Yet this was not only a struggle for the future of her students and the shape of Polish society, but an ongoing effort to remain true to herself by reaching out to others. Her path forward would be guided by this affective epistemological inclination towards giving, sharing, and opening—*communitas*—entangled with a societal discourse dominated by *immunitas*: isolation, refusal and silencing (Esposito 2010, 2011).

### **“The Fun Is Over”: From Integration to Dissociation in the Polish Humanities**

The insistence of a dialogic approach on the level of methodology is already apparent in some of Janion’s texts from the mid- to late 1960s. In her earlier monograph “Romanticism: studies on ideas and style” (*Romantyzm: studia o ideach i stylu*), published in 1969, Janion insisted on a “dialectical internal dependence” of “worldview and style, the history of ideas and the history of artistic forms. The way of thinking and its stylistic articulation” (1969, 5).<sup>5</sup> This conviction of the dialectical relation between *idea* (worldview) and *form* (artistic style) forecasts the transformation evident in *RRM*—“Romanticism, revolution, Marxism” (*Romantyzm, rewolucja, Marksizm*), 1972—, in which Janion’s dialogic conception of the world is rooted in a fully developed dialogic style. Also in 1969, Janion noted an external criticism of her idea-centric approach that seemingly neglected style and form (Janion 1969, 5; Janion and Piorunowa 1967, 218–219). This critique was voiced during the conference “The historical process in literature and art” (*Proces historyczny w literaturze i sztuce*), held in May 1965 in Warsaw. Leafing through the conference proceedings, I am astonished to find almost 40 pages of discussion after the panel with Janion’s presentation that reflect the diverse approaches, interests and doubts present in the conference hall; according to Janion, the discussion lasted nearly 24 hours (Janion and Piorunowa 1967, 224). This criticism of Janion’s approach hints at the general transition of Polish literary studies and theory from a Marxist, idea-focussed, historical-materialist method towards the structuralist paradigm that would dominate the next decade (Sławiński 2002, 10; Balcerzan 2012, 10; Łebkowska 2012, 416). Yet this evolution seems to have been accompanied by an articulated need for exchange and reorientation, discussion and the reassembling of thoughts and people. Participants in the conference issued a call for academic *integration*,

the opening of methodological and theoretical approaches, interdisciplinary exchange, and personal association among researchers and theoreticians (Wyka 1967, 6). Janion voiced the need for an academic language that would connect the different disciplines—history, literature, film, art, ethnology, etc.—and allow for “broad academic agreement” (Janion and Piorunowa 1967, 224–225).<sup>6</sup> She ascribed the development of this interdisciplinary language to the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas (*Warszawska szkoła historii idei*)—the very school that in 1966 came under political pressure and disassembled in the wake of March 1968 with the emigration of leading thinkers like Bronisław Baczko and Leszek Kołakowski. The conference proceedings show that the attempt at critical disciplinary and methodological cross-fertilisation was fully underway in 1965 but would be cut short in the following years.<sup>7</sup>

While in the 1967 conference proceedings, we can re-read most of the discussion as well as Janion's reply, in the preface to her 1969 “Romanticism: studies on ideas and style,” this debate is reduced to a dry note on “accusation” and Janion's brief legitimisation of her approach. The communicative situation in the second text is quite different—instead of a group of academics debating, we encounter a singular subject confronting a potentially hostile or critical, impersonal outer world. In 1969, the scholar's subject stamps out its academic entourage; instead of the need for *integration* that defined the pre-1968 academic dialogue, we perceive strategies of dissociation and immunisation of the academic self. Janion, here, no longer appears as a participant in a general current and open discussion, but as a textual subject struggling for autonomy. Janion's introduction to “Romanticism” thus reflects the atmospheric change that took place in academic institutions due to the March campaign and that also affected her writing. The need and will for exchange and openness in post-Stalinist academia abruptly ended in 1968, as the party's dominating monologue suppressed dialogic, communitarian approaches. To insist on a *liberal, integrative, and intrinsically political* academia created a situation of dissociation that Janion retrospectively dubbed a war-like atmosphere (Janion and Szczuka 2012a, 143). However, Janion refused to join the discriminations and limitations and continued to exhibit the very cosmopolitanism rejected by the March propaganda. The position of integration and critical debate thus became a paradoxical political stance of self-immunisation against the immunitarian March monologic, while conformism guaranteed socio-political immunity and secured academic positions.

Academia shifted towards epistemological *depolitisation*. The refocus on a linguistically inspired structuralism concentrating primarily on the text's structure, though occasionally still labelled as Marxist scholarship, allowed for a depoliticised scholarly stance that avoided analysis of the given material's ideologeme (Balcerzan 2012, 10; Kasztenna 2018, 671). There is a significant divergence between French and Polish structuralism of the late 1960s: while the former, infused by Marxism, now “accept[ed] political content as a part of academic discourse,” the latter allegedly refused to “allow non-academic, political contents onto its terrain” (Gorczyński 2012, 471–472).<sup>8</sup>



Polish structuralism renounced the possibility of judging a work in relation to its external “reality” (cf. Kasztenna 2018, 673) as it was analysed primarily “immanently” or “intrinsically” in relation to the literary tradition and the linguistic system alone (Flaker and Žmegač 1974, 8; Kasztenna 2018, 675). In contrast to French academia, Polish literary studies thus became a reservation (*rezerwat*), as the renowned structuralist Janusz Sławiński later remarked (Sławiński 1990, 100–102, 168–169, 230–234; Kuźma 1994, 33). This academic “terrain” would allow for relative freedom (Gorczyński 472; Kuźma 33), as long as one steered clear of the political, otherwise “the fun will be over” (Sławiński 1990, 234<sup>9</sup>; see also Modzelewski 2013, 127–133; Kuroń 1989, 285). The period of structuralist literary studies was characterised by a non-dialogism (*nie-dialogowość*) that rarely entered into productive dialogue with other methodological approaches (Sławiński 2002, 10; Łebkowska 2012, 406–407) and remained isolated from political issues on both the ontological and epistemological level.

Janion’s self-positioning in the late 1960s can be seen as an attempt to differentiate her academic-textual subject from its academic context amidst a *structuralisation* of academic discourse that abandoned the “constant deciphering of senses” (Janion and Piorunowa 1967, 225).<sup>10</sup> Thus, mechanisms of dissociation and defence accompany her refusal to relinquish a politically conscious “cosmopolitan” approach.<sup>11</sup> Already in 1969, we perceive a certain closing-off of Janion’s text from most of the contemporary Polish academic context, while her dialogue with (Western) European thought and her disciples was to further increase in *RRM*. Similarly, Janion directed her later critique or refusal of structuralism not at Polish structuralist approaches—these were hardly referenced at all—but mostly at French structuralism, which she perceived as too impersonal and inhuman. Against this backdrop, Janion noted that her “intention was to defend historicism. Maybe this is the defence of a lost cause [...]. Yet the ravens and crows have not yet pecked away historicism” (1972a, 235).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in the ten-page discussion printed in *RRM*, all of Janion’s students argue for a structuralist approach and do not seem to share their lecturer’s concerns. Yet this also shows that her lectures were a space where historicism and (French) structuralism could meet and engage, where opening and sharing took place.

### “Some Sort of Mania”: Transgressive Writing

Janion’s “cult book” (Janion and Szczuka 2012b, 55) “Romanticism, revolution, Marxism” from 1972 marks a milestone in her work and a transition from an earlier, less explicitly “dialogic” (Bakhtin 1973; Kristeva 1980, 64–93) stage to her almost “frenzied”<sup>13</sup> post-March literary research and teaching. Its methodological intensification of polyphony serves as a key means of questioning and countering the construction of borders and exclusions in society and academia. Designed as a sort of didactic textbook, *RRM* was received particularly well among students, despite its demanding

content. Apparently, the book's engaged and almost feverish tone, arising from the author's ideological disputes, inspired students who were open to strategies of literary engagement that differed from the "dry" structuralist approach or who sought to challenge their own structuralist predilections. The structure of the book's discourse exceeds the dialogic binary, introducing a multi-perspective conversation that gradually involves more voices. The simultaneous construction of dichotomous oppositions and their instant deconstruction become apparent, for example, in the very first sentences of the introduction:

[This is] a book-conversation, a book that is basically "told," colloquial, "spoken," and not "written." It is of course easy to understand that in the end, it is a written book, yet it is born from talks at university [...] In fact, I consciously preserved several peculiarities here. They result both from the needs and requirements of university pedagogy (e.g., not only discussing the classics that belong to the canon anyway but also books that simply appeared on our book market lately), and from the seminary courses themselves, from the dialogues with listeners that often [...] guided their lecturer with thoughts and interests.

(Janion 1972, 7)<sup>14</sup>

This introduction places the oral in opposition to the written; and yet, the written book emerges from oral discussion and preserves its traces—and it intends to spark other, written or oral, debates. The book resides on the margins between talking, listening and writing, and writing and reading again, as its author becomes a reader-writer.<sup>15</sup> Janion also engages with the hierarchically structured opposition between the university lecturer and her audience. She stages herself (the lecturer) not as *the* speaker, but as a listener who gathers, assembles, and organises the thoughts and interests of her audience in the book in order to fulfil their yearning for inspiration. Her function becomes that of a medium, an interface between the assembled students and a "spiritual" sphere that upon request guides the students' reading of the world. Finally, Janion challenges the division of cultural works into canonical "classics" and everyday titles that simply happen to appear on the market. Both classes of literature serve as study material; in principle, every literary work meets the needs and requirements of Janion's "understanding hermeneutics" that is concerned with the entanglement of literary style and textual ideogeme.

*RRM* is the result of an ongoing dialogue between reading and writing, lecturer and students, classics and modern literature. Yet it is also a conversation that transgresses binary oppositions by introducing a third member, hinted at by the titular triad of "Romanticism, revolution, Marxism"—a constellation that does not easily arrange itself into triangular relations, let alone linearity. The same is true of the book-conversation: not solely a dialogue between the lecturer and her students, it is both less and more than that.

Indeed, the students are not perceptible in the text itself, save for the ten pages of reprinted discussion. Their opinions, questions and interests form the basis of the “talk” woven into the discourse without surfacing. Nor does Janion’s voice often emerge. It only occasionally erupts into affective expressions or emotive passages in the text that re-position its ideologeme, shifting the sympathies and agreements of the reader. Especially in these passages of affective eruption, the emerging textual subject invokes its reader, thus adding a layer of reception into the communicative network of the text.

The main discussion, however, consists of interaction among several philosophical voices, intertwined with literary, cultural, and social materials. This conversation often seems to flow almost unmoderated, with each voice overlapping and re-writing the other as they spin a dense cobweb of opinions on a particular topic. Hierarchies or orders of succession among the voices and opinions are often not clearly articulated, as Janion’s hermeneutic circling does not attempt to arrive at a definite truth. Nonetheless, amidst the fast-paced intermingling of diverse voices, the way in which these voices are allowed to speak suggests their positive or negative evaluation by Janion, as will be shown in the following passage:

Let’s say against Foucault that man will realise the kingdom of man. The ascription of the privileged point of view to the proletariat is the result of the historical self-interpretation of Marxism.

In a letter from 1907 Stanisław Brzozowski criticised the pseudo-socialist attitude of *Głos* [The Voice, a weekly paper (1885–1905)]: “*Głos* constantly remarks that the rich do not think about the poor. That is a demoralisation of the working classes; the basis of the socialist consciousness is: away with welfare! We don’t want to be thought about! We want to think!” That was a protest against the paternalist social conception, against treating the proletariat as an object of care from above. Today we can also say that structuralism has something of a structure of incapacitation, paternalistic and anonymous at the same time, if not we think, but “something” thinks itself through us.

We understand the furious outburst of the German critic of structuralism, Urs Jaeggi: “The individual does not think anymore, the individual is traded. No one asks about the subject—who? Who talks? Who writes? Who acts? Who did that?” The answers were given in advance. Lévi-Strauss: “It is not the individual who gives sense to the structure in which it lives, but the structure that defines the sense of its life.” Lacan: “We are not speaking beings, but spoken, [...] not thinking beings, but thought.”

Of course, one is free not to accept such answers. One can determine that we do not only want to, but can think, that we keep our status as thinking and acting historical subjects, although we do it—according to Marx’s classic formula—“under defined circumstances.”

(Janion 1972a, 140–141)<sup>16</sup>

Even though Foucault is mentioned in the first sentence, *Foucault* remains somehow an empty term, as Janion never actually discusses his ideas. Nonetheless, Foucault—along with Lévi-Strauss, who at least has a voice—functions as the negative embodiment of a radically antihistorical structuralism in the text. Countering Foucault is the opinion of the working class, voiced, however, by the turn-of-the-century Marxist philosopher Stanisław Brzozowski in his critique of yet another voice, the weekly paper *Głos* (Warsaw)—whose main writer was himself. As a result, the notion of *proletariat* remains rather vague as well; although it is attributed a “privileged point of view,” no proletarian is quoted, and its alleged standpoint is represented by others. What becomes evident here is the difficulty of inviting subaltern voices to speak for themselves, as they are only preserved through the more or less biased writings of literate contemporaries. This issue of a voice’s autonomy and its embedment in the social discursive structure is the very topic of the passage above: to think or be thought, to speak or be spoken, who (or what?) writes and under which circumstances. While Janion argues against structuralism in favour of a motile subject that can think and speak for itself, even if it is entangled in social, historical, political contexts (“under defined circumstances,” as she terms it) and thus always biased, her engagement with the philosophical discourse also shows that certain voices and social positions are unavoidably excluded, spoken for, or silenced.

An intertextual discourse emerges from the multi-layered text, a staccato of voices that sometimes stand side by side and sometimes answer or reject the previous positions. By spiralling through these voices and suggestions, Janion’s text transgresses their positions and constantly shifts the borders between them. The eclectic intermingling of ephemerally introduced voices blurs their spatio-temporal context: France, Poland, and Germany, nineteenth-century romantic outbursts and the cool structuralism of the late 1960s are mixed together, with names dropped or left out—a kaleidoscope of accumulated European philosophical thought. Even though in some passages Janion clearly endorses or refutes a certain view, the text shows a tendency towards liminality, a celebration of the sphere of neither-nor and not-only-but-also, lingering always in between the proposed views. In a way, the text becomes a field of de-situated knowledge that exceeds locality and temporality, an unstable knowledge that emerges in the non-space of the relation and questions, rather than answers, the discussed problems and proposed solutions. *RRM* is thus characterised by *transgression*—a type of thought that insists on the constitutive yet porous and disputable borders of culturally constructed categories. This idea gains importance in Janion’s work on the cultural phenomena of liminality and metamorphosis in the later 1970s.<sup>17</sup> In large parts, especially in part II on worldviews, the *unbounded*<sup>18</sup> text of *RRM* does not allow the reader to establish its ideologeme, as it successfully evades assessment and fixation by opening up a multitude of strands and questions. This quality of polyphonic *unboundedness* and constant transgression produces

a sensory overflow that leaves the reader quite stunned (Nowak 2016, 212). Looking back on her work, Janion aptly remarked:

I have to say that when I looked through Romanticism, Revolution, ... now, it aroused some serious horror in me. It overwhelms with erudition, a certain excess, a wish to say everything. Why did I read and write all this? It looks like some sort of mania, or so I think.

(Janion and Szczuka 2012b, 32)<sup>19</sup>

The excessive character and overwhelming effect of *RRM* is due to Janion's wish to say everything. The text's intensity affectively moves the reader without clearly indicating the direction of movement. In general, it suggests a direction *outward*: beyond borders, transgressing the known, disturbing the monologue of what can be said. The movement is one of opening instead of closing. It is a frenzied text: Janion describes "romantic frenzy" (*frenesja romantyczna*) as way of writing that heightens emotional content while abandoning style and form, creating raw and chaotic works that render the inner world external (Janion 1969, 6). This ecstasy, the overturning of the border between inside and outside, may appear disorganised, but is in fact a performance of reaching out towards others—the very core of communitarian being (Bataille 1988; Blanchot 1988, 2–26).

Janion's mimicry of romantic frenzy in *RRM* was the culmination of her intellectual resistance to the 1968 immunitarian crisis. In the face of the monolithic and monologic narrative of the Polish March propaganda that produced closure, isolation, and the death of communication, Janion turned her writing into its frenzied opposite. In her 1972 essay on "Hermeneutics" (*Hermeneutyka*), she devotes half of the text to explaining the "sinister and dangerous" (14)<sup>20</sup> side of a dogmatically understood hermeneutics: "The totalitarian society to an almost pathological extreme protects the [...] exegesis that is seen as the only one acceptable; and it has to do so in order to detect and instantly stifle every reflex of free thought" (15).<sup>21</sup> Even though this statement about the totalitarian insistence on unitary truth refers to Nazi Germany, it also applies to the Polish discourse of March 1968 that so thoroughly reminded Janion of fascist totalitarianism. This is why she practised "free thought" to the point of epistemological ecstasy, almost losing any overarching argument and her textual self in the entanglements of European thinking on Romanticism, Marxism, and revolution.

### **"The Anthropological Factor": Transgressing Humanism**

Despite the unboundedness of thought in *RRM*, Janion also expresses an interest in the human subject, in agency and identity—issues that were of the greatest significance to the Polish scholar as she was confronted yet again with the eerie operations of ethno-nationalist immunisations. Thus, in a dialectic, if not paradoxical relation to her ecstatic thinking, Janion insisted on

“the anthropological factor” (1972a, 175)<sup>22</sup> in the processes of understanding, research, and cognition. She understood “truth” as relative and dependent on whoever researches and states it. Referring to the uncertainty principle of quantum physicist Werner Heisenberg, she elaborated on the affective interdependence between academic subject and research, the questions asked and the resulting answers. The human perspective on the world informs scientific paradigms and vice versa, as the material and the mental world enter into a dialectical relation (Janion 1972a, 175–178; Nowak 2016, 225–229). Though mostly agreeing with German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey’s definition of the humanities as the “understanding” (Janion 1972a, 143) discipline, Janion rejected the conception of universal human reason and continual progress towards truth-finding as proposed and propagated by Enlightenment humanism. In her view, “reasoning” could only take place in close interaction with the world. Citing the Polish sociologist Jerzy Szacki’s 1971 essay “On the so-called Historicism in the Social Sciences” (O tzw. historyzmie w naukach społecznych), she pointed out the “rootedness” of cognition and located the experiencing subject “in the very same social reality that it occupies itself with” (quoted in Janion 1972a, 142).<sup>23</sup>

The question of the human subject in history, social and cultural contexts, and academia catalysed Janion’s hermeneutic transgressions through philosophical positions. Her arguments occupy a liminal, almost phenomenological position between classical humanism, structuralist approaches, and deconstruction. Janion insisted that the human subject is not only mobile (i.e., it can be moved by outer circumstances to which it is subjected), but also has an intrinsic motility that in her eyes provides the only basis for political engagement and a sensible life. Yet this stance was unfashionable in contemporary structuralism, and she therefore fiercely contested it. She demonstrated that structuralist humanities stripped of historicism would lead to the “death of man”<sup>24</sup> as a motile, pro-active subject, replaced by an “anonymous, impersonal and omnipotent Structure”<sup>25</sup> (Janion 1972a, 141)—a rigid grid of interpretative schemes obscuring the life beneath. Conversely, Janion considered the *death of man* from a different perspective. Following Szacki, she pointed out that historicism undermined the notion of a stable category of humankind, of *Man* with a capital letter. Hence, historicism(s) freed the humanities from a hegemonic (European) universalism, which assumed that a defined, unchangeable human nature would apply to all human beings alike, “independently of where and when they live” (Szacki quoted in Janion 1972a, 142<sup>26</sup>). Janion further refined the argument by separating the irrational historicism proposed by Dilthey from the rational historicism of Hegel and Marx (1972a, 143). According to Janion, Dilthey favoured “irrational ‘life’ ” over the “rational ‘concept’,” arguing that the latter was secondary to and born from experiencing life, from the act of “living through” (1972a, 143).<sup>27</sup> Freed from mediation by a postulated omnipotent reason, the relation between the subject and life thus gains a singular intimacy, connecting inner and outer worlds, experience and reason as it unites body and mind. While

demonstrating a greater interest in materialities (Nowak 2016), this approach reconnects two subjects that Janion saw as neglected or disconnected by the French structuralism of the 1960s<sup>28</sup>: the human being bestowed with agency and the world beyond its discursive processing, which possessed an existence and motility of its own (Nowak 2016, 218). Life as a process has or generates knowledge that more or less, and from different perspectives, constitutes, imprints itself on and moves the human subject. Thinking alone proves insufficient if it is not embedded in being and feeling:

We do not have to be ashamed at all of the term: “humanist intuition.” We use it as an indispensable tool in everyday life, I don’t know why we should resign from it in the sciences (nauka). In the name of a strict differentiation between science and life? It seems that the humanities (humanistyka), at least the understanding humanities, aim to break down such distinctions—and I see this as one of their greatest merits.

(Janion 1972a 161–162)<sup>29</sup>

The “understanding” humanities, as proposed by Janion, blur the distinction between thinking mind and feeling body, reintegrating the self as a psychophysical entity. Yet at the same time, the understanding humanities in Janion’s conception are located in the process of life itself and happen in and through immersion in the social and material environment, thereby puncturing the borders between subject and world. This conception of *intuitive* understanding is closely related to the state of *frenzy*, not only thanks to their common Slavic–Romantic provenance, but because both intuition and frenzy initiate the transgression of the self towards exteriority, its opening up towards the other. Both simultaneously adhere to and destabilise the belief in a self-sufficient motility of the self and embrace the anxiety of (non-)identity. The subject becomes an “autopoietic” (Wolfe 2010, xxiv)—both open and closed—focal point in an environment from which it interdependently emerges. Janion thus promotes here an understanding similar to an autistic “environmental mode of awareness” (Manning and Massumi 2013, 78), a heightened awareness of a subject’s singular localisation that does not renounce a myriad of other perspectives. The positions, concepts and “results” produced by such intuitive understanding are marked by a specific singularity due to their emergence from the interaction between world and subject and encompass both the self and its position in the world.

The shock Janion experienced due to the crisis of March 1968 thus translates into the frenzy of *RRM*. Janion was guided by an effort at cultural understanding that, in her eyes, would result in a society capable of acknowledging difference just as much as equality—a society which she strongly desired.<sup>30</sup> Her intermingling of Romanticism and Marxism, and their actualisation in the discourse of the early 1970s, led to a revolutionary *dispositif* aiming for everything. *RRM* is a manifestation of the struggle to overcome fear in an atmosphere that played precisely on fear of the self and

the other. It is a struggle for the self as well as a struggle for the other—and thus a communitarian manifesto for the right of both to meet.

## Acknowledgement

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## Notes

- 1 For discussions of the events of 1968 in Poland, see, for example, Eisler (1998); Grudzinska Gross (2011); Oseka and Zaremba (1999); Siermiński (2020, 61–108); Tych (2014); and Zaremba (2018).
- 2 “doszli do wniosku, że jednak muszę być Żydówką.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
- 3 “Pod obuchem zgrozy marcowej rzuciłam się na francuskie i niemieckie książki i czasopisma ze zdwojoną mocą. Wcześniej oczywiście też zajmowałam się zachodnim marksizmem, ale cała ta książka, nazywana wtedy w skrócie RRM, jest tworem myśli rewizjonistycznej, na przekór temu że marksizm tak bardzo u nas podupadł. Było w tym jakieś przywiązanie czy wierność wobec spraw przegranych.”
- 4 “Miałam poczucie, że szykuje się katastrofa, jeszcze gorsza od tej, która już się przetoczyła. I że trzeba tej katastrofie zapobiec, mobilizując moce, które są w młodych, że nie można ich tak zostawić. Naciągająca katastrofa byłaby końcem Polski, jakimś ogołoceniem ostatecznym, pustką. Więc trzeba było ratować siebie i to, co tu zostało.”
- 5 “dialektyczna wewnętrzna zależność”; “Światopogląd i styl, historia idei i historia form artystycznych. Sposób myślenia i jego artykulacja stylowa.”
- 6 “szerokiego porozumienia naukowego.”
- 7 Further evidence of transdisciplinary exchange and the will for intensified synthetic approaches can be seen in the development of interdisciplinary cultural studies (kulturoznawstwo) at several universities, starting from 1966 (Fereński et al. 2017).
- 8 “akceptacja treści politycznych jako części dyskursu naukowego”; “tym, czego nie wpuszczała na swój teren były treści pozanaukowe, polityczne.” Górczyński quite enthusiastically notes this refusal of Polish structuralism to be instrumentalised politically.
- 9 “zabawa się skończy.”
- 10 “rozszyfrowywanie sensów.”
- 11 For instance, by referring to the work of historian Bronisław Baczko—a March émigré—as an important source of inspiration in *RRM* (Janion 1972a, 220–222).
- 12 “Moją intencją było bronić historyzmu. Być może, jest to obrona straconej sprawy [...]. Tyle tylko, że kruki i wrony nie rozdziobały jeszcze historyzmu.”
- 13 I will return to this noteworthy expression later on, noting here that it was a term introduced by Janion herself for a Romantic state (*frenezja*) that is roughly equivalent to the communitarian *ek-stasis*.
- 14 “[...] książka–rozmowa, książka z założenia ‘powiedzana’, kolokwialna, ‘mówiona’, a nie ‘pisana’. Oczywiście, łatwo pojąć, że jest to w końcu książka pisana, ale zrodzona z uniwersyteckich rozmów [...] Rzeczywiście, świadomie zachowałam tutaj rozmaite osobliwości. Wynikają one zarówno z potrzeb i wymagań dydaktyki uniwersyteckiej (na przykład kiedy omawia się nie tylko książki klasyczne, należące tak czy inaczej do kanonu, ale również książki, które po prostu ostatnio ukazały się na naszym rynku wydawniczym), jak i z toku zajęć



seminaryjnych, dialogów ze słuchaczami, częstokroć [...] kierującymi myślami i zainteresowaniami swego wykładowcy.”

- 15 See also Bakhtin's (1990, 4–256) conception of the *avtor-čitatel* (author-reader) in the framework of intertextuality.

- 16 “Powiedzmy to wbrew Foucaultowi, człowiek zrealizuje królestwo człowieka. Przyznanie proletariatu uprzywilejowanego punktu widzenia to wynik historycznej autointerpretacji marksizmu.”

W liście z roku 1907 Stanisław Brzozowski skrytykował pseudosocjalistyczną postawę ‘Głosu’: “Głos’ stale zwraca uwagę, że bogaci nie myślą o biednych. Jest to demoralizowanie klas pracujących; podstawą świadomości socjalistycznej jest: precz z opieką! Nie chcemy, aby o nas myślano! Chcemy myśleć! Był to protest przeciwko paternalistycznej koncepcji społecznej, przeciw traktowaniu proletariatu jako przedmiotu opieki z góry. A dziś również możemy powiedzieć, że strukturalizm ma w sobie coś ze struktury ubezwłasnowolnienia, paternalistycznej i anonimowej zarazem, jeśli to nie my myślimy, lecz ‘coś’ myśli się samo przez nas.

Rozumiemy wybuch wściekłości niemieckiego krytyka strukturalizmu, Ursa Jaeggi: ‘Jednostka już nie myśli, jednostką się kupczy. Nikt nie pyta o podmiot—kto? Kto mówi? Kto pisze? Kto działa? Kto to zrobił?’ Odpowiedzi wszak padły już wcześniej. Lévi-Strauss: ‘To nie jednostka nadaje sens strukturze, w której żyje, lecz struktura określa sens jej życia’. Lacan: ‘Jesteśmy nie istotami mówiącymi, lecz mówionymi, [...] nie istotami myślącymi, lecz myślanymi.’

Oczywiście, można nie przyjąć takich odpowiedzi. Można sądzić, że nie tylko chcemy, ale i możemy myśleć, że zachowujemy swój status historycznych podmiotów myślących i działających, jakkolwiek czynimy to—wedle klasycznej formuły Marksa—‘w określonych okolicznościach.’”

- 17 In the Polish humanities, the term *transgression* is strongly connected to Janion's work, as in the 1980s she published a series entitled “Transgressions” (Janion et al. 1981–1988; *Transgresje*). This series assembles the study materials and discussions of Janion's Gdańsk colloquia in the 1970s, with the distinctive presence and input of her students (presentations, essays, discussions). Despite the series' title, the concept of transgression was not explicated, but rather emerges as a palimpsest through the plurality of assembled materials. Thus, it is questionable whether we can speak of a Janonian *concept* of transgression at all. The term itself refers to the overstepping of borders and semantically includes an anti-immunitarian character. Unlike *transition* or *transformation*, transgression does not denote the crossing over into another fixed state; transgression is a relation that does not leave behind what was before. It oscillates at the border and makes it porous, blurring and intertwining the bordering spheres. A discussion of Janion's transgression can also be found in Bauer (forthcoming).

- 18 For the concept of the bounded text, see Kristeva (1980, 36–63).

- 19 “Ale muszę powiedzieć, że kiedy przejrzałam teraz *Romantyzm, rewolucję...*, wzbudziło to we mnie pewną zgrozę. Poważną nawet. To przytłacza erudycją, jakimś nadmiarem, chęcią powiedzenia wszystkiego. Po co ja to wszystko czytałam i pisałam? To jednak ma charakter jakiejś [sic] manii, jak mi się zdaje.”

- 20 “groźna i niebezpieczna.”

- 21 “Społeczeństwo totalitarne doprowadza ochronę [...] egzegezy, uznanej za jedynie dopuszczalną, do patologicznej niemal skrajności i musi tak czynić, by rozpoznać i zdławić natychmiast każdy odruch wolnej myśli.”

- 22 “czynnika antropologicznego.”

- 23 “był ‘zakorzeniony’ nieuchronnie w tej samej rzeczywistości społecznej, której poznaniem się zajmuję.”

- 24 Janion (1972a, 215–216) accuses Foucault of promoting this very *death of man* after the *death of god*.

- 25 “anonimowej, bezosobowej i wszechpotężnej Struktury.”
- 26 “niezależnie od tego, kiedy i gdzie żyją.”
- 27 “Dilthey [...] przeciwstawił racjonalne ‘pojęcie’ i irracjonalne ‘życie’ [...]. ‘pogląd, że ‘życie’ jest pierwotne wobec pojęcia i poznawane bezpośrednio dzięki przeżywaniu [...]’.”
- 28 Janion also harshly criticises Lévi-Strauss for his separation of biological life from thought and society as something exterior to the latter (Janion 1972a, 272).
- 29 “I wcale nie musimy się wstydzić określenia: ‘intuicja humanistyczna’. Posługujemy się nim jako narzędziem nieodzownym w życiu potocznym, nie wiem, dlaczego mielibyśmy zeń zrezygnować w nauce. W imię rygorystycznego przedziału między nauką a życiem? Wydaje się, że humanistyka, a przynajmniej na pewno humanistyka rozumiejąca, zmierza do przełamania takich podziałów—i ja zaliczam to do jej największych zasług.”
- 30 Janion clearly laid out her political stance in her work; however, she would become actively involved in politics only later, by directly voicing her concerns over the development of post-socialist society on several public occasions that took place outside academia.

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## 9 Sharing Image, Sharing Time. Dante, Visibility and the Common

*Paweł Mościcki*

Do we really see images in singular, as singular images with singular subjects? What is singular and what is plural in the experience of seeing? It seems that every time one is gazing at a picture, its effect on their senses depends on the unique constellation between the inner character of representation and the inner set of subjective conditions. However, one could also claim that in this encounter with the image, there is more than one level of possible mediation each time the individual undergoes the influence, or the intervention, of plurality, or even something that one could call commonality. There is no innocent gaze; in every singular act of seeing, a whole set of social, political, and cultural mechanisms and factors are at stake. In some sense, this singular act is also—every time—a claim for the possible universal community, an invitation to the imagined collective. It could be called tradition as well as a cause or utopian vision of political collective. In any of those instances, the crucial figure involved in the experience of the image is the one of sharing. What is shared through, within, around and in the images? And what else is or could be shared in the shared images?

### **Uncanny Tradition**

I would like to discuss those questions by referring to Averroes (Ibn Rushd), the most eminent Arabic philosopher from the twelfth century, who was mostly known in the Latin Middle Ages as a great commentator of Aristotle. Averroes is also famous—although one should perhaps say infamous—for his idea of the unity of the intellect. It was not only severely criticised by the main philosophers and theologians of his time, but his books were also repeatedly banned by the Church (with various effects). Eventually, his main philosophical thesis was marginalised and ridiculed. Jean-Baptiste Brenet, one of the leading scholars responsible for the renewal of Averroes's scholarship today, entitled one of his books *Averroès l'inquietant* (2017a), referring to the Freudian notion of the uncanny to underscore the degree to which the thought of Averroes haunted and, at the same time, terrified Western philosophers. Averroes's thought seemed to pose a threat to Western reason, as it was constituted within the continuity between ancient Greek philosophy



and its Latin reception in Christian theology. From the point of view of this tradition, Averroes's thought was nothing but a dangerous virus that should be cured rather than seriously discussed.

The original misreading of Averroes by Latin philosophers—with the special mention of Thomas of Aquinas and his *De unitate intellectus* (1270)—consisted of treating the concept of the unity of the intellect as if there is only one, universal, actually thinking subject, somehow dominating every individual act of cognition. The phantom of this subject became then, as Brenet shows in his book, the omnipotent rival of every individual mind, which risks being robbed of their thoughts by this universal double. The term *monopsychism*, coined by Leibniz and since then constantly associated with Averroes, reproduced this misunderstanding, changing the original and impressive conception into a source of absurdities and self-contradictory statements. Contemporary scholars question this vision of Averroes's philosophy; as Emanuele Coccia—the author of the groundbreaking study on this topic—puts it, unique intellect “is not the consciousness or thought in action, but a possibility of whatever idea or whatever consciousness” (2005, 98).<sup>1</sup>

For Averroes, the material intellect—separated and transcendent—is not the actual thinking subject, but “a pure and absolute potentiality” (Coccia 2005, 69). At some point, Coccia even compares it to the Platonic concept of *khôra* (appearing in the dialogue *Timaeus* and famously commented on by Jacques Derrida): the being of the third kind (neither a material being nor an idea), a receiving space in which everything that exists finds its place. Similarly, material intellect “becomes everything in the sense that it unifies with every form that it receives. [...] Material intellect could be called a place not only because it contains the thinkable but also because it becomes that by which it is affected and what it thinks” (Coccia 2005, 90). In other words, as Coccia continues, the unity of the material intellect refers not to some sort of general thinking subject living above individual minds and depriving them of their thoughts, but to “the original speculative plasticity” (92), in which they partake and through which their thoughts gain intelligibility. Averroes's main idea had nothing to do with the creation of a super-subject overarching all thinking individuals; it suggested, however, that there is a common instance involved in all the acts of cognition and that this instance has something to do with a possible universality.

### Political Averroism

Averroes appears at the crucial point of Dante Alighieri's treatise *De Monarchia*, in which the Florentine poet establishes universal humanity as an ultimate subject of politics. According to Claude Lefort, Dante was the first to

understand the term *humanitas* as both the dignity proper to the human being and the human race taken in its widest sense. He was the first to

imagine a universal political society, subject to a single authority whose mission was to reveal to all their citizenship of the same world.  
(2020, 1; original italics)

This is how the modern philosophy of politics organised the survival of Averroes's idea of the unity of intellect after it had been rejected from philosophical and theological reason. As Giorgio Agamben states in his essay "Form-of-Life," this modern shift in the political imaginary centres "the thought of the one and only possible intellect common to all human beings, and, crucially [...] of the inheritance of a multitude to the very power of thought" (2000, 10). Again, Averroism appears as a sort of spectral vision that haunts the West rather than officially belonging to its legacy, even if it instigates issues that for centuries were the objects of crucial discussions.

What exactly did Dante write in his political treatise? He mentions Averroes in the first book of *De Monarchia* in which he states that there is one, universal purpose of humankind: "It would be foolish to suppose that there is one purpose for this society and another for that and not a common purpose for all of them" (1996, 5). Dante calls this universal purpose "the work" (*operatio*) since every singular being's purpose is revealed through its specific kind of activity. The same goes for humanity. It has a purpose in its common activity: universal work accomplished by the people as a whole.

There is, therefore, some activity specific to humanity as a whole, for which the whole human race in all its vast number of individual human beings is designed; and no single person, or household, or small community, or city, or individual kingdom can fully achieve it. Now what this activity is will become clear when once we clarify what is the highest potentiality of the whole of mankind.

(Dante 1996, 6)

Paradoxically, from the perspective of scholastic terminology—as inherited from Aristotle's metaphysics—this highest achievable work, this utmost, universal act is the act of potentiality for Dante:

It is thus clear that the highest potentiality of mankind is his intellectual potentiality or faculty [ultimum de potentia ipsius humanitatis est potentia sive virtus intellectiva]. And since that potentiality cannot be fully actualized all at once in any one individual or in any one of the particular social groupings [...] there must be a vast number of individual people in the human race [necesse est multitudinem esse in humano genere], through whom the whole of this potentiality can be actualized [tota potentia hec actuetur].

(1996, 7)

Human race needs to act as the universal multitude, but as such it does not engage in any particular action or cause. Instead, it attempts to actualise the full potential of intellectual virtue. In other words, the highest possible and most universal action is the one that aims to create and sustain humanity as a thinking multitude, hence the reference to Averroes and his concept of the possible intellect:

[T]he activity proper to mankind considered as a whole is constantly to actualize the full potentiality of the possible intellect [actuare semper totam potentiam intellectus possibilis], primarily through thought and secondarily through action (as a function and extension of thought).

(1996, 8; translation modified)<sup>2</sup>

Only universal human multitude can put the potential of the possible intellect into practice. However, this multitude should not be identified with any actualised subject, but rather a subject in becoming. It is Averroes who first conceptualised this potential subject of an accessible, unified, and unifying ability to think (or thinkability), not the unity of the actual thinking subjects.

The passages quoted above have provoked long-term discussions about Dante's alleged Averroism and its reference to other works of the poet. Whatever the results of those debates, it is unquestionable that *De Monarchia* initiated a current in Western philosophy, which could be associated with Averroes even if his name rarely appears as its official inspiration. Among those closely connected with the spirit of Ibn Rushd, we could enumerate Spinoza and his idea of *unique substance*, Rousseau and the concept of *general will*, and Marx's idea of the *general intellect*. In recent decades, these affinities multiply in the work of the post-Marxist Italian philosophers (such as Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno); Giorgio Agamben and his rereading of potentiality; Etienne Balibar thinking about collective political subjects; Jacques Rancière's concept of *the distribution of the sensible*; as well as Jean-Luc Nancy's metaphysics of the *être singulier pluriel* (see Brenet 2019, 75–76). In this context, Dante's Averroism should not be treated as a straightforward historical dependency, nor a conscious identification of the poet with the Arabic philosopher's system, but rather it should be used to contextualise reading Dante today. Especially considering the omnipresence of adaptations, rewritings and quotations from *Divine Comedy*, circulating in all fields of contemporary culture, it is as if the possible intellect could not be fully actualised without Dante's mediation.

In contemporary philosophy, the political subject invented in *De Monarchia* returns under the figure of *the common*. This should not be confused with *the commons*—understood as the indispensable resources necessary for humankind to prosper—rather, *the common* is the figure of the unified human multitude.<sup>3</sup> This figure is not, again, treated as a metaphysical basis of humankind's identity, nor a universal subject of this humanity's actual thought, but rather as the horizon to which common thinking and practice could lead. “Universality

is an effect of cooperation, and not its condition of possibility,” writes Judith Revel (2020, 96), commenting on the contemporary meaning of Dante’s treatise. This shift allows us to overcome the problem heavily discussed by Lefort, that the search for the unity of humankind immediately calls into being monopolistic figures of the One, be it metaphysical substance, thinking subject or, in a political sphere, the Emperor—the figure that Dante used in his *De Monarchia*. For contemporary readers of his political philosophy, this conclusion not only seems dubious (as all the critics of monolithic political and philosophical structures testify) but also contradicts the original Averroist inspiration that it stems from.

What is at stake here is the possibility of changing the very idea, the inner organisation of the concept of unity, through reference to Averroes’s original understanding of the potential intellect. Contemporary thinkers try to think of unity not as a unified subsumption of plurality but as a special case of plurality itself. Consequently, Revel reads Dante in this perspective, and defines his concept of the multitude—and thus the idea of the possible intellect—as “the common capacity for differences (which is what each of us is) to create connections and to communicate [...] which constitutes here the common of human beings” (2020, 105). Again, the common has nothing to do with any unifying concept or figure, which would subsume or sublimate the multiplicity of singular subjects and collectives and create some sort of vertically dominating, monopolistic power structure. On the contrary, the common should be understood as “the effect of [...] constantly shifting interactions” (Revel 2020, 106) between and within those singularities. Instead of creating hierarchies, it uses the resources inscribed in the network of horizontal relations. These relations create a necessary surplus for participating in universality, or better, for constituting it. Referring again to Dante’s *De Monarchia*, Revel calls this constitutive intensification of interactions fraternity:

There is indeed an element based on which turning Dante against himself, or redefining the unity of the possible intellect as the common of differences and the cooperation of the ones, can indeed be upheld. [...] It is fraternity. [...] Fraternity is the necessary third party between the freedom of the ones and the equality of all which is at once the promise and the guarantee of the common as a cooperation of singularities.

(2020, 108)

In other words, fraternity is how intervals differentiating between various positions and singularities keep themselves together, rather than separating or opposing each other. Fraternity, one could say, is a strategy of inhabiting intervals in which division is the opening of the common space and not the creation of conflicted or competing identities. In this sense, the very term *fraternity* should be divided and deconstructed as well in order to include all the possible figures of commonality that present the inexhaustible diversity of human interactions.

As mentioned above, Averroist echoes sound, among others, in Marx's concept of *general intellect*, used in his famous *Grundrisse*. This very notion, in turn, has been a point of departure for contemporary rereading of Marxism by Italian post-operaist theorists, among which Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004, 2009) have played dominant roles. All versions of this modern adaptation serve to fill Averroes's remote and obscure vision with contemporary content, precisising the stakes of the present work and power relations. Here is what general intellect meant for Marx himself:

The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it.

(1993)

The whole post-Marxist reinvention of the general intellect concept lies in its liberation from fixed capital. As Paolo Virno (2001) claims in his entry to the *Postfordist Lexicon*,

the so-called “second-generation autonomous labour” and the procedural operations of radically innovated factories such as Fiat in Melfi show how the relation between knowledge and production is articulated in the linguistic cooperation of men and women and their concrete acting in concert, rather than being exhausted in the system of machinery. [...] The “general intellect” includes formal and informal knowledge, imagination, ethical tendencies, mentalities and “language games”. Thoughts and discourses function in themselves as productive “machines” in contemporary labour and do not need to take on a mechanical body or an electronic soul.

Today, the common is not the state of society's dependency on the system of industrialised factories, rather it is a set of political and economic relations in which people engage in all kinds of working contexts. Moreover, since contemporary capitalism has blurred the lines between labour and free time, exploiting all of people's creative capacities, their interconnection is even stronger. Furthermore, their workforce can no longer be separated from the degree of their being in common. Networking—a corporatist nightmare aiming to capture all kinds of human interaction—gains, therefore, an unexpected revolutionary potential. It is thanks to these new types of connectedness that “cognitive competences” of global society “cannot be objectified in machinery” (Virno 2001). General intellect, as post-operaist theorists understand it, is “an abstraction, but a real one with a material and operative function” (Virno 2001). It does not take any definitive shape or form but concerns the crucial aspect of the whole set of relations without which contemporary

global society would not be possible. General intellect is the force of all the interconnected labour which exceeds that what the Capital can fix, encompass or reinscribe in its already existing structures. And just as money, “as the ‘universal equivalent’, in its independent existence embodied the commensurability of products, labours and subjects, the general intellect establishes the analytical premises for any kind of praxis” (Virno 2001).

The dialectic tension between new forms of capitalist exploitation and the excess it produces is the new stake of radical political movements and a chance to redefine revolutionary activity. In other words: a chance to think about political praxis and collective subject differently to the tradition inherited through the political institutions, as well as philosophical systems. Judith Revel and Antonio Negri tried to capture the dynamic we all live through today: “Without the common, capitalism can no longer exist. With the common, the possibilities of conflict, resistance and re-appropriation have been infinitely raised. The delightful paradox of the epoch that managed to get rid of the tinsel of modernity” (2007, 7). This paradox changes the common into something close to existential, something that is necessary for any kind of collective to function and exist within the current system.<sup>4</sup> According to Revel and Negri, we are standing at the crossroads between “modern democracy which was the invention of liberty” and “radical democracy, which wants to be the invention of the common” (2007, 10). The initial step to bring this new vision of political activity into existence should consist of “reconquering not a thing but the constitutive process” (10) of the very construction of social tissue as well as “making the common visible” (9).

### The Crucial Role of Images

To better understand the status and functionality of the concept of possible intellect, one should perhaps refer to the notion of *transparency* (or *translucidity*, *diaphaneous*) as it is described in Aristotle’s treatise *On the Soul*, and then developed in Averroes’s commentary:

Now there clearly is something which is transparent (*diaphanes*), and by “transparent” I mean what is visible, and yet not visible in itself, but rather owing its visibility to the colour of something else; of this character are air, water, and many solid bodies. Neither air nor water is transparent because it is air or water; they are transparent because each of them has contained in it a certain substance [...]. Of this substance light is the activity—the activity of what is transparent so far forth as it has in it the determinate power of becoming transparent; where this power is present, there is also the potentiality of the contrary, viz. darkness. Light is as it were the proper colour of what is transparent, and exists whenever the potentially transparent is excited to actuality.

(Aristotle 1985, 418b)

Averroes used this fragment from Aristotle to explain the relation between possible intellect and singular, active intellects of every thinking subject:

You should know that the relation of the active intellect to the material intellect is [like] the relation of the light to the transparent and that the relation of the material forms to this intellect is [like] the relation of the colour to the transparent. And just as the light is a perfection of the transparent, the active intellect is the perfection of the material. And just as the transparent is not moved by colour nor receives it unless it shines, this intellect does not receive thoughts from here unless it is perfected by this intellect and enlightened by it.

(Averroes 1998, 79–80)

The general material intellect is thus just like this translucent, transparent being, which, while itself invisible, makes everything that appears visible. Even the light, which is necessary for every being to occur, is just the actual, active form of this transparent potentiality of appearance.

The most important aspect of this analogy is that both the transparent and the material intellect is something intermediary—the medium. Jean-Baptiste Brenet wrote that the transparent (*diaphanes*)

is what is required in the act of vision, that is the condition of visibility of the visible, the condition of the possible perception of this or that, and not the perception or the instance perceiving the visible itself. The transparent does not see, it is not the seeing subject; it makes visible, makes the individual, via his or her organ and its potentiality, see. Similarly, the material separated intellect, the universal receptacle of images, is nothing but the condition of thinkability of the thinkable, the neutral, impersonal *milieu*, [...] common space of the appropriation of the intelligible: not something that thinks, but something that makes one think through the acquisition of thinking.

(Brenet 2017a, 30–31; italics added)

To explain this close, intimate connection of everything that appears to its invisible potentiality, Averroes, and later his commentators, refer to the metaphor of the mirror. Brenet explains:

The separated intellect is for me [for the individual intellect] like a mirror for the object it reflects. Thus it does not guarantee my rationality for the act of the mirror, the reflection, is not the work of the one it makes visible. In the intellect, it is me, perhaps, who appears, but the act which itself makes myself visible [...] is not mine. I am just a reflected being not the reflecting one.

(2017a, 93)

This is perhaps the most painful consequence of the idea of the unity of the material intellect, the one that decided upon its destiny in the history of philosophy. Here, Averroes is not far away from Freudian revolution as he presents, like psychoanalysis does, the most intimate act of thinking as something that requires a separated, universal intellect, to even be actualised. Thus, in every intellectual insight, there is something external or rather communal that operates within me. It does not make me foreign to my thought—on the contrary, it makes a particular thought mine, as well as making myself a particular thinking intellect. However, it also questions the modern idea of a self-sufficient and fully autonomous thinking subject. It appears that my thinking only becomes mine thanks to its mediation through the universal potentiality of thinking. Emanuele Coccia explains it quite clearly: “[T]he singularity does not define the being of the idea but its use, its actualization. As such an idea is not singular or individual (mine, yours, his or hers) in its being: it becomes such only in the relation which in its use and its concrete actualization is acquired by this or that man (or woman)” (2005, 163). If I have thoughts on my own, I have them only as a tenant; I rent them, so to speak, for the time I need to use them. There is no private property in the realm of thinking, only private use of ideas that in their substance, potentially, belong to everybody.

The concept of the unity of the possible intellect requires displacing the whole discussion about the constitution of the subject and, as Coccia claims, “to substitute the question of subjectivity of thinking with one of its mediality (*medialità*). The position of the notion of material intellect responds to the demand of defining the question of the subjectivity within the one, more vast and concrete, of the mediality” (2005, 141). Averroes’s conception of the intellect is thus a conception in which an individual, in order to think, has to participate in the general potentiality of thinking, elevate oneself to it or “universalize oneself step by step” (Brenet 2017a, 143). And this practice, this use of the original speculative plasticity, is possible only through images as vehicles of mediality. It is through them that the individual acquires thought, learns how to think. Images are necessary intermediary beings through which, and in which, the connection—which Averroes calls *copulatio*—between the individual intellect and the universal material intellect is accomplished. Thinking does not arise from itself; is a composition which uses images as a crucial tool of conjoining sensible data of individual subjects, on the one hand, and pure potentiality of thinking on the other. The image is thus a synthesis of the sensible with the intelligible.

Images are for thinking what language is for speaking. Giorgio Agamben (2000, 10) wrote that

we can communicate with others only through what in us—as much as in others—has remained potential, and any communication [...] is first of all communication not of something in common but of communicability



itself. [...] And there where I am capable, we are always already many (just as when, if there is a language, that is, a power of speech, there cannot then be one and only one being who speaks it).

The same goes for images in the context of thinking. When I try to gain a thought, I must first connect to the possible intellect; I must immerse myself in the realm of thinkability. And I do it always within and through images because they can connect my sensibility with the abstract and common intellectuality.

This centrality of images in the act of thinking is another revolutionary aspect of Averroes's thought, and one which made it unacceptable for the Latin readers of Aristotle and their successors. At the same time, it made thinking, paradoxically, very close to concreteness and materiality of the world. The unity of the intellect does not force the individual subject into the abstract intelligibility. Thanks to the mediation of images, thinking is strictly connected with the sensible world and participates in the universality of the intelligible. There is no absolute break between reason and the senses. On the contrary, there is no thinking that is not be inspired by some sort of sensibility, because there is no thinking without images. It is very important to note that for Averroes, images are not representations of things; rather they are media in which the connection between the sensible and the intelligible is located. The idea that images and the sensible, in general, could be against reason or the irrational by nature is thus totally absurd on the grounds of this philosophy.

The Averroist lesson on images is thus twofold. On the one hand, they are necessary to produce thought; on the other, they are emblems of contingency and limitation. They are—as Jean-Luc Godard may say—just images in the absence of the just image that could impose itself as a substantial and fundamental being. For Coccia (and here again he follows in Averroes's footsteps), images are “special beings” for which one needs a special kind of micro-ontology, a form of regional ontology “capable of positing another kind of being, the being of the images beyond the being of things, of mind and of consciousness” (2016, 25–26). This ontology deals with a special kind of being that is

something in between the being of things and the being of souls, between bodies and spirit. Forms that exist outside of the soul have a purely corporeal being, while those that exist within the soul have a purely spiritual being. The being of images is necessary for this very reason [...] because it constitutes the only element that permits nature to pass from the spiritual to the corporeal domain and vice versa. So that the spiritual can grasp and take possession of the corporeal, a middle term is necessary.  
(Coccia 2016, 26)

Images are thus crucial because they are responsible for the unity of the world. “The unity of the world is not physical, spiritual, or metaphysical, but always and only *medial*” (Coccia 2016, 39; original italics).

This last thing, namely the medial synthesis of the world, puts this special, regional ontology in an awkward relation with metaphysics. If there is no substance, no being at the basis of the world's structure, there is no metaphysics in the traditional sense of the term. Instead, in the place of the synthesis, one can find only mediality, only images mediating between the body and the soul, the material and the spiritual. In other words, the synthesis is more political than metaphysical if the political could be understood—as post-Marxist thinkers show—as a replacement for ontology rather than just a domain of power and power relations. This politics, which is simultaneously aesthetic, spiritual, and materialistic, is based on the same idea as the common: the idea of sharing.

Let me enumerate three further aspects which link the idea of sharing to the problem of images and intellect as it is conceptualised by Averroes. Firstly, every cognitive act divides the subject; for the individual intellect, thinking and being occurs at the same time. Since one cannot have cognitions without the mediation of the common intellect, there is an inherent break in the subject's identity. This division, however, is inseparable from the connection, as proven in the logic of the *partage du sensible* developed by Jacques Rancière. For the subject, sharing the sensible means both distancing (I get my share and you get yours) and bringing together (we share a space, we share a common destiny).<sup>5</sup> The process of individuation is inseparable from the process of socialisation, for the distribution of senses has no outside from which it could be modified or managed. Thus, the divided subject does not lose anything except for the false idea of continuity and stability of their identity. There is no identity without the negation of what is outside or what is not me, but also without me being a multitude inside myself, connected to and differentiated from the common potentiality of images.

For Averroes, every act of cognition contains this aspect of division and collection. This results from his understanding of the structure of the intellect and its different faculties and capacities. Thus, every act of cognition is a sort of montage. For Averroes, the intellect is divided into three instances: imagination conserving what the common sense has perceived; the cogitative, which under the influence of the intellect acts upon the images by either separating them or collecting them with *intentions*; and then memory, which guards what the former instance has extracted from images (Brenet 2017b, 31–32). So, in every intellectual act, these three levels must cooperate, which means one has to find a useful balance between their differences and resemblances.

Secondly, every act of cognition is a montage of heterogeneous forms of experience, different kinds of *cogitationes*. Putting it differently, and in more contemporary terms, there are no turns in cognition. We cannot have a memory without the affect as we cannot have language without images. Instead of the memorial, affective, linguistic, or visual turns, we should perhaps think about their contiguity if not continuity.

Thirdly, every act of cognition functions in a split temporality. As Coccia explains, “[e]very thought in act epitomizes and abbreviates two different

temporalities: eternity, which does not tolerate mutations nor needs to be generated and the time subjected to the rhythm of birth and destruction” (2005, 154). We have here two types of temporalities: horizontal (objective, linear, eventful) and vertical. How could we think of the latter as anything other than a metaphysical idea of eternity? Would it be a pure potentiality of time? Or time as a pure receptivity, irreducible to any concrete being functioning in time, but giving it this time, allows it to appear in time? Would it be this kind of time that is given—*es gibt Zeit*, as in Heidegger—or this strange *giving time* mode analysed by Derrida in his *Given Time* (1992)? As for this last one, Derrida interestingly connects time with visibility, in a way very pertinent to my argument: “Time, in any case, gives nothing to see. It is at the very least the element of invisibility itself. It withdraws whatever could give itself to be seen. It itself withdraws itself from visibility. One can only be blind to time, to the essential *disappearance* of time even as, nevertheless, in a certain manner nothing *appears*, that does not require and take time” (Derrida 1992, 6). In the present of cognition, there is a temporality of the experience—the punctual moment of the *now* that subjects live through, and another one—a giving temporality underlying every instant of occurrence. This second type of temporality could also be named present, although its presence is similar to the presence of the possible intellect in individual cognition. It could be called a presence in an expanded present.

Sharing, in all three aspects mentioned before, could be summarised in the etymological equation common in the Latin Middle Ages: *cogitatio* = *co-agitatio*. The latter should be treated not as a *cogitatio collecta* (collective thinking or thinking as collecting) but as co-agitation in a double sense. Firstly, it should be regarded as a common, mutual agitation of the elements of experience, which would be a collective animation, exultation of particles in order to bring them closer, make them intertwine and interact. Secondly, co-agitation could also mean—with a stronger political undertone—a collective agitation, propaganda within the subject or among its attitudes, a civil war of faculties, nerves, and thoughts. Averroes announces the Freudian idea of the subject as a constant struggle, clash of different forces, and an inherently politicised space. The common is not unity without conflict; on the contrary, it is unity as conflict.

### **Rauschenberg, Dante and Political Iconography**

Images as mediating objects bring the aesthetic and political aspect of the common together. The question “how to make the common visible” is just as much about political attempts to organise the multitude as it is about sharing sensual and intellectual spaces. Images are all over the place, and part of each process in making the common visible, even if they are not visible themselves. On the other hand, the question about the visual culture of the common remains, of images that could be treated as useful or even helpful in the attempt to co-agitate aesthetically as well as politically. I would like

to bring two visual works to the discussion, in fact, one work consisting of two collages, which refer to Dante's legacy but also, explicitly, deal with the question of sharing common space and common time.

The work in question is *A Modern Inferno*—a pair of collages made by Robert Rauschenberg for *Life* magazine on the occasion of the 700th anniversary of Dante Alighieri's birthday. Published on the 17th December 1965, it presents a complicated and heterogeneous panorama of the contemporary epoch. Rauschenberg drew various photographs from the previous issues of the magazine and put them together into a dramatic vision of human suffering, political conflicts, culture wars and military operations. Here, the artist attempted a double recollection, a double act of re-editing time: one of collective memory of recent times and one of its representation institutionalised by the popular press. *Divine Comedy* acts as a point of departure for this radical gesture of rereading, as certain motives and figures could refer to particular fragments contained in the first part of the poem—*Inferno*. However, in fact, they serve to reread the present rather than simply commemorate the great poem.

It is hard to overemphasise the dynamic character of juxtapositions created by Rauschenberg in these two collages. There are images which revisit atrocities of the Second World War: pictures from the liberated camp at Buchenwald, ruined German cities after mass bombing, a portrait of Adolf Eichmann, a pile of corpses depicting victims of the Katyn massacre, and finally, a big image of the atomic mushroom takes centre place in one of the works. These images mingle with photos referring to the American history of racism, the Nazi movement and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories spread out in political posters and public manifestations. Rauschenberg also alludes to the recent assassination of John F. Kennedy, a politician that the artist held in high regard. An important place is occupied here with the question of racial injustice and the growing human rights movement with portraits of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. On the other hand, Rauschenberg includes scenes from brutal police repression against Afro-American protesters as well as pictures showing the hatred and lynching culture that deeply penetrate American society. Finally, the collage displays symbols of late modernity with astronauts and sportsmen (exemplified by Wilt Chamberlain).<sup>6</sup>

All of those juxtapositions present in Rauschenberg's collage prove, above all, that images have an unquestionable tendency to exemplariness. And this exemplariness is the central field of their mediating abilities. What is an example? It is a singular element, which—to become exemplary—must be something more than just itself. An example is not just a general concept referring to a class of individual beings. It is a displaced singularity, which is functioning simultaneously as itself and its representation, as an image with a potential to represent much more than it actually shows.<sup>7</sup> Every picture in Rauschenberg's montage assumes this double role, showing a particular scene from recent history or current social and political unrests, and at the same time exemplifying a broader issue, an aspect of the horror of history. Every image-example coexists in this work with another one, and functions

as a counterexample or counterpoint to its neighbour, thus preventing the whole work to freeze in any symbolic unity. Graham Smith shows this double exemplarity using the picture of the dog on the right side of one collage as an illustration: “The animal brings to mind guard dogs in the Nazi concentration camps, while also recalling dogs that police used in the 1960s to control Civil Rights demonstrators in apartheid South Africa and the United States” (2016, 158). One could add to those potential meanings the figures of Cerberus and Lucifer from Dante’s *Inferno* (Canto VI and XXXIV respectively). The juxtaposition is what brings out the potentiality of every single actual image. It sets it in motion, allowing it to create new associations and new realms of imagination.

Thus, *A Modern Inferno* becomes a panorama of the emblems of the epoch, the image whose complexity demonstrates the example of the present. Contemporary history is encapsulated in the dynamic multiplicity of images that, one after the other, pulsate with shifting meanings and connotations. Rauschenberg’s work creates something that could be called a *visual milieu for the common*. It does not show anything that would unite us in a sort of symbolic identity. It introduces a set of dynamic, conflicted representations of our time and forces us to recognise our adherence to this moment, no matter how terrifying it could be. Here, the common is understood as an interval, a set of divisions/connections that images ignite and do not resolve. Sharing appears here to be nothing but sharing the intervals, existing within the sphere of mediality that both synthesises and divides the experience of a particular present. To see these collages means to enter—through images—this extended historical present and share it like a series of intervals, which it appears to consist of.

Sharing intervals presupposes the conviction that images show common problems, however, they normally do it by questioning particular moments or positions, transforming them into examples that have to resonate with other moments and other positions. In this sense, images call for the imagination of the common, which does not overlook something that Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) called *the undercommons*—ways of associating with one another that cannot be grasped by any established idea of the present. Those hidden and exploited registers of commonality build something I would call *underpresent*—a temporality within temporality, a subterranean stream of time and experience that every accomplished image of the present must ignore or exclude. But it is there, and it re-emerges every time the established image of time is put into question. Sharing requires this movement of dissection no less than the one of association. Rauschenberg proves in his collages, that the present as the common lies in the gaps between diverse moments and disparate examples. It is always and irrevocably the underpresent: a question of the common act of potential sharing rather than an established fact or symbol. It is clear to me that the beholder, projected by these collages, cannot be contained in any recognisable figure of the singular or collective subject. It is, so to speak, only a potential humanity that could recognise itself in this mirror. The scope of these images—as the scope of

every cognitive act according to Averroes and every properly political practice according to his late readers—is nothing short of infinite.

When we try to make the common visible we should not look for images that will unite us (like a flag or a symbol), but rather those which could divide us in the right way. Sharing intervals refers us through images to the yet undiscovered potentialities of the very moment we look at or the one in which we are looking. The montage constructed by Rauschenberg could shake some of the narratives of suffering that he decided to put together rather than isolate. Thus, he brought to attention the long duration and cultural variation of injustice, making it a problem common to everybody. It is striking that today, looking at *A Modern Inferno*, one could still feel contemporary to many types of violence that he included in his work. The clash between his present and ours forces us to see, in those images, something that both moments cannot contain separately. *Now* and *then* are both part of the unresolved burden of our times. The interval between them—the one shared by every new individual in front of these images—suggests that the common is always embedded in history even if it transcends its actual figures, narratives, and conceptions. Finally, this practice of sharing images—and treating images as sharable—also signifies sharing time, being in the open and divided present with all its commonality and strangeness, its violence and hope.

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## Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
- 2 The original English translation surprisingly misses the whole point and obfuscates the explicit reference to Averroes's terminology, rendering, mistakenly, "totam potentiam intellectus possibilis" as "full intellectual potential."
- 3 On this shift of perspective, see Revel (2020, 95).
- 4 I am referring here to *comparution*, the term (and the book) that captured this transformation in a brilliant way, just after the collapse of Soviet Union. See Nancy and Baily (1991).
- 5 The notion of *partage* (sharing) appeared in a book by Jean-Luc Nancy entitled *Le Partage des voix* (1982).
- 6 For a close iconographic reading of *A Modern Inferno*, see Smith (2016).
- 7 On the logic of the example, see Agamben (1998, 21–22).

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## 10 Just Numbers

### From Extras to Agents of an Uncountable Community

*Fabienne Liptay*

In his book *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants* (2012), Georges Didi-Huberman puts forward the idea that a film is *politically just* only if it succeeds in making “*the image a common place* where the commonplace of images of the people used to reign” (2009, 22; original italics).<sup>1</sup> The main protagonists of his book are deliberately not cinema’s main characters, but rather the extras—the many who fill the picture at the margins and in the background, as soldiers, the enslaved, workers, ordinary people, passers-by, and even revolutionaries. Extras differ from actors precisely because they *do not* act; they decorate the picture as living props. They are the numbers, the nameless and voiceless, the non-elected and undiscovered, the swept-away and fallen, the many who did not make it onto Schindler’s list or Noah’s Ark, who cheer the others from below and testify to their rescue or fame, while they themselves are forgotten. They are “the anonymous foot soldier,” as Didi-Huberman writes,

who, among the hundreds or thousands of his fellows, is just there to figure the battle scene—from which the hero will emerge triumphant or will become the wounded hero—and has nothing to do but walk, pointing a bayonet, and pretend to fall down dead at the given moment.  
(20)

While extras often appear on screen as representation of the people, they stand-in for a community that is missing—a lack of precisely what would constitute them as a community. In terms of a politics of aesthetics, this lack is intricately tied to the conditions of extra labour: lack of social care, unionisation, legal representation, adequate payment, and recognition through the granting of credits, to name but a few—conditions that, as a whole, institutionally exclude their participation in collaborative film production.<sup>2</sup> Their contribution is confined to the lowest realm of unskilled labour, amounting to their mere presence, since they are obliged not to act or talk, which disables their capacities for creative expression as a shared experience. It is on the grounds of this acknowledgement of the missing community that we come to understand Didi-Huberman’s idea of a *politically just* cinema, resonating with Gilles Deleuze’s claim that “art, and especially cinematographic art, must



take part in this task: not that of addressing a people, which is presupposed already there, but of contributing to the invention of a people” (1989, 218). It is evident that this making of a common place—a place for the invention of people—is not merely a matter of representation but requires a true confrontation and struggle with the forces that prevent the community from emerging exactly where it is staged, comprised of the many extras that in the cinema commonly serve for the image of the people. In what follows, I will discuss such inventions of the people in relation to film extras as the agents of a missing community, a community that is uncountable.

The word for extras<sup>3</sup> in German is *Statisten*, introduced into theatre jargon in the mid-eighteenth century to describe an insignificant and silent stage presence. *Statisten* are so-called because they are subject to the command to not act as someone else, namely the character of a play, but to populate the stage, to enact their inferior social standing or status through their mute presence (Düringer and Barthels 1841, 1010; s.v. *Statisten*). In an encyclopaedia published by the theatre of Leipzig in 1841, to cite just one reference, we are informed that extras

are simply people trained for their marches, processions, battles, people’s assemblies, on command, without any will at all, just doing what they have been trained to do by the stage manager, and who are either soldiers (military extras) or people of the lower classes from the city (citizen extras).

(Düringer and Barthels 1841, 220; s.v. *Comparsen*)<sup>4</sup>

Significantly, the term *Statisten* is derived from the Latin *status*, meaning “standing” in the sense of the general position of a person or a whole community and its members. The relation between *status* and *communitas* is crucial when one considers that the Latin *communitas*, originating from *munus*, meaning “gift,” referred above all to the obligation to pay a tribute or debt—a fact Roberto Esposito (2010, 4–8) highlights in his sceptical approach to existing concepts of community. This included the obligation to pay taxes, which, according to Roman law, did not apply equally to all people. By the sixteenth century, a time when the word *status* and its derivatives informed notions of the State (with a capital “S”), it had acquired a somewhat different meaning. Until the French Revolution in 1789, and even later, “the ‘State’ primarily meant the position of being the superior or supreme political authority, and thence it came to be applied derivatively to the person or body enjoying that position” (Pruthi 2005, 110). The term *status*, in the sense of *state*, referred to the doctrine of state or political science that developed in connection with political history in Europe. It concerned the territory as well as the administrative apparatus, the fiscal system, the princely sovereign rights, and the rights and duties of the corporative or class society, as well as the representation of power. Statistics as a scientific discipline emerged in the mid-eighteenth century, when Gottfried Achenwall, regarded as the founder

of statistics and credited with naming it, published his academic lectures on “the newest political science” under the title *Abriß der neuesten Staatswissenschaft der vornehmsten europäischen Reiche und Republicken* in 1749. It is precisely at this historical moment, with the advent of statistics, that the extras on the stage became known as *Statisten*. I consider it worthwhile to keep in mind this historical relation of extras and statistics, which originated in cameralistic or mercantilist political science in the age of absolutism, before becoming the science of recording and researching numerical data as a branch of applied mathematics.

In the decades following the French Revolution, statistics underwent significant changes. It expanded in scope, beyond its focus on the description of the state, to that of society, and saw the incorporation of administrative practices and “techniques of formalization centered on numbers,” including “summaries, encoding, summing, calculations, and the creation of graphs and tables” (Desrosières 1998, 147). In this context, it is not surprising that the abovementioned theatre encyclopaedia, published in 1841, contains, above all, references to the administration, remuneration, numerical description, and recording of extras. However, in his seminal study of the history of statistics, *The Politics of Large Numbers* (1998), originally published in French in 1993, Alain Desrosières argues that it is impossible to separate the state from society:

The state was constituted into particular forms of relationships between individuals. These forms were organized and codified to varying degrees and could therefore be objectified, mainly by means of statistics. From this point of view, the state was [...] a particular ensemble of social ties that had solidified, and that individuals recognized as social ‘things’.

(1998, 147)

Statistics provided a set of practices related to the description and management of the state, as well as society—among them, practices of numbering, calculating, and measuring that regulate the social, juridical, fiscal, and economic spheres. In transcending the singularities of individual or local situations, these practices create a common ground for the statistical description of the social world. (We should bear in mind that one of the major political objectives and accomplishments of the French Revolution and the National Convention—its first government—was the creation of a space of common norms and standards. The unification of weights and measures and the introduction of the metric system paved the way for the universality of measurement in accordance with the universality of the rights of man: “All men are born and remain free and equal.”)<sup>5</sup> The practices of numbering, calculating, and measuring are deeply entangled in the political history of establishing and maintaining social and state order.<sup>6</sup> They are also highly ambivalent, providing new forms of power and measures of exclusion in the pronounced name of equality for all men and the fairness of their social interaction.<sup>7</sup>

For Alain Badiou, numbering and counting constitute the basis of state sovereignty and control. In his major philosophical work *Being and Event* (2005), as well as in *Number and Numbers* (2008)—both originally published in French, 1988 and 1990 respectively, with the latter considered an appendix of the former—Badiou develops the idea of the state as a political structure of order based on counting. Operations of counting, namely counting the multiple as one, establish a social connection between the elements of a society (Badiou 2005, 23–30). What is counted becomes an identifiable element in the situation and is thus presented; only when it is re-counted in the “state of the situation,” is it also represented in it: “This means that it belongs to the situation (presentation), and that it is equally included in the situation (representation)” (99). Political forces or elements that are presented but not represented, which belong to the count but are not included in it, are the potentiality of an upcoming event. The event, as Badiou understands it, breaks with the authority of the mathematical laws of being: “It is—not being—supernumerary” (178).

In Badiou’s political reflection on historical situations in which an event interrupts the law of unity and the representation of the census, the Paris Commune (along with the French Revolution, May ’68, Arnold Schoenberg’s 12-tone technique in musical composition, and Georg Cantor’s revolutionary discovery of the uncountability of real numbers in set theory, which is the basis of Badiou’s argument)<sup>8</sup> occupies a central position (Badiou 2003, 141–150; 2006, 257–290; 2010, 168–228).<sup>9</sup> “What is, exactly, in terms of its manifest content, this beginning called March 18?” he asks. His answer reads: “the appearing of a worker-being—to this very day a social symptom, a brute force of uprisings and a theoretical threat—in the space of governmental and political capacity” (2006, 276). In the context of these thoughts, a photograph showing the numbered corpses of the last Communards shot by government troops against a wall at Père Lachaise cemetery on the 28th of May 1871, seems particularly striking, as it can be regarded a trophy of the Commune’s defeat, a denial of individuality as well as community through the act of numbering. It was taken by André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, inventor of the fashionable *carte-de-visite* photograph (McCauley 1985; Aubenas 1997), who was commissioned by the police to document the Communards’ defeat and execution after the government vanquished the Commune at the end of the “Bloody Week” of May 1871. In many respects, the Paris Commune of 1871 can be regarded as the first appearance of the proletariat in photography; the photographic image would become a site of their struggle for political representation, while at the same time serving as a means of social control. However, the numbering of the dead bodies, the corpses from which all signs of political engagement and social life had been stripped away by the removal of their clothes, discredits this image politics of representation. “No names,” just “numbers,” as Jules Claretie—director of the Comédie-Française and staff-officer of the National Guard during the Paris Commune—described the scene in this photographic staging of the bodies, laid out orderly in their

coffins and arranged tightly to fit the picture format (quoted in Gottlieb 2016, 152).<sup>10</sup> In this context, Georges Didi-Huberman reminds us that the *munus* in *communitas* also refers to the spectacle as a gift to those who pay funeral honours to the dead (2012, 99). Photo historians disagree on whether the numbering actually served the purpose of identification, not least because the number four is assigned twice. What is evident, though, is that it effectively criminalised the revolutionaries, whose photographic portraits, circulating as collectibles after their defeat, would soon be confiscated by the police, not only to identify arrested suspects and prosecute the communards who had fled the capital, but to restore “public peace” (English 1985, 54–70).<sup>11</sup> In this context, Disdéri’s photograph of the numbered corpses can be seen as an act against the communal, the reinstatement of state control through the symbolic gesture of numbering after the event.

I am interested in considering Peter Watkins’s (2000) film about the Paris Commune, originally produced for television and simply titled *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, as a critical engagement with counting operations—a foundational practice of state order—through the figure of the extra (*Statist*), which is so intimately related to statistical reasoning and thought. In its production process—a reworking of extra labour through the creation of participatory and collaborative forms of creative expression—the film also provides the grounds for a reflection on the constitutions of the common, introducing self-governed forms of shared experience into production structures based on the hierarchical organisation and division of labour. Through an identification of the film’s participants with the Communards, their struggle to overturn the structures that would confine their engagement to extra labour becomes a site for contesting all disabling forces of a common experience. The film recounts the events of the temporary assumption of power by the Central Committee of the National Guard, and the formation of a local council as an elected body of the people, the Paris Commune. Formed by revolutionaries during the Franco-German War of 1871, after the collapse of the Second Empire and the foundation of the Third Republic, the Commune’s goal was to govern Paris according to socialist ideas, in opposition to the central government of Adolphe Thiers. The Communards sought to reorganise society according to liberal and humanist principles, to represent the people, particularly the interests of the workers, and to improve living conditions through social reforms. They also attempted to forcibly defend the autonomy they had attained by ordering the arming of the people in order to overthrow the National Assembly of Versailles. The Paris Commune was characterised precisely by the attempt to transform the democratic principle of political representation into a principle of local self-government; fill the city’s empty assembly rooms and offices, abandoned by state power; and test entirely new forms of political organisation beyond central and hierarchical rule.

The film’s cast is made up of over 220 people from Paris and the banlieues, more than half of them amateurs, including *sans papiers*—illegal immigrants from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. In one of the film’s intertitles, providing

a commentary on the production process that is retrospectively inscribed in the narrative, we are informed that

precisely the active participation of these people in the making of the film is what frightens the world's media, and is probably one of the main reasons for the refusal of funding by the many TV channels requested to provide support...

(Watkins 2000)<sup>12</sup>

Watkins's critique is not limited to representation, but extends to the processes of production and distribution, the division of labour, and the standardisation of workflows in the film industry, which, since its establishment in the early twentieth century, has been modelled on the principles of scientific management drawn from manufacturing industries. Contrary to the usual practice by which actors are included in the production process only after the film script has been written, their characters and dialogues fully developed and sketched on paper, here, the protagonists were involved in developing their roles and writing their dialogues, their *parole*, from the very beginning (Bas 2000, 11).<sup>13</sup> Before filming, the protagonists spent 16 months intensively studying the history of the Commune under the guidance of a team of historians and researchers. The film was then shot chronologically, according to historical events, and without a script, relying mainly on improvisation, over just thirteen days in an abandoned factory in Montreuil, on the site of Georges Méliès's former studio. The location was subsequently used as a workshop space and centre for cultural action by Armand Gatti and his theatre group La Parole errante. The labour of the collective negotiation of roles and representational spaces manifests in the film's 345-minute running time. Eventually, the film becomes the sediment of its own production process, blurring the boundaries between fiction and documentary, between the staging of history and the improvisation of the present.

The film is replete with offers to read it as a critique of the measures of state power, including references to the legacies of the French colonial empire that are linked to the current situation of immigrants being denied legal status and civil rights. At the same time, its criticism and resistance are not directly aimed at the apparatus of the state but are enacted through an intervention aimed at the media's institutions. Marginalisation and oppression are explicitly understood and presented as effects of processes of media standardisation. They are attributed to what Watkins himself calls the *Monoform* of mass audiovisual media which, as I understand it, is equivalent to the notion of format in the way it regulates the content of the media, as well as its institutionalised practices and technologies of production and distribution (Watkins 2015, 28–38).<sup>14</sup> Formats are delimitating and restricting because they do not only regulate what is publicly shown and heard, but also how it is understood and experienced as an articulation of social reality. By probing alternative ways to engage the public, Watkins explicitly challenges the

standardised schemes of media production, which predetermine not only the representation of historical events but also the way we relate to them from the present moment. What is at stake here is not simply the effort to oppose or overcome the habitualised routines or conventions of filmmaking in order to pave the way for formal innovation and the freedom of artistic expression; it is rather the effort to redescribe and rework, i.e., to work *with* and *against* the power schemes, the protocols, and policies preceding these routines and conventions. The intricate logic of formats prevents the possibility of simply abolishing or discarding them; it is only possible to oppose or confront them from within, while remaining subjected to the hegemonic and marginalising powers of standardisation. Jean-Luc Godard expressed this futility poignantly in an interview included in the documentary *La politique et le bonheur: Georges Kiejman* (1972), in which he speaks about *Tout va bien*, his 1972 film about a factory strike co-directed with Jean-Pierre Gorin, reflecting on failures to voice the concerns of the men and women of the working class. It is, despite all good intentions, impossible to make a film “in the service of” without risking it being “to the detriment of” the exploited and oppressed, for the simple reason that “the very way we direct,” the technologies that are used and the practices that are employed in making the film, are conditioned by the regulating forces that commonly silence or suppress their voices. “Who can answer when he’s had his mouth sewn shut?” (Godard in Camus 1972)<sup>15</sup> This resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988, 271–313) concern in the question “Can the subaltern speak?” to which the answer—which Spivak performs in its impossibility—is that she cannot because the order of discourse, since it is based on silencing, does not allow her to express her opinion and will. Any artwork or film dealing with this problem will have to begin with the conditions of speaking, to reflect or rework its very own technologies and practices, which prevent people from speaking for themselves.

It is in this context that we understand why Watkins invents an anachronistic media environment consisting of two competing channels covering the events: on one side, the official, state-owned Versailles TV, characterised by studio news with expert guests; on the other, the revolutionaries’ Commune TV, offering live coverage from the streets. This recourse to the standardised forms and formats of news reporting and documentation is a critique of the institutional framework of television, which prevents alternative modes of communication, interaction, and the establishment of a public sphere on the basis of communal practice. Within this staged media environment, the actors’ performances become an effort to redistribute representational power: who speaks? Who is seen and heard? Who broadcasts? The actors’ own experiences and thoughts increasingly permeate their characters’ dialogues; in speaking their lines, they also voice their real-life social situations. The film’s structure connects the layers of time by creating analogies, anachronisms, interruptions, leaps, and short circuits between past and present. Towards the end of the film, contemporary scenes emerge from the historical plot that reverse the relationship between frontstage and backstage by having the

actors, dressed in costume, reflect on the film as a site of or space for the negotiation of positions and relations in a collective process.

Here, it is worth noting the film's unfortunate production history. It was funded by the Franco-German television network La Sept ARTE, which eventually considered the film unsuitable for prime-time and only broadcast it once, on the 26th of May 2000, beginning in the late evening, while hardly anyone was watching. Unnoticed by the public and dismissed by the press, it was then shown as part of an exhibition about the Commune at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Watkins refused to make the cuts ARTE demanded, and ARTE did not release the film on videocassette as initially planned.<sup>16</sup> Speculation about the possible reasons for the media's hesitant or even hostile attitude towards the film continues in the intertitles: "What the media are particularly afraid of is that the little man on the little screen will be replaced by a multitude of people—by the public..."<sup>17</sup>

After the completion of the film, a group of participants founded the collective *Le Rebond pour la Commune* to continue the participatory process of social experimentation and critical debate.<sup>18</sup> This collective, a non-hierarchical association, was committed to organising public events, talks, and discussions, and to diffusing the film through alternative networks outside official distribution channels. Members of the collective recorded the film the night it was broadcast on television so they could organise public screenings before the distributor, Doriane Films, released the film on video. *Le Rebond* was also a member of the *Co-errances* co-operative, where publishers worked with film and cultural producers to promote the autonomous production and distribution of media content. In this context, Watkins speaks of a transgression of the film's image space, its extension into the social and political sphere, while retrospectively conceding his failure or unwillingness as a director to fully abandon the hierarchical structures of film production: "The more conscious I was of the liberating forces I was unleashing, the more conscious I was of the hierarchical practices—and personal control—I was maintaining" (Watkins, n.d.).

Geoff Bowie's portrait of the director, *The Universal Clock—The Resistance of Peter Watkins* (2001), offers further insights into the process of making the film. There is a significant moment in which one of the participants, a young girl in costume on the set, responds to questions concerning her appearance in the film. She says that her character has no name, referring to her role as "Catholic orphan no. 10." This episode sits uncomfortably within the overall narrative of participatory production, framed by the fiery speech of the theatre director and writer Armand Gatti, who, in a call to revolutionary action, recommends the project to the assembled cast as an "adventure" in which they "are not merely extras" but "active participants in an ongoing battle." The documentary concludes with behind-the-scenes footage showing the staging of the Communards' defeat, their collective shooting by Assembly artillery fire, which is conducted in a particular manner by using historical photographs of the corpses in their coffins, each assigned a number.

Shooting by numbers, in the double sense of the phrase, is employed here as an operation of restoring control and power, by which Watkins (as the film's director) deliberately acts as the representant of authoritarian power. In his role on set, he constantly glides between the person who offers the tools and technologies to fight against a system of limiting and oppressive forces, and the person who, as the director, represents the same system and so unleashes the opposing forces that, in turn, are directed against him.

Following Vivian Sobchack's argument (1990, 24–49) that the historical epic does not merely represent its historical content but performatively produces it through repetition—by using human labour and capital cost—we can understand Watkins's film as an attempt to engage with the history of the Paris Commune through its production process. The result of this, however, is far removed from the “surge and splendor” (29) that is characteristic of the investment of extra labour in the historical epic of the classical era, but approximates what the members of the Paris Commune, almost all of whom belonged to the proletariat, called *communal luxury*. Coined by Eugène Pottier in the Artists' Federation of the Paris Commune's manifesto (1871), the term describes a common prosperity that includes the distribution of “beauty,” of aesthetic experience, in public space beyond the private salons. As Kristin Ross has pointed out in her study on the political imaginary of the Paris Commune, the idea of communal luxury “countered any notion of the sharing of misery with a distinctly different kind of world: one where everyone, instead, would have his or her share of the best” (2015, 65). The notion of communal luxury poses a theoretical challenge as it abolishes the distinction between abundance and shortage that commonly characterises the political aesthetics of extra work.

The aspiration to create spaces that allow people to share their thoughts and ideas becomes a measure against statistical reasoning, against the recounting of history in terms of dates, counts, and numbers as repeated through the staging of extras. To Ross, even Badiou's (1985, 68) critique of the “tyranny of number,” and the reduction of the people to statistics, remains subject to its logic by making the Communards' actions “empirical data marshaled in support of verifying the given theory” (2016). However, elsewhere in her writing, she reminds us that an understanding of *democracy* in quantitative terms, be it as the power of the many or the few, dismisses its original meaning as “the capacity of ordinary people to discover modes of action for realizing common concerns” (2011, 89).<sup>19</sup> As this capacity belongs to neither the many nor the few, but to anyone, it is “free from the law of number” (2011, 89). Therefore, in her book, moving through a smaller-scaled or finer-grained field of history as lived experience, she is less concerned with explicating or defining the idea of communal luxury; it is not so much the central issue of the book than it is a governing or guiding principle in the production of political thought. In this sense, her account of the events through the Communards' voices is less narrative than it is dramatic in setting the stage for the historical figures of the revolution to enter while letting communal luxury



emerge as the practice, and not the result of, political thinking in action. There is an implicitly theatrical or performative momentum at play in the production and distribution of communal luxury through shared aesthetic experience. In suspending the division between manual labour and artistic work, this experience, as Ross notes, was explicitly aimed against the “powerful institutional reiteration of the division of labor” that organised the field of artistic education and production according to economic principles of skill and specialisation (2015a, 48). In this field, the extras are confined to unskilled labour and thus excluded from the realm of artistic expression that remains reserved for qualified personnel at all levels, from the supporting cast to the leading actors.

Ross wrote her book under the influence of the protests and movements of 2011, which, for her, shared central concerns with the Paris Commune (2015a, 2–4). While recognising the singularity of the historical events, which makes any simple comparison with the present difficult, the Commune still appears to her as “the figuration of a possible future” (2015b), a model for the invention and exploration of communal cooperation and association, which opposes forms of state organisation, regardless of whether capitalist or socialist. Rather than treating the Commune as a historical precedent or instructive example, she considers it a newly available “resource” or “archive” for present political thought and action (2015c). We might, therefore, understand the recourse of contemporary filmmakers and artists to the Paris Commune less as the re-enactment of historical events on the stage of present politics than as an opening of this archive of a possible communal future. Other projects besides Watkins’s have emerged from this, such as Zoe Beloff’s *The Days of the Commune* (2012), which brings together a heterogeneous cast of performers and activists on stage, in New York City’s public space, and Brecht’s play of the same name from 1947 in the context of the Occupy Wall Street movement (Brecht 1966). Albeit different in their artistic approaches, these projects are equally indebted to the idea of using this archive for collective creation, in order to explore the potential of political communities.

What efforts are required to enable the people to speak, to empower those who, as extras, are by definition confined to silent presence to raise their voices? How can one transform the labour of extras into a collective experience according to the principles of association and cooperation, to work against the institutional division of labour, outside the centralising organisation of institutional space? The promise of communal luxury, as expressed by the Commune, serves here as a trajectory in the search for possibilities of articulation, of addressing concerns not through the content of speech, but through acts of speaking, sharing thoughts and intellectual resources. The image emerging from this process, however, never fully becomes “*a common place* where the commonplace of images of the people used to reign” (Didi-Huberman 2009, 22; original italics). Instead, we find a site of contestation and conflict, of struggling and opposing forces, of experimentation and play. In short, we find crisis as the potentiality of community.

## Notes

- 1 Another version of this excerpt with the same title is included in Willemsen and Trummer (2009, 37–50).
- 2 The exploitation of extras, their labour force, their bodies, and their precarious lives is quite well documented in socio-historical studies of Hollywood's studio system (Slide 2012; Segrave 2013). On the history of industrial organisation of labour by actors and extras, particularly in Hollywood, see Harding (1929); Baker (1933); Ross (1941); and Perry and Perry (1963, 318–361; chapter “Union Success in the Movie Industry”).
- 3 The English word *extras* hints at the economic dimension of film production, “the fact that these are extra workers, as well as at the extra costs involved in film production” (Saxenhuber 2008, 14).
- 4 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
- 5 On the history of measures and their standardisation during the French Revolution and the abolition of feudalism, see the seminal study by Kula (1986, 161–264).
- 6 On the relationship between statistics and state control, see Hacking (1991, 181–195). On the history of statistics, see Hacking (1975); Stigler (1986); and Hald (1990, 1998).
- 7 On this ambivalence of state measures aimed at social engineering and their failures throughout the twentieth century, see Scott (2008).
- 8 For more, see Smith (2003, 411–449); Brassier (2005, 135–150); Mount (2005, 41–91); Fraser (2006, 94–133); Feltham (2008); Gillespie (2008); Norris (2009); Baki (2015); and Schubbach (2017, 127–150).
- 9 Basset (2008, 895–910) discusses the Paris Commune as an example of the event in Badiou's philosophy.
- 10 On photography and the Paris Commune, see Doy (1979, 12–21); English (1984, 69–70); Rouillé (1984, 41); Buck-Morss (1989, 67); Lapostolle (1988, 67–76; 1989, 20–28); and Przyblyski (1995, 253–278; 2001, 54–78).
- 11 Such measures would later inform the practices of police photography, refined by Alphonse Bertillon. A French police officer and the son of a statistician, Bertillon employed photography in the service of anthropometry aimed at improving methods of criminal identification (Phéline, 1985; Sekula 1986, 1–64).
- 12 “La participation active des comédiens à la réalisation de ce film constitue précisément ce qui fait peur aux médias mondiaux, et représente probablement l'une des raisons premières des refus de financement de la part des nombreuses chaînes de TV sollicitées pour apporter un soutien...”
- 13 On the democratic process of production, see Wayne (2002, 57–69); Pöschl (2003); Panchasi (2006, 553–571); Starr (2006, 169–184); Baecque (2008, 192–200); Levine (2008, 120–129); Marinone (2010, 49–61); and Bovier and Fluckiger (2012, 92–109).
- 14 Sterne (2012, 1–31) discusses the concept of format in this context.
- 15 Godard in an interview excerpt from *La politique et le bonheur: Georges Kiejman* (1972), an episode from the monthly television programme *Vive le cinéma!* created by André S. Labarthe and Janine Bazin and directed by Patrick Camus. Quoted after the English subtitles on the Criterion Collection DVD of *Tout va bien*. On this topic, see also Steyerl (2008).
- 16 See the afterword to the publication that reissues Peter Watkins's website in book form: Rebond pour La Commune, “Le Censure n'est plus ce qu'elle était: De *La Bombe* (1965) à *La Commune* (1999)” (Watkins 2015, 197).
- 17 “Ce don't les medias ont particulièrement peur, est de voir le petit homme du petit écran remplacé par une multitude de gens—par le public...”

- 18 For brief information on the activities of the collective, see also the appendix “Rebond pour la Commune” (Watkins 2015, 193–194). For testimonies of members of the association who acted in the film, see Bovier and Portmann (2012).
- 19 Ross is indebted here to Jacques Rancière’s thoughts on Joseph Jacotot’s method of intellectual emancipation, and translated his 1987 essay *Le Maître ignorant* as *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière 1991).

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# 11 An Avant-Garde with Its Back to the Future

## Affirming the Crisis

*Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen*

If the notion of the avant-garde seems slightly outdated in the context of contemporary art, it appears downright unthinkable in the context of politics, not least as a model for a political community. The idea of a small cadre of people determined to advance history and lead the masses to some imagined utopia comes off as completely anachronistic today. We may be living in a historical situation characterised by multiple crises and the slow erosion of politics as we know it, and today only fascist politicians seem capable of mobilising a fragmented *demos*, but the avant-garde and its idea of progress and newness has yet to reappear. Few notions have aged worse than the idea of an avant-garde that emerged after the French Revolution and played a key role in subsequent attempts to create a new society.<sup>1</sup> As an artistic or anti-artistic gesture, the avant-garde left the scene with the Situationists who expelled most of its artists and sought to exit the institution of art in order to become properly anti-capitalist. The most recent “political” occurrence of the avant-garde was in the old centre of accumulation in the 1970s with the different urban guerrillas or anti-imperialist and radical Leftist terror groups (most notably the Red Army Faction and the Red Brigades). However, in retrospect, it seems to have destined the idea of the avant-garde into oblivion, if not downright ridicule, or complete rejection.<sup>2</sup> Who would suggest setting up small terror groups that could trigger a repressive response from the state in order to spark a broader revolutionary movement? Climate activists might be getting desperate, but none of them have yet set up small militant cells devoted to provoking a Climate Leviathan (Mann and Wainwright 2018) into existence, capable of tackling the biospheric meltdown.<sup>3</sup>

Already in the mid-1970s it was clear that the dream of the *modern* revolutionary break with capitalist society was not going to materialise, and that neoliberal globalisation was using the cultural revolution of the late 1960s to introduce a new phase of capitalist accumulation. Pasolini (1975) was quick to notice the change and wrote about it as a “revolution from the right.” This (counter)revolution would change anything; it was profound and fundamental. Nothing would be left unchanged. Pasolini called this new state of affairs “hedonistic fascism.” The shift undermined the notion of the avant-garde, politically and aesthetically.

The last occurrence of an avant-garde in the form of urban guerrillas or terror groups in the early 1970s did not bode well for the avant-garde's particular combination of opposition and *novum*. In the age of "the end of history," after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the complete ideological success of neoliberalism, the avant-garde had disappeared and was only alive in history books when it suddenly re-emerged in the paradoxical guise of militant jihadists. Was Al-Qaeda—a small group of dedicated men intent on creating havoc and preparing the ground for a new/old world—not an avant-garde group? The vanguard of newness as a complete return to dogmatism. It was truly bizarre; at the end of history, the people of the future took on the form of a cadre of fundamental Islamists striving to mobilise (and scarify) the wretched of the earth. With Bin Laden's attempt to break the spell of the US superpower by directing planes into the World Trade Center, Pentagon, and the White House on live television, the avant-garde appeared as a thing of the past, a relic from a time where it was possible to envision a complete break, or a rupture so overwhelming it would open the door for a new Caliphate.

While the notion of the avant-garde has more or less completely disappeared in politics as a viable political concept and description of political community—with Al-Qaeda confirming the obsolescence—the avant-garde has continued to linger within the field of contemporary art, always already outdated but never completely forgotten or abandoned. In the 1990s and early 2000s, many artists, for instance, picked up or recycled gestures and forms from different neo-avant-garde groups—like Fluxus and performance art—cooking dinners or setting up small second-hand shops, inviting art critics to once more address the status of the avant-garde in contemporary art. They questioned if contemporary artists were merely, knowingly or not, recycling historical works or adding something significant to a historical (anti)tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Few artists today stage themselves as avant-garde, but the whole art and life dichotomy introduced by the avant-garde continues to frame discussions on contemporary art practices, from relational aesthetics and participatory art to notions of ideas of community-based art where artists move outside the institution into "everyday life." The avant-garde's quasi-Hegelian attack on the autonomy of art—art is only art in so far as art is dissolved into a revolutionised everyday life—continues to inform contemporary art's navigation of the complex relationship between the artist, the artwork, and the institution of art. The institution thrives on its capacity to introduce extra-artistic material, as Peter Osborne (2009, 108–113) puts it. The avant-garde continues to be an important condition of im/possibility for contemporary artistic production. But the important distinction between the interwar era, the 1950s—where groups like the Situationist International tried to continue and expand the avant-garde project—and today is of course that few contemporary artists form groups that declare themselves to be avant-garde. The idea of a historical necessity and a dialectical *Aufhebung* is simply not there today. The avant-garde's attack on the institutional status of art, and its playful



or iconoclastic attempts to give art a function, has become internalised in contemporary art but without the socio-political—or better—revolutionary dimension that was integral to the initial avant-gardist gesture. We thus have a development that goes from the avant-garde's inorganic work-in-progress and its transcendental effect in society to the notion of the expanded concept of art where anything in principle can be or become art—from Duchamp's different ready-mades to Piero Manzoni's *Socle du Monde* where the whole world was made into an artwork. A notion that is today part and parcel of the institution, and hence not something that “threatens” the institution, is something the institution itself acknowledges and “performs”: inviting artists to transgress its borders by activating local audiences or inviting activists inside the art institution.

There is, of course, good reason the avant-garde only exists in art as an internalised “soft” version of the tremendously ambitious attempt to surpass art in a whole-sale revolution today, and that it is missing as a political concept or as a form of organisation in contemporary politics. No political movements or parties present themselves as avant-garde today. After all, the twentieth century was, in so many ways, a terrible experience in large-scale projects—let us re-invent humanity and transform society—gone horribly wrong. We do not have to subscribe to T. J. Clark's extremely bleak assessment in “For a Left with No Future” (2012, 53–75), where Clark ends up abandoning any hope of a revolutionary break with capitalism in favour for what he describes as a “grown-up” and “tragic perspective on politics,” to acknowledge that the avant-garde played its role in the horrors and catastrophes that beset the century. The last century was a century of enormous hope and even bigger tragedies. “The age of extremes,” Hobsbawm (1994) called it, or “the age of genocide” as Albert Boime (unpublished) preferred—where politics was all about grand visions and sweeping blueprints whose realisations somehow turned into one horrible event after another.<sup>5</sup> The Russian Revolution obviously stands as the emblem of the best and worst of them in many ways. This was the dream of humankind's self-government and an end to exploitation; the “theft” of the labour power of the proletariat was to be overcome by the socialisation of production where all humanity would be emancipated from the disastrous effects of capitalist domination. The crack-down of the Kronstadt rebellion, where sailors demanded a series of reforms and a reduction in Bolshevik power in 1921, tore that dream to shreds and pointed towards the Show Trials, the extermination of the Bolshevik Old Guard, and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Class struggle was not only transformed into geo-politics; the Bolsheviks' party bureaucracy emerged as a new class in itself.<sup>6</sup> The great communist project turned disastrous. And not just in Russia—Mao's Cultural Revolution might have inspired a generation of young intellectuals and militants in the First and Third World in the late 1960s, but in reality it was a bloody power struggle inside the party with Mao attempting to regain power. The party was a secret society that ruled through terror and deception as Simon Leys (1977) wrote. One after

another the experiments turned sour: Leninism, Maoism, Guevarism, etc. False futures all over.

There are few alternatives left and it is difficult to envision any kind of outside reality from where to impose liberty. Things are falling apart but it is difficult to get a grip on history. Who can play the role of Napoleon crossing the Alps? Who can create a new community?

## **The End of Modernity**

The point of departure in any attempt to come to terms with the avant-garde as a model for a revolutionary community in capitalist society—that is, post-artistic and post-political—is a necessary critique of the Euro-modernist avant-garde concept, including a critique of “the first cut” where the avant-garde distances itself from the mass while desperately trying to mobilise the mass to become active and conscious of its historical role (Bolt Rasmussen 2018b, 27–52). The end goal is a seemingly paradoxical one: coming up with a new understanding of the avant-garde after the end of the avant-garde, re-thinking the notion of a revolutionary community. In order to be able to counter “the slow cancellation of the future” we need to be able to map the present, and secretly—after the horrors of the twentieth century—imagine a future (Fisher 2014). The avant-garde did both, not secretly of course, but blazingly and head-on believing that there was a programme. That is no longer the case. That is not possible today. There is no programme to realise. We live “after programmatism,” as *Théorie Communiste* says (Simon 2001), in the difficult postponement of “what is to be done?” as Jacques Derrida (2007, 45–62) and Jean-Luc Nancy (2014, 100–117) have both shown. We must ask the question without the self-assured stance Lenin mustered in 1902, that is, without the need for an answer and without certainty that the question is correct to begin with. It seems imperative to do something, the climate disaster forces us into acting, but it is the whole modern narration of *doing* that somehow got us into trouble. So how do we proceed? The possibility of identifying a *doing* is risky. And we cannot not be sceptical towards any call to action. We are starting elsewhere.

An obvious difficulty in this endeavour has to do with the fact that any more coherent use of the notion of avant-garde would locate it in the past. I fully concur with that but will nonetheless try to displace the inevitable *end of the avant-garde* and point towards something we could perhaps tentatively call an *after-avant-garde* or an *after-avant-garde effect*—the disappearance of the avant-garde as an expression of a structural crisis of modern narration. The crisis of the avant-garde is a crisis of art and politics alike. The avant-garde was the last great and failed incarnation of the artist as a revolutionary subject: the artist as the avant-garde of a new society. The crisis of the avant-garde is the premise. And perhaps there is a promise in the crisis. This would be something like an after-avant-garde with its back turned towards the future, active outside art and secretly imaging that another world is possible. This

after-avant-garde is less a political project in the modern sense than it is an unavowable community in Blanchot's (1988) sense—a virtual exchange between common presence and absence in which a positive “NO” emerges, opening a space beyond political programmes. The avant-garde disappeared with the labour movement—the great modern political subject, if there ever was one—and the after-avant-garde attempts to embrace the possibility of this disappearance, this crisis, the disappearance of the political as a global constituent project. We start from this crisis, the crisis of the political and modernity; this is the playing field.

### The Avant-Garde Is Dead

I begin with the present state of the analysis of the (anti)artistic avant-garde. The avant-garde was an (anti)artistic gesture because the revolution could not be reduced to a socio-material transformation; even though many Socialists and Leftists attempted to do so throughout the twentieth century, the revolution was a much more encompassing mental metamorphosis. And art was less the medium for this transformation than an idea of this expansion. This was why Debord wanted to put revolution in the service of art and not vice versa. It was not a question of instrumentalising art for political ends nor of protecting art from politics. It was a question of using art as a perspective, pointing to its brokenness in capitalist society. Only insofar as capitalism was destroyed would art be capable of becoming all that it could be.

The dominant reading of the trajectory of the avant-garde argues that it disappeared either with the Second World War or at the latest in the 1960s. This analysis comes in two different variants: one takes this to be a good thing, and the other laments the disappearance of the avant-garde. The first variant comes in a conservative and a Left-leaning version. The conservative position is only too happy to get rid of the avant-garde and its irresponsible ridiculing of the tradition of art and European civilisation. The Left-leaning version critiques the avant-garde for its grand iconoclastic gestures. In her influential 1981 article “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” former Greenberg pupil, US art historian and editor of *October*, Rosalind Krauss (1981, 66), wrote that “the historical period that the avant-garde shared with modernism is over. That seems an obvious fact.” The avant-garde was characterised by a problematic notion of originality, Krauss argued in a deconstructivist gesture. Krauss's goodbye to the avant-garde was part of a defence of what she herself termed postmodernist art, exemplified by Sherrie Levine in the article. Postmodernist art, and Krauss's own postmodernist art critique we might note, were demystifying the avant-garde's idea of authenticity showing “the fictitious condition of the origin,” that original and copy cannot easily be separated (Krauss 1981, 66).

The lament of the avant-garde is perhaps best represented by the literary historian Peter Bürger. In his short but hugely influential 1974 book, *Theorie der Avant-Garde* (translated into English in 1984), he argued that the

avant-garde had been integrated into the art institution after the Second World War. According to Bürger, the avant-garde was a one-off, full-frontal attack on the art institution where groups like the Surrealists and the Russian avant-garde had sought to give art a function outside the institution by integrating art into everyday life. Bürger persuasively argued for the necessity of distinguishing between modernism as a broader concept and the avant-garde as a description of the inter-war attack on art. The avant-garde constituted what Bürger, following Marx, called the “self-critical phase of art” where artists recognised the institutional confinement of the autonomy of art and tried to subvert it by either ridiculing its norms and conventions or by putting art to use beyond the art institution. Following Walter Benjamin, Bürger saw the avant-garde as a refusal of the organic artwork. However, the attack on the art institution failed, Bürger argued, and after the Second World War, the transgressive gestures of the inter-war avant-garde groups were repeated by what he dismissively called *the neo-avant-garde* inside the art institution. In 1974, when the West German student opposition was in full retreat, Bürger had nothing but contempt for this phenomenon and wrote that the neo-avant-garde was nothing but a farcical repetition of the historical avant-garde’s heroic efforts to exit the institution. For him, the avant-garde was clearly a thing of the past.

While Bürger lamented the integration of the avant-garde and its radical gesture, Krauss was happy to bid farewell to the avant-garde and its idea of originality. However, they both agreed that the avant-garde was a thing of the past and it was no longer present as a gesture in art. For Bürger, it disappeared with the Second World War; for Krauss, it was made obsolete by the representational critique of postmodernist art. Both accounts were narrowly art historical; neither had much to say about the broader historical context of modern art in the twentieth century and both Krauss and Bürger preferred to argue for the disappearance of the avant-garde as a result of “internal” artistic and art institutional developments. This is a general problem with analyses of the avant-garde. Most of them are not up to the task of the avant-garde, so to speak, and its problematisation of the category of art. They prefer to remain within a fairly limited art historical framework where the trajectory of the avant-garde is narrated as a development that takes place within the field of art in a narrow Bourdieuan sense.

It is difficult to find more materialist accounts of the trajectory of the avant-garde. But one such analysis was made by the Italian workerist, architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri who, in *Progetto e utopia* from 1973 (translated into English as *Architecture and Utopia* in 1976), argued that the avant-garde had been unable to transcend the structures that determined it. The artistic and architectural avant-garde had been a tragic artistic attempt to control the negative forces of capitalist society as if it would have been possible to plan and master the negativity of modernity, accelerating the crisis of capitalist modernisation with a view of creating a new world. But this was an illusion. This was not possible as art. Capitalist modernity was characterised

by anxiety, Tafuri argued, following Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and Massimo Cacciari. The avant-garde tried to dispel the anxiety of capitalist modernity by internalising it and giving it a form, thus coming up with plans, schemes and programmes articulated in the enormous amount of manifestos written by different avant-garde groups. But this amounted to an illusion of mastery as if the individual artwork or the provocative emptying out of the artistic gesture could somehow rise to the level of the system. Tafuri's (1976) critical analysis embedded the avant-garde in a much broader historical context, but he nonetheless came to the same conclusion as Bürger and Krauss: the avant-garde was dead and gone. For Tafuri, the avant-garde represented the most radical self-critique of bourgeois society, an attempt to inhabit and use the ruthless destructive forces of industrial capitalism. But it remained an ideological expression of the fundamental contradictions of bourgeois society and was unable to solve that contradiction (as art and anti-art).

Although the general sense is that the avant-garde is a thing of the past, or at least has been replaced or perhaps displaced by first a neo-avant-garde and since a post-neo-avant-garde, there have of course been different attempts to revive its very notion. One of the most influential has been the US art critic and second-generation *October* editor Hal Foster, who in the mid-1990s levelled a severe critique at Bürger's dismissal of the post-Second World War neo-avant-gardes. Foster (1996) critiqued Bürger's rather one-dimensional "endist" account of art historical development where things occur once, arguing that the attack on the art institution only became recognisable with the post-war neo-avant-gardes' repetition, in a kind of Freudian *afterwardness*. According to Foster, the neo-avant-gardes of the 1950s and 1960s were not only engaged in a critical analysis of the institutional nexus, but also engaged in a discussion on the ongoing institutionalisation of the avant-garde itself. Foster tried to create a position between Bürger's avant-garde and Krauss's postmodernist art, between Bürger's critical theory and Krauss's poststructuralism, arguing that neo-avant-garde practices, such as conceptual art, made visible and critiqued "artistic conventions and historical conditions" (1996, 2). Foster's critique of Bürger was very convincing and pointed to the complex temporality of modern art, but it ended dissolving the very distinction between modernism and the avant-garde that Bürger introduced. Thus, it emptied the notion of the avant-garde, or made it so broad that most contemporary art which is almost always already institutionally aware and meta-discursive could be described as avant-garde. The self-critical or revolutionary character of the avant-garde was thus drastically reduced by Foster who emphasised self-reflectiveness but silently down-played self-negation and the more transgressive gesture of the "original" avant-garde.

In many ways, Foster's argument for an open-ended notion of the avant-garde is spot on as an analysis of the historical development from the mid-1990s, and it could be argued that contemporary art has indeed internalised the avant-garde's attack on the organic artwork by becoming an interdisciplinary and multifarious post-object praxis. The painterly, modernist art object, done

by the artist genius, has been replaced by an open-ended research practice or micro-social practice. But it is important to note that this internalisation comes at a great cost and seriously diminishes the avant-garde project. Contemporary art as a kind of *post-post-neo-avant-garde* might very well be an expanded art practice—in the sense of the dematerialisation of art, mapped by Lucy R. Lippard (1973)—but it is undoubtedly art and carries its institutional framework wherever it goes, as Andrea Fraser has noted repeatedly, among others.<sup>7</sup> And, even more importantly, it has definitely lost any direct connection to an extra-artistic revolutionary movement, real or imagined. In other words, contemporary art is disconnected from the revolutionary practices the inter-war avant-gardes were part and parcel of, and without which the avant-garde does not make sense. There is a reason the Surrealists chose to title their journal first *La révolution surréaliste* and then *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution*. The necessity of joining ranks with the revolutionary movement was explicit. The Surrealists were wrong to bet on the Stalinised French Communist Party, which they joined in 1927, but right in trying to go beyond the domain of culture.

### **After the Revolution**

Since the mid-1990s, there have been different attempts to conceptualise a more directly involved art under rubrics such as activist art, interventionist art or socially engaged art, but all of them fall flat in comparison to the engagement of the avant-gardes. They are all part of what I have previously described as “the art of modest proposals,” that is an art which tries to solve concrete problems in different ways—like the Trampoline House, a space for asylum seekers living in Danish refugee camps or Wochenklausur’s repurposing of a church in Cologne for local community activities—but that refrains from engaging in more “utopian” acts, preferring to alleviate present social issues (Bolt Rasmussen 2018a; Kester 2004). The abandonment of a more radical gesture, “the great refusal” of Maurice Blanchot (2010) and Herbert Marcuse ([1964] 2006), is not the fault of the artists (or the art theoreticians who try to analyse and “promote” these interventionist art practices) but has to do with longer historical developments characterised by the gradual dismantling of a previous Leftist vocabulary to which the avant-garde was related. In short, that is the disappearance of the revolutionary perspective, the absence of a movement capable of opposing what Jean-François Lyotard (1998) called *the system* in the late 1990s. As he put it, this is a system “which has no others” and is not “subject to radical upheaval, only to revision” (25). Lyotard writes that the system, which could have been named “liberal imperialist capitalism” had Marxism not disappeared, is “continually being revised by integrating winning strategies” (25). This is, of course, a huge topic—the disappearance of a revolutionary perspective, the supersession of capitalist community in favour of a world without state and money—that I am not able to account for in any detailed manner. However, we can say that the period

from the early 1980s until today has been one characterised by the almost complete dissolution of an anti-capitalist perspective in any practical sense. This is the historical context for “the modest proposals” of socially engaged art of today (Bolt Rasmussen 2018a, 21).

The avant-garde was oriented towards and engaged in the first communist assault on capitalism that swept through the world in the years 1917–1921, but lived on until the late 1930s as a real threat and perspective one could pursue. The counterrevolutionary response, in the form of fascism, anti-fascism and Stalinism, destroyed the revolutionary dynamic and although the revolution did not completely disappear after the Second World War (it was present in anti-colonial projects and made a partial comeback in the global May '68 events), it was turned into a promise of (selective) access to commodities and political rights during the post-war economic boom. This was what Debord (1994) and the Situationists sought to analyse with the notion of the spectacle.

This is the story of the integration of the Western working-class movement into the social state of Western capitalist society where the local workers gained access to education, housing, culture, and consumption. However, in the process, they let go of more radical demands connected to a vision of a global, equal, post-capitalist distribution. Through tremendous pressure from both the organised working-class movement and its “wild” undercurrent bourgeois society, workers and other subaltern subjects ended up gaining political rights and were integrated into the modern nation-state. The other side of this process, what Geoff Eley (2002) writes about as the “forging of democracy,” was the ongoing exclusion and racialisation of other subaltern subjects that were not allowed to enter the nation-state as (political) subjects or waged labourers. W. E. B. Du Bois (1915, 707–714) talked about this as “democratic despotism”—the fact that the “democratization” of the white working class took place at the expense of people who were racialised as Black or non-white at home and abroad. With the establishment of the post-war social state in the West, the revolution was replaced with what Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (1994) call the Fordist wage productivity compromise.

If we fast-forward, we can say that the period since the early 1970s has been one characterised by the ruthless response to the partial rediscovery of the global May '68 revolution, that is, the gradual dismantling of the post-war welfare society and concerted efforts to socialise the costs of a shrinking economy in the West. This is what we often talk about as neoliberalism—an economic paradigm but also a particular culture where the political horizon is closed, and the revolution is at best a description of micro-electronic innovations put at the disposal of eager consumers.

We know this history, within cultural analysis and art theory, as the question of the spectacle or postmodernism, in Jameson's (1991) use of the term. In other words, this refers to the disappearance of the last vestiges of resistance to late capitalist mass culture, the process where the last overlooked parts of everyday life, idiosyncratic speech patterns, local forms of solidarity and resistant lifestyles, together constituting what James C. Scott (1990) calls

*infra-politics*, are subsumed to the demands of the market. Jameson (2015, 111) has recently talked about postmodernism as the time of the curator, as someone who has a recipe for producing events in the institution for the now. “In the institution now” means that there is no historical dimension nor outside to the institution—the institution being the natural habitat for any artistic gesture, however critical it is intended.

### After-Avant-Garde

The British art historian, John Roberts (2015), has recently warned against undialectical misanthropic readings of the integration of art into mass culture, arguing that modern art has always been under pressure. Of course, we have to keep the most doom-like readings at bay. We must highlight the way the art institution has in fact functioned as a substitute political Left public sphere, during a period in which the neoliberal ideology has tended to remove any reference to a world outside of capital accumulation and individual happiness. The art institution has been a place for presentations of political conflicts, a space where discussions of crisis and communities have taken place.<sup>8</sup> Roberts’s argument is less concerned with the re-purposing of the art institution and puts forth an Adornian argument about the continued self-critique of the artwork. Roberts tries to conceptualise this as a *third* or *suspensive* avant-garde that upholds and expands the continuing labour of negation within the category of art and the institutions of capitalist society. It is a suspensive avant-garde because it continues art’s labour of negation in historically unpropitious circumstances, trying to sustain art’s independence within capitalist society. The artwork tries to resist its own exchange value and market visibility. Roberts’s stress on the real complexity of art’s autonomy is very relevant, but Roberts ends up internalising the spectacle, leaving him with a very reduced idea of opposition. Trying to avoid a bleak Jamesonian position where resistance is futile, he paradoxically must retreat. His third avant-garde is very much an avant-garde *after*, in the sense that it lacks the revolutionary dimension that was so central in previous avant-gardes. The inclusion of external art materials into the artwork has become the very definition of contemporary art and Roberts ends up in a similar position to Foster, where the avant-garde has lost any connection to radical politics. It is telling that Roberts starts out by defining the third avant-garde as negating both “the category of art” and “the institutions of capitalist society” but quickly let go of the last part of the critique, thus seriously downscaling the avant-garde perspective.

Roberts paradoxically ends up in a position where the avant-garde is doomed to endlessly negate itself as art, forever unable to exit the art institution. But what if the avant-garde has already left the institution of art? What if the avant-garde did indeed die as an artistic or anti-artistic gesture but was translated into a *destituent* gesture outside the institution of art? From the Creative Autonomist in the ’77 movement in Italy, to the Invisible Committee



in the Nuit debout movement, today the iconoclastic gesture of the avant-garde has in fact been present all along but in a displaced way, outside the institutional confinements of art, expressing itself in moments of upheaval and insurrection.

It is important to understand that this is not the avant-garde becoming a social movement. The vocabulary of social movements—both in social movement studies and social movements themselves—subscribe to the social division that the avant-garde aims at attacking: the dedifferentiation of capitalist modernity with artists, activists, and academics each in their separate spheres. A fundamental insight of the avant-garde is a critique of the specialised identities of capitalist modernity, be it the identity and practice of the artist or the identity of the activist. It is in that sense that the avant-garde was an attempt to integrate art and everyday life, transgressing the relative autonomous spheres of capitalist society with a view to not only create a new society but immediately live a different life, communising existence—meaning to live a communist life now in the present.

## Destitution

The Situationist International is the obvious starting point for this project. The Situationists are both the end point of the avant-garde but also the starting point for a different post-artistic avant-garde—what I would propose to name *the destituent avant-garde*.<sup>9</sup> It is destituent because it is neither a question of realising an already-described artistic political programme, nor a question of replacing one order with a new one, but more a question of saving the already-existing world and liberating it from the abstract logic of capital accumulation and state violence. In the terms of Walter Benjamin (2004, 236–252), it is a question of deposing or displacing the state, destitution—*Entsetzung* in German—is the unmaking of the instituted.

This after-avant-garde is without a programme. For a long period in the twentieth century, the programme for Leninists and Socialists alike was “the socialisation of production,” making something real as if it does not already exist: communism as the endpoint of political transformation. The destituent avant-garde abandons the idea of realising an ideal in an act, like communism or art, and as such there is no programme to be put into practice. It is no longer a question of carrying out a series of acts or deeds that follow and confirm a revolutionary programme. The project consists in making power unworkable, making it impossible for politics to function, making it unable to reproduce its laws, remake its institutions. Unlike the old avant-garde, the new destituent avant-garde does not transgress laws and oppose the state and its repressive or ideological institutions, including the art institution—it simply withdraws from them. It is no longer a question of critiquing or destroying the existing laws with the aim of establishing new ones. The project is a much more complex operation whereby the law is suspended, made unreal, whereby it becomes impossible to follow the law (as well as break the law).

The after-avant-garde exits the schematics of sovereignty, where the avant-garde interrupts the old form but inevitably founds a new one, thus confirming “the appropriation–distribution–production–nexus” (Schmitt 1993, 52–64). There is no new form. Art is not realised. And it is not a question of joining or creating a community. There are no political identities at play. Art is communist in a different sense, as Nancy (1991) stressed in his reply to Blanchot.

The avant-garde did indeed disappear as an artistic/anti-artistic gesture connected to the institution of art, but it continued elsewhere outside the art institution as a creative capital-negating gesture that united revolutionary discipline and the ecstatic intoxication of the revolt—the intoxication described by Furio Jesi (2014). This after-avant-garde would be an avant-garde that is an avant-garde *as not*. It is an avant-garde that turns its back on the future and strives to “exit,” refusing to realise the potential, refusing to give form to a new community; rather it empties state power and ends the deadly dialectic between law and violence.

The Situationist Michèle Bernstein gave us a good idea of this new avant-garde and its take on history with her contribution to the exhibition *Destruction of RSG-6* in 1963 in Galerie EXI in Odense, Denmark.<sup>10</sup> The Situationists wanted to expand the critique present in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) movement and give it a revolutionary direction. One and a half months prior to the exhibition, British activists had broken into a secret nuclear bunker complex in Reading, exposing the British government’s plans in case of a nuclear war. The Situationists used the ensuing scandal as a starting point for their project, turning the art gallery into a shelter. As part of the project, Bernstein showed a series of paintings titled *Victories of the Proletariat*. The pictures depicted historical battle scenes where the proletariat had lost to counter-revolutionary forces. In Bernstein’s rendering, things were turned upside down and the proletariat suddenly emerged as the victor: *Victory of the Commune of Paris*, *Victory of the Spanish Republicans*, and *Victory of the Great Jacquerie*. On a formal level, the paintings were unpretentious or hastily made, composed of plaster, with toy soldiers or plastic tanks pressed into the surface and paint splashed on top. Bernstein was repeating the adventures of the Communards and the Spanish Republicans not as an act of nostalgia, but as an attempt to render the past possible again, restoring these lost possibilities of anti-capitalist negation. In a radical gesture of disavowal, Bernstein opposes the postcard time of the spectacle with a self-conscious creation of history. History is suddenly opened, and what it is, is suddenly haunted by what it might be. This is not a nostalgic gesture where Bernstein wants to return to the past, but a radical gesture that is explicitly striving to highlight the dialectic of revolution and counter-revolution—a gesture that strives to turn both history and the present into an open-ended battlefield of class war. *Victories of the Proletariat* is not the return of the identical, of the historical facts of the proletarian experiences and defeats. It is the return of the possibility of what was; it is a making the past possible again. She is re-inventing the past

in order to be able to remake the present. By showing us the historical defeats of the proletariat as victories, Bernstein makes them possible again. We have the same situation with the same antagonists, yet completely different. The point being is that everything is possible, even the horrors of the spectacular commodity society, but of course something different is also possible, namely another world.

## Notes

- 1 A follower of Saint-Simon, Odile Rodriguez, wrote a dialogue in 1825 “L’artiste, le savant et l’industriel” in which he argued that artists could serve as the avant-garde of the new society that was emerging. See Calinescu (1987, 102–105).
- 2 The failed attempt to free the imprisoned members of RAF, “a self-declared revolutionary avant-garde,” in October 1977 spelt the end of the modern dream of revolution (Sarasin 2020, 41).
- 3 Even Andreas Malm (2021) does not go so far as proposing setting up an avant-garde group in his attempt to question the climate movement’s adherence to non-violent tactics.
- 4 It was telling that Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) sought to relate the artists he discussed under the term *relational aesthetics* to the avant-garde, saying that they proposed “micro-utopias” instead of the large-scale utopias of the avant-garde.
- 5 “Art in the Age of Genocide” was the working-title of the Marxist art historian Albert Boime’s final volume in his unfinished series *The Social History of Modern Art*.
- 6 For the best balance sheet of the development in the Soviet Union see Bordiga (1975).
- 7 As Fraser (2005, 282) puts it: “We are trapped within our field. [...] With each attempt to evade the limits of institutional determination, to embrace an outside, we expand our frames and bring more of the world into it. But we never escape it.”
- 8 The 1993 Whitney Biennale which included the Rodney King video and Okwui Enwezor’s 2002 documenta 11 in Kassel are among the best examples of presentations of political representations in the global art institution.
- 9 My use of the notion of *destitution* is obviously indebted to Giorgio Agamben (2016), *The Invisible Committee* (2009) and Marcello Tarì (2017).
- 10 I have previously discussed the exhibition in “To Act in Culture While Being Against All Culture: The Situationists and the ‘Destruction of RSG-6’ ” (Bolt Rasmussen and Jakobsen 2011).

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## 12 Assembling the Audience

### The Spread of the Parliamentary Form in Contemporary Arts

*Louise Décaillet*

In 2017, artist Jonas Staal, whose works have been exhibited in various European institutions and biennials over the last decade, published a text entitled “Assemblism.” The neologism allowed him to cast his practice as an artistic and political programme, making the difference between the two domains appear obsolete. Since Staal founded the international organisation New World Summit for the 7th Berlin Biennale (2012), his artistic work has stood out due to its political persistence. Particularly alert to political crises occurring throughout the European continent, the Dutch artist has been bringing together a variety of artists, activists, and actors of civil society in art institutions to take issue over the challenges and flaws of contemporary Western democracies. His installations and events have intervened in various venues such as museums and theatres, constantly repurposing them as sites of political gatherings where experiences of resistance against authoritative state power, self-determination, and statelessness could be discussed.

New World Summit has taken place in Berlin (2012), Brussels (2014), Utrecht (2016), as well as in the public space of Dêrik (2015), the autonomous northern Syrian region of Rojava, and has gathered, for instance, representatives of various stateless states and independence movements often classified as terrorists by official states (Staal, n.d.). In a 2018 series of works, Staal developed visual models of parliaments in theatres and museums for actors from political parties, social movements, and civil platforms, calling upon them to join forces against the rise of ultranationalism and the crisis of the European Union. Most emblematic of this series is certainly the *People’s Parliament of Rojava*, a circular building first erected together with locals in the city of Dêrik, in which one of the New World Summit sessions took place. The installation served as a “spatial manifesto” for Rojava’s model of radical democracy established after the 2011 revolution according to the principles of confederalism, gender equality, ethnic inclusion, and social ecology. The *People’s Parliament of Rojava* was then reconstructed in the Van Abbemuseum of Eindhoven as part of the programme *Museum as Parliament*, where it intended “to introduce the ideals of the Rojava revolution to a wider public” (Staal 2018) and, again, to build “new unions” between politicians, activists, and artists from Kurdistan to the Netherlands (Staal 2016, 2017a). The tasks

of bringing a variety of actors together, building alliances, and designing new parliamentary platforms are indeed gathered in the concept of *assemblism*, which confers them as much consistency as intentionality.

The manifest recurrence of forms and concepts throughout Staal's work turn his artistic projects into long-term programmes that relentlessly stick to their political aims. Yet, bestowing the name of assemblism on this programme does not perfect it. It first and foremost points towards a wider tendency in the contemporary art world that Staal's overall work perhaps best epitomises. Staal's attitude, now definable as of an "assemblist" type, illustrates how diverse forms of gatherings have entered the art world on behalf of democratic claims and made it a possible terrain for political demands and participation. The text "Assemblism," thus allows him to chart assemblies and parliaments as ubiquitous gatherings that escape boundaries between art and activism or aesthetics and politics. As a proliferating practice and neologism alike, assemblism can be read as a far-reaching response to ongoing crises of Western representative democracy, a broader urge for collective power, and one that makes Staal's text particularly iconic and worth dwelling on in the context of this volume. However, this urge compels us to interrogate the conditions under which such a power can take shape from within the structures of the art world. As I would like to draw critical attention to, assemblism, by engaging bodies in time and space, inevitably affects and transforms the traditional concept of audience and thus calls for reconsidering it as a primary subject. The projects I will outline in this text all allow for cultural repercussions that the spread of assemblism and its accompanying parliamentary form have on the notion of audience as a collective and plural body. In doing so, they reflect the challenges faced by European contemporary arts and their institutions in the shaping of collective subjectivities and, as Jonas Staal writes, of "new definition[s] of Us" (2017a).

### **Assembling Collective Power**

With its evocation of both political ideologies and artistic avant-gardes of modernism, the creation of an "-ism" grants Staal's text a manifesto character that suggests a ground-breaking impetus to the domains of both arts and politics. The text derives its eponymous concept from Judith Butler's 2015 seminal book *Notes Towards a Theory of Performative Assembly*, where the philosopher analysed street assemblies ranging from the Occupy movement in New York, to Arab Springs and the Gezi Park movement in Istanbul, as well as collective hunger strikes in Guantánamo prison, demonstrations by undocumented migrants and refugees, student protests, and online hacking mobilisations. The crucial contribution of Butler's *Notes* lies in the conceptualisation of these assemblies as embodied practices of radical democracy through concerted and plural action. While street assemblies do not seem to deliver a durable political programme, their "street politics" in fact consist of the new equalitarian way of life that bodies, when gathered in public space, put into

practice. In laying bare the dependence and vulnerability of bodies towards each other and bringing them to the fore of their struggles, assemblies do not solely claim a “more livable life,” but also realise the democratic principles of equality, interdependency, and dependability (Butler 2015, 168–171). In this sense, Butler argues, assemblies prefigure the social order they stand for by *enacting* it collectively in public space, which causes Butler to call them “performative enactments of radical democracy” (218), a democracy that shapes new ways of life and subjectivities. In acknowledging the performativity of assemblies, Butler describes bodies as means and ends of political demands that rise against the dismantling of common infrastructures in charge of life support. Due to their neoliberal privatisations, the spread of precarity as a life regime causes bodies to assemble in public space, reclaiming it as common good. By exposing themselves in assemblies, bodies make their conditions of precarity public and simultaneously protest against them, asserting thereby their right to a “more livable life” (Butler 2015, 193–219). In Staal’s words, “[assemblies] enact a political choreography that suggests the articulation of some form of collectivity” arising from precarity, a “potential class-in-the-making through which a variety of peoples could become aligned” (2017a). Herself involved in the Occupy movement, Butler developed a theoretical language for the political power of bodies and established the concept of performative assembly as core to the understanding of contemporary resistance movements and thus of democracy theory.

In borrowing Butler’s theoretical concept, Staal, for his part, intends to bring the impetus of assemblies to bear on his work in art institutions and to align with their collective power. Above all, the term *assemblism* allows him to define a broader urge to assemble—one that stems from street politics and that his work only strives to bolster. *Assemblism* was also the name of Staal’s 2017 project in BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, in Utrecht, that brought together bodies who had “assembled in resistance, in liberated autonomous zones, occupied buildings, city squares, prisons, and cultural spaces to collectively enact a different demand for egalitarian society” (Staal 2017b). What may at first glance appear as a domestication of street protests’ power by the art world is rather part of his agenda for an unequivocally political art, which, according to the artist, “can help formulate the new campaigns, the new symbols, and the popular poetry needed to bolster the emergence of a radical collective imaginary” (2017a). The concept of *assemblism*, thus, also redefines the role of the artist, making them a social organiser, a producer of alliances between different political formations for whom they provide public platforms and visibility in the art world. Unlike a concept such as *artivism*, the term *assemblism* leaves the notions of *art* and *activism* aside and brings to the fore the aim of building a new resistant and emancipatory collectivity, namely to “*assemble* a new definition of Us” that resists the “Us/Them dichotomy” reignited by the War on Terror since the beginning of the century (Staal 2017a; original italics).<sup>1</sup> Such a collectivity, Staal insists, does not need to rely on some commonality among its members. Rather, it is its



unchosen plurality that makes it capable of “chang[ing] the lines of divisions imposed upon us by an authoritarian world order” (2017a). As distinct from the ephemeral togetherness of *communitas*, the notion of *collectivity* here is intimately related to the capacity of resistance and denotes a political subject taking shape through the act of assembling. Also, the concept of assemblism is destined to break away with disciplinary boundaries, “link[ing] the domains of art, theater, performance, activism, and politics,” suggesting an organic *continuum* between them (2017a). In order to effectively support and collaborate with political struggles, political art and “assemblists,” Staal writes, should “translate prefigurative propositions of alternative institutionality into truly new and durable morphologies of transdemocracy” (2017a)—the latter being a term denoting political mobilisations that escape the forms of “party, state, or capital” through intersectionality and self-governance (Staal 2016). This ambition also goes along with performative redefinitions of art institutions, as Staal’s states about his project *Museum as Parliament*: “In a time of increasing democratic crises that have turned our parliaments into theaters, the project proposes to turn the theater—the museum—into an alternative people’s parliament instead” (2018). Staal’s parliamentary installations, be it in Rojava, Poland, or Scotland, probably best illustrates this act of translation: their architectures and design each reflect the political alternatives they stand for, waiting for bodies to enact them.

While Butler translated the performativity of assemblies in political concepts, Staal’s installations strive to translate it in a durable *praxis* of assemblism capable of implementing itself in different places, spreading its form and consolidating its political potential each time it is activated. The translation of assemblies to assemblism, of streets politics to Staal’s alternative parliaments and summits, resonates with what architect Eyal Weizman—pondering on the continuity of the Arab Spring—named the “twin political apparatuses” of revolutions: “The transformative power of the people in the streets and the ‘democratic assemblies’ able to take power” (2015, 62–63). This interdependency between transformation and negotiation, immanent and organisational power, is also at the core of Staal’s theory and practice of assemblism. In her *Notes*, Butler (2015, 66–98) drew particular attention to their “choreography” and “theatricality,” as well as their “morphology” and “architecture”—all terms acknowledging the very aesthetic work that underlie their collective organisation (see also Staal 2017a). Likewise, morphology and form are key notions for the practice of assemblism if it is to assemble, namely to “formaliz[e], organiz[e] and enac[t]” collective struggles and their imagination: “As artists, we are not *in power*, but through morphology we *give power*: we give *form to power*,” he states (2017a; original italics). The task of artists in the practice of assemblism first and foremost consists of unfolding the political imagination of social movements, as Staal’s project on Rojava illustrates, and channelling and spreading their emerging power—an attitude that Staal defines as “emancipatory propaganda” (Staal 2017a, 2010).

## The Parliamentary Form

As Staal's concept of assemblism strikingly illustrates, this urge for assembling has gone hand in hand with recent renewal of democracy theory reflected by the emergence of concepts such as the aforementioned *transdemocracy* (Staal 2016), *democracy in the present* (Lorey 2020), *experimentalist* (Weibel 2015), or *performative democracy* (Matynia 2009). Each of these concepts allow for the rise of a global activism ranging from square occupations to transnational queer-feminist strike movements. They acknowledge ephemeral, embodied, and at times transnationally coordinated, dimensions of collective action as paramount to the making of democracy.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the endeavour to identify and "give form to power" has taken place as much on the stage of political theory as that of art. Over the last decade, various projects of assemblist types have indeed pervaded art institutions, such as museums and theatres, as well as blockbuster exhibitions and biennials, often echoing public assemblies and pointing to the shortcomings of liberal representative democracy.<sup>3</sup> Staal's works probably best exemplify this broad phenomenon through their iconic forms and designs. Interestingly enough, "Assemblism" (2017a) was incidentally published the same year as two large-scale events that seemed to honour and extend its programme—and caused a stir in the European art world. In November 2017, theatre director and activist Milo Rau elaborated on the project *General Assembly* together with the International Institute of Political Murder (IIPM) and installed a "world parliament" for three days at the Schaubühne in Berlin. Also in 2017, the fourteenth issue of *documenta* took place, entitled "Learning from Athens," and directed by curator Adam Szymczyk, whose curatorial concept and public programme was conceived as a *Parliament of Bodies*.<sup>4</sup> Alongside the spread of assemblism, this conjuncture in the 2017 European art world seems to establish the parliament as a travelling signifier that, when appropriated by the sphere of arts, can denote manifold practices. Furthermore, its dissemination attests to the urge to rethink the notion of political assemblies as representative institutions seem to face a crisis. Staal's project *Museum as Parliament* intended to "turn the museum into an alternative people's parliament" (2018–ongoing), while official parliaments have turned into theatres, and theatre director and activist Milo Rau, who started his career by organising and re-enacting trials, nurtures similar ambitions: "We have to develop new, utopian institutions outside of the existing institutions, which will be there when the current ones collapse" (Rau and IIPM 2017, 13). Such programmes, in fact, direct the art world towards an "alternative institutionality," suggesting a certain *parliamentary turn* of contemporary political arts in the face of the crisis of representative democracy.

Claims of alternativeness and utopia gain a different complexity when taken on by artists and institutions, compared to when emerging from the collective imagination of the street and social media, as Butler described. When artistic imagination endeavours to fit in with the assemblist momentum in facilitating platforms for political gatherings, the power of assemblism,

with its boundary-breaking and democratic potential, quickly bumps against the walls of the art institution. To what extent can this power live up to its democratic claims in a theatre or museum, institutions that are symbolically and physically enclosed and privatised? Are these democratic promises compatible with the individualised and marketised figure of the artist in charge of their organisation? What kind of collectivity is capable of emerging when this organisation also includes the body of the audience, a collectivity characterised itself by its fragility (Benthien 2002)?<sup>5</sup> Is the revolutionary potential of precarious bodies assembling in the street capable of permeating the unchosen and plural body of an audience? These are the questions I will try to touch upon in examining two large-scale projects of assemblist type: Milo Rau and IIPM's *General Assembly*, and the public programme of documenta 14, *Parliament of Bodies*, curated by Paul B. Preciado and Adam Szymczyk.

### ***General Assembly***

Rau's call for inventing new institutions is perhaps most tellingly epitomised in the 2017 project *General Assembly*, which intended to install nothing less than a world parliament over three days in Berlin's Schaubühne theatre. The event brought together sixty political actors, activists, lawyers, and intellectuals from highly varied backgrounds around the world to engage them in a democratic debate on human rights violations, flaws of global economy, climate change and international relations that were considered key to 2017 global politics. The idea of a world parliament responded to a simple fact, namely the evident entanglements of German policy in the world market and the lack of legal and democratic institutions to regulate them. These entanglements were charted by the organisers on a planetary scale, measuring their impacts in terms of human labour oppression, transnational armed conflicts, their accompanying population displacements, as well as ecological catastrophes and technological revolution. Advocating thus a non-anthropocentric universalism, the assembly gathered representatives of human, non-human, and non-living actors usually devoid of a political voice within the Bundestag or, to quote Milo Rau (2017, 11), the ones "without a lobby" in the German state's decision-making, though their living conditions are affected by it. During the three days, the assembly gave the floor to trade unionists from around the world, anti-palm oil, climate, human and animal rights activists, a drag queen, a cyborg activist, a representative of anti-natalism, and an opponent of abortion rights, as well as members of authoritarian-conservative parties, just to cite a few (*General Assembly*, n.d.b.). These delegates were selected and contacted by Milo Rau and IIPM prior to the event, as were the observers of the assembly—a group of seven intellectuals, political scientists and lawyers, including, among others, philosopher of democracy Chantal Mouffe, EU-critical historian and film maker Tariq Ali, and bishop and South African mining-workers' rights activist Jo Seoka, who inaugurated the constituent session. In accordance with the model of the Bundestag, all the

sessions were led by a “Council of Elders,” namely the chairs of the *General Assembly* consisting of a president and two vice-presidents who were voted in by delegates at the constituent session on the recommendation of the assembly’s delegates and organisers of the event.

Since the beginning of his work, Milo Rau, in line with Jonas Staal, has opposed an “interrogative and critical” conception of art and advocated an utterly revolutionary and utopic attitude capable of overcoming postmodernity (Staal 2010; Rau 2013, 2018). Embodying this modernist determination, the project of *General Assembly* was accompanied by a manifesto:

War victims, labor migrants, economic and climate refugees, the victims of the dawning ecocide, children, the unborn and the victims of colonial history—they all have no right to a say in the Reichstag. But what would happen if all those whose lives are influenced by the German Bundestag were to assemble and claim their rights? The “General Assembly” and the “Storming of the Reichstag” will give their concerns a voice and offer their non-simultaneity a moment of simultaneity. A local parliament will be replaced by a global parliament. For the first time, the global Third Estate will claim its rights: one world, one parliament!

(Rau and IIPM 2017, 23–24)

The sessions of *General Assembly* were livestreamed in five European theatres: Théâtre Nanterre–Amandiers in Paris, Théâtre National Wallonie in Brussels, NTGent, Thalia Theater in Hamburg, and at the SPIELART Theaterfestival in Munich. Here, the notion of *assembly* explicitly alluded to the French Revolution and the subsequent constitution of an *Assemblée nationale constituante*, which served as the official representative of the Third Estate. The entire event was indeed inscribed in the narrative of French and Russian revolutions, symbolically situating itself in their continuity through historical allusions. Consequently, the speakers were featured as delegates of the “global Third Estate” and, during the last session, requested to pass a “Charter for the 21st Century” outlined by the “observers of the assembly.” Two days later, the participants, the audience, and the population of Berlin were invited to meet in front of the Bundestag to perform the *Storming of the Reichstag*. Guided by Milo Rau’s megaphone, the crowd of 500 people surged towards the German Parliament building in reference to the mass spectacle *Storming of the Winter Palace* by Soviet director Nikolay Evreinov, which itself re-enacted the key event of the Russian revolution, staged exactly 100 years earlier in Petrograd. Thus, the assembly of the global Third Estate was staged as a historical upheaval, conflating the present of its performance with past revolutions and utopias.

Over the course of the sessions, this revolutionary narrative was nevertheless carried out with an utterly non spectacular aesthetic, following well-defined procedural parliamentary rules that had been enunciated and approved by the delegates at the opening constituent session. Each delegate

was entitled to ten minutes of speech, votes were cast by a show of hand, questions had to be quick and concise in order to guarantee an equal representation of each delegate and topic. The assembly thus combined deliberation processes and decision-making exactly like usual parliamentary sessions. Conflating parliament and theatre institution, the form of *General Assembly* did not contest the very model of representative democracy. On the contrary, it honoured the theatricality of political representation by allowing delegates to speak for social groups and communities not represented in the parliaments of European nation-states. As a result, the assembly allowed them to acquire a political function unavailable outside of the assembly. Thus, the theatricality of the whole event allowed a thorough imitation of real parliamentary assemblies that actually helped enact its utopic potential; in following the script and playing their roles, the delegates engaged in debates and confrontations with each other, creating, thus, a hitherto non-existent global public sphere, a utopic political structure susceptible of superseding the existing one. In fact, the upstream media coverage of the event, its slogan “Democracy for Everyone and Everything” or “We are the 99 percent” (Rau and IIPM 2017, 24)—alluding to the Occupy Wall Street movement—were directly addressed to the incumbent German government whose policy and decisions the assembly declared as insufficiently democratic. As a matter of fact, members of the Bundestag were invited to attend the sessions and eight of them, mostly from left-wing parties, but including a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), ultimately joined the assembly. Thus, the assembly was performative in that it created an unprecedented political collectivity by enacting it, that is, by enabling a real exchange among its members and making it visible for the audience and the public at large.

The role of the audience in the assembly nonetheless remained consistent with that of the audience in regular parliamentary sessions. Separated from the delegates by a cordon, the audience was part of the parliamentary theatre, and its presence conferred each statement and decision a public character, thus legitimising the truthfulness of the unprecedented event. By listening to the delegates and their claims, the audience of the Schaubühne was addressed as world citizens and constantly reminded of the global entanglements of their Western living conditions, in accordance with Milo Rau’s entire aesthetic-political project of a *global realism* (Rau 2018). However, the second part of the event, the *Storming of the Reichstag*, allocated the audience a more active role in inviting it to run towards the Bundestag with the delegates and a crowd who joined the event, enacting thereby the revolutionary narrative orchestrated by Milo Rau. In fact, the demonstration, by no means self-organised or exposed to any kind of state violence, completely assumed its symbolic and festive character. The model of Nikolay Evreinov’s *Storming of the Winter Palace* is of particular interest here insofar as the original show, arguably a mass spectacle including 8,000 performers and 100,000 spectators, sought to mobilise revolutionary masses and the audience in a collective identity that the performance served both to represent and bring forth (Fischer-Lichte 2005). Staged

out of historical context and devoid of its massive dimension, the *Storming of the Reichstag* was less concerned about the real collectivity it may gather under its banner than about the very symbol it performed for the public at large. When the audience and the crowd quite playfully surged together towards the Bundestag, their performance was staged by author and director Milo Rau, symbolically playing the role of an agitator. Perhaps the demonstration did empower its participants in conveying a sense of belonging to a collectivity hitherto intangible. However, one might confront Rau's dramaturgy with the slogan of the participants' poster "Democracy for Everything and Everyone" and ask whether the audience, instead of performing global citizens or revolutionary masses, was rather cast as a crowd of anonymous bodies in the service of a respected theatre director's ideas. Maintaining the framework of political representation, the overall project of *General Assembly* clearly placed greater emphasis on its symbolic and prefigurative show—the public enactment of a political utopia—than on the real conditions of its collective making. As a result, the audience was rather performing a collectivity whose banners were pre-written by the overall rhetoric of the project—humanity as a "community of fate," participants as "world citizens"—and whose mode of action was dictated by the script of the performance. As powerful the symbol of a world parliament can be, one may ask whether the participants really felt empowered in performing a collective body, or whether the pre-given framework rather deprived them of any capacity of self-determination, and thereby turned the audience into a "powerless public" instead (Argyropoulou 2018, 214–218).<sup>6</sup>

### ***Parliament of Bodies***

In 2017, the decision to extend documenta's large-scale exhibition—held in Kassel since 1955—to Athens responded to three indicators of profound global change: the migratory flows that nation-states have been massively facing since 2015, the accompanying rise of Far Right and Populist movements throughout the world, and the so-called Greek Crisis resulting from the European Union's austerity policy. Greece, and the city of Athens in particular, thus turned out to be at the core of socio-political dynamics, bearing what artistic director Adam Szymczyk has called the "stigma of 'crisis' imprinted on the communal body in a well-known, pseudo-compassionate, moralising, and in its essence neocolonial and neoliberal formula" (Szymczyk 2017, 21). Connected to the German city of Kassel, the Greek capital was thus able to interrogate Europe's democratic foundations and political community supposedly represented by the European Union, and its role as a former colonial power whose cultural imperialism and neocolonial policies continue to this day. As a result, the exhibition foregrounded anti-colonial, transfeminist, and anti-fascist discourses and practices, and fostered a radical criticism of European knowledge production and democratic institutions in view of their limits and exclusions. This endeavour was notably revealed in

the overarching concept of the exhibition, the *Parliament of Bodies*, which suggests a non-logocentric approach to political participation and thus a radical rethinking of European traditional politics. In the context of documenta 14, the *Parliament of Bodies* was both the name of the public programme, curated by biopolitics philosopher Paul B. Preciado, as well as a specific site installed in both Kassel and Athens where artists, intellectuals, activists, and visitors could gather. The programme was first launched eight months before the beginning of the exhibition in Athens' Parko Eleftherias (Freedom Park) at the Municipality Arts Center, a building that used to be the headquarters of military police during the Greek dictatorship. In Kassel, the *Parliament of Bodies* was located in the rotunda of the Museum Fridericianum. Alongside being the most iconic site of documenta, the building was also one of the first public museums in late eighteenth-century Europe, transformed into a parliament in the early nineteenth century, used as a gathering place by the Nazi Party, and wrecked by bombs during the Second World War.

The sites of the *Parliament of Bodies* were designed by architect Andreas Angelidakis in reference to the different layers of both buildings' history. Instead of the "democratic fiction of semicircular amphitheater," it consisted of 68 blocks of ruins that the participants could assemble and disassemble, constructing the parliament as a "political theater every day, interrogating location, hierarchy, visibility, scale..." (Parliament of Bodies 2016). This "soft architecture" resonated with the *open form theory* developed by architect Oskar Hansen in the 1950s. Based on flexibility, participation and the production of relationship, the open form served as another key curatorial concept of documenta 14. In Kassel, the blocks were covered by military patterns, evoking both archaeological ruins and war industry. As a "parliament in ruins," the setting referred to the aftermath of the so-called 2015 long summer of migration and the failure of democratic institutions to represent the new refugee population who had arrived in Greece. "The Parliament was in ruins. The real Parliament was on the streets, constituted by unrepresented and undocumented bodies resisting austerity measures and xenophobic policies," declared curator Paul B. Preciado at the opening of the Parliament (Parliament of Bodies 2017a, n.d.a). Thus, the image of a Parliament in ruins bore a radical political potential by suggesting the decay of the Greek Parliament as both a representative institution and apparatus of the nation-state policy. Recalling Ancient Greece's civilisation, the motif of the ruins demanded a rethinking of the pillars of Western democracy altogether.<sup>7</sup>

This call for political imagination started seven days before the beginning of the exhibition in Athens with the programme "34 Exercises of Freedom." For ten days, artists, philosophers, theorists, and activists were invited in the *Parliament of Bodies* to "write a queer anticolonial symphony of Europe from the 1960s, scripting dialogue and giving visibility to dissident, heterogeneous, and minor narratives" (Parliament of Bodies 2016). The programme thus comprised performances; collective walks and film screenings on torture and military violence during dictatorships; talks from historians on resistance

strategies; inputs by theorists on transgenderism, Black internationalism, and women's activism in Rojava; talks on the memory of Indigenous peoples along the Pacific Northwest Coast; musical interventions; workshops on war traumas and ecosex activism; and DJ sets. This broad spectrum of topics and practices favoured an intersectional and transhistorical approach towards oppression, foregrounding resistance strategies and anti-hegemonic discourse:

The Parliament of Bodies acts against the individualization of bodies but also against the transformation of bodies into a mass, against the transformation of the public into a marketing target. Against essential origins, reified borders, and identity politics, the Parliament of Bodies proposes to act as a space for cultural activism, inventing new affects and creating synthetic alliances between different world struggles for sovereignty, recognition, and survival. Inspired by micropolitical self-organization, collaborative practices, radical pedagogy, and artistic experiments, the Parliament of Bodies is a critical device to queer both the ruins of democratic institutions as well as the traditional formats of the exhibition and public programs.

(Parliament of Bodies, n.d.a)

With its particular emphasis on performance, the *Parliament of Bodies*' programme was predicated on Paul B. Preciado's biopolitical conception of the body as a primary locus of resistance. Perhaps the attempt to create "new affects" and "synthetic alliances" finds its epitome in the *Ecosexual Walking Tour* organised by porn activist and former sex worker Annie Sprinkle together with her partner Beth Stephens in the public space of Kassel. There, performers initiated participants into different ways of having sexual intercourse with nature, encouraging the audience to interact with the air, sun rays, trees, and water. The event also included a protest in the name of ecosex, and all these actions were carried out in a cheerful and festive atmosphere. Although the moment when the performers encouraged the audience to jump together with their arms raised to "let the sun rays penetrate their skin" may evocate a New Age ritual of questionable political relevance, it was meant to promote sexual desire as a ground for more-than-human relationships and new forms of collective subjectivities (Sprinkle and Stephens 2016, 2017). Thus, the concomitance of theory, practice, pedagogy, and aesthetic experiences broke with the logocentrism of the notion of *parliament* in erasing the hierarchies between speech and action, science and art, reason and affect. Accordingly, the *Parliament of Bodies* aimed to constantly question Western cultural conditioning and one's own subject position; a process of *unlearning*, informed by postcolonial theory, guided the overall concept of the exhibition (Szymczyk 2017, 33). In contrast to the world parliament of *General Assembly* that relied on a representative model, the participants of the *Parliament of Bodies* were supposed to exercise equality and freedom in a situated and



processual way, embracing a “presentist democracy” (Szymczyk 2017, 36; see also Lorey 2020, 14–15) that took shape through alliances and affects among political subjects rather than identity and conceptions of the political present as interwoven with past power relations and collective struggles.

The democratic and anti-hegemonic endeavour of the *Parliament of Bodies* can also be applied to its relation towards the documenta 14 public. While a public programme traditionally fulfils an educational function in making the content of the exhibition available to a broader audience, curator Adam Szymczyk (2017, 36) wrote that documenta 14 was “interested in the knowledge that our audience brings with them [...]. Instead of infantilizing and quantifying the audience, documenta 14 hopes to empower visitors as the true owners of documenta, each holding a share in a common undertaking.” In the framework of the *Parliament of Bodies* in Athens, the documenta team collaborated with local actors to build six Open Form Societies on the model of the French *Société des amis des Noirs* founded in 1788. Claiming the abolition of slave trade, the society aimed to create “social and friendly bonds between those who were considered citizens and those who were considered legally and politically unequal” (Parliament of Bodies, n.d.b).<sup>8</sup> The Open Form Societies fulfilled similar aims, giving rise to groups such as the Apatride Society of the Political Others who explore global migration and decolonial discourses, and the Society of Friends of Sotiria Bellou who promote queer and transfeminist politics. This local work in Athens intended to foster models of solidarity, cooperation and alliance building among the public, and to enhance the polyphony of the *Parliament of Bodies*, which certain members of these societies joined in Kassel.

Ultimately, the project *Parliament of Bodies* was oriented against the very notion of a *public programme* as specific to cultural institutions of Western democracy. Instead of considering its public as the marketing target of the blockbuster exhibition, as an undifferentiated crowd of global tourists, it valued “radical subjectivities” (Szymczyk 2017, 32) and a form of collectivity based on alliances and solidarity. Thus, it replaced a “monolithic version of the ‘public’” with “scattered, singularized and networked subject[s]” (Phillips 2013) who were encouraged to enact the parliament together with the organisers, artists, and intellectuals present. In addressing the visitors as living bodies capable of being aesthetically and politically affected, the *Parliament of Bodies* was meant to oppose power structures that underlie Western democratic models and establish resistance, that is, freedom as a primary ground for practices of democracy and thus of collective action. Yet the notion of a public programme is itself infused with power structures. Curator Andrea Phillips has described public programmes as symptomatic of a contradiction that is characteristic of the contemporary art world. This tension lies between the “regulated bodies of those that constitute art’s public (with which it could not do without constitutionally in its normative form) and those same bodies’ desire to learn about, engage with and discuss art and ideas” (Phillips 2013). While public programmes aim at opening the institution, they

“physically and semantically refranchise the basic division between makers and recipients of intellectual production” (Phillips 2013). In other words, the concept of a public programme entertains a fiction of “egalitarian discursivity” while simultaneously maintaining a body of people to “programme” (Phillips 2013). That the *Parliament of Bodies* conceived its public precisely as bodies to empower does not neutralise this power structure intrinsic to institutions of knowledge production. This was notably made manifest during one of the sessions when a visitor addressed the accessibility of documenta for Kassel’s wide population. The visitor underlined the exhibition’s failure to be understood by a broader public, including Kassel’s refugee population, whereas it overtly thematised migration and minority issues. Curator Paul B. Preciado and architect Sandi Hilal—both part of the *Parliament of Bodies*’ programme—engaged in the debate (Parliament of Bodies 2017b), and both made a point of reiterating elements of discourse specific to the exhibition such as the power of art in imagining alternatives and the misleading separation between *us* (the Parliament) and *them* (Kassel’s public at large). In such moments, one may wonder whether the *Parliament of Bodies* really lives up to its anti-hegemonic claims, that is, to what extent the institutional authority of the curator present in the *Parliament* is compatible with a programme based on knowledge de-hierarchisation and unlearning processes. This situation perhaps most tellingly exemplifies the contradiction of a public programme promoting emancipation, resistance, and minor narratives. What is more, the *Parliament*’s programme and documenta 14’s handling of the so-called Greek Crisis proved to be hardly in tune with Athens’ population. The inhabitants notably accused, firstly, the exhibition of encouraging artwashing and crisis tourism, secondly, its discourse on classical heritage of transporting a neo-colonial and neoliberal ideology, and lastly, its overall curation of silencing the invisible “Others” it claimed to give voice to (Plantzos 2019). This clash between documenta 14’s ambitions and the population, plainly illustrated by reactions of local activists, cannot but suggest the exhibition’s failure to open its form and its *Parliament of Bodies*—namely—to spread its assemblist drive outside of institutional power.

The rise of assemblism has thus caused art and its European institutions to interrogate their own participation in the contemporary making of democracy. It has not solely multiplied alliances between artists and activists, but also catalysed their political imagination towards new forms of collectivities. The spread of the parliamentary form in art institutions underpins this collective movement by providing it with arrangements and stages which feature democracy as a mode of enactment and embodiment, and political alternatives as available scenarios. Yet alongside artists’ greater search for political alternatives, the spread of the parliamentary form, as well-meant as it might have been, perhaps also indicates yet another issue alongside the crisis of democratic institutions: the subjacent reshaping of art’s public function in the context of neoliberal cultural policies (Bishop 2012). The injunction of artists, curators, and state institutions to act on behalf of “the public”

in highlighting their commitment to the “common good”—two tasks commonly attributable to parliaments as well—also arises from the erosion of established public services, with the art sphere taking over duties abandoned by political leaders. Phillips (2016, 211) has also diagnosed the emphasis of contemporary art institutions on their civic function as symptomatic of the liberal individualisation of the civic through culture, leading, in turn, to a neoliberal privatisation of the concept of the public. In such circumstances, the spread of parliamentary performances in museums and theatres may just as well standardise nothing more than a “temporary solidarity,” which hardly leads to broader and more sustainable forms of collective action—namely, effective solidarity, beyond art institutions (Phillips 2016, 212). Following this criticism, democratic practices and forms of collectivities staged by alternative parliaments may appear as no less temporary and illusory. Rather than a *performative* or *experimentalist* democracy, their mimicry of political procedures, as in *General Assembly*, or search for other forms of political subjectivation, as in the *Parliament of Bodies*, might be deemed as a generalised theatricalisation of democratic life. The theatre vocabulary is imbued here with Platonic distrust, namely with its pejorative meaning of simulacrum or illusion (Rebentisch 2012). The illusion of solidarity and political participation, staged for and with the audience, would merely maintain the latter’s powerlessness as to state policies.

Nonetheless, reducing the spread of alternative parliaments to mere neoliberal governance technics would provide little regard for artistic imagination and, in some cases—like that of Jonas Staal, Milo Rau and Paul B. Preciado—for commitment to emancipatory struggles. Accounting for the performativity of such works emerging from the art sphere can hardly be tantamount to calculating their impact on society at large. In fact, projects such as *General Assembly* or the *Parliament of Bodies* enact alternative models of political collectivities as much as public assemblies do. They also prefigure the promises of “a future that is yet to be lived out” (Butler 2015, 169) and “*assemble* new definition[s] of Us” (Staal 2017a; original italics). Yet, when not self-organised in the streets but set up in art institutions, the question of the projects’ collectivity shifts to the body of the audience as a collective of bodies that are yet to assemble. As I would like to suggest, reconsidering the notion of audience helps negotiate the challenges posed by assemblism to art practices and institutions, precisely because assemblist morphologies and forms are able to shape its unchosen and plural collectivity as a political subject. Yet, just as Staal (2017a) reminds of the relation between power and form, the notion of subject is crucial here because it links power and agency. Considering the audience as a political subject thus requires allowing for its plurality and asking about the forms of collective subjectivities and actions that art can encourage and accompany. If art and its institutions choose to ally themselves with global activism, support the dynamics of assemblism, and effectively *give form* to an emancipatory power, they may need to identify and recognise the power structures they themselves exercise over the body of

the audience—in both repressive and emancipatory terms. As it reveals issues of power and agency, the audience indeed proves to be the first subject of experiments with radical democracy and redefinitions of collectivity. And it is its very plurality that calls for more exercises of freedom.

## Acknowledgement

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## Notes

- 1 “‘Us’ can be the self-proclaimed, enlightened liberal-democratic order (there’s not much liberal nor democratic about it) versus ‘Them’: the so-called terrorist, barbarian other. ‘Us’ can be the white, American upper and middle classes reinforcing their privilege against ‘Them’: people of color, immigrant communities, Muslims. ‘Us’ can be the Brexit voters claiming their country back from ‘Them’: the Eurocratic elites and the so-called tsunami of refugees” (Staal 2017a).
- 2 Isabell Lorey (2020) traces the global spread of transnational queer-feminist strikes back to the protests against feminicides initiated by the Argentinian movement NiUnaMenos in March 2015 in Buenos Aires, followed by the Black Protests of Polish women against the tightening of abortion laws in 2016. Both protests have since aroused solidarity throughout queer-feminist movements around the world.
- 3 In the context of biennials, one may think of architects Eyal Weizman and Samaneh Moafi’s spatial intervention at the 11th Gwangju Biennale (2016) entitled *Roundabout Revolution Folly*, which commemorated the 1980 student protests against the then dictatorial regime of South Korea, as well as the more recent events of the Arab Spring, both initiated on roundabouts. In front of Gwangju’s train station, the architects constructed a pavilion equipped with a large round table and a film studio, inviting the population to assemble: “To be translated into political power, the immanent power of the people at the roundabouts should be complemented by sustained work at round tables, the latter standing for the slow making and negotiation that politics demands” (Weizman 2015, 62). For another large-scale theatre project addressing political representation and participation, one may think of the 2015 project *Théâtre des Négociations* organised by Paris theatre Nanterre-Amandiers together with the Institute of Political Studies, theatre director Philippe Quesne, historian of literature Frédérique Ait-Touati, and philosopher Bruno Latour. For three days, the theatre invited students from around the world to re-enact the United Climate Change Conference (COP 21) and rethink the political representation of human collectivities and non-human forms of life. Three years later, with the rise of the global climate strike movement, Fridays for Future, it became clear that the assembly ultimately had to leave the conference hall and theatre to take place on the streets.
- 4 Jonas Staal also values the eponymous concept of documenta’s programme in “Assemblism” when he claims that “an architecture of collective power [cannot] exist if the collective is not literally present at that very moment. If the bodies disperse, the Parliament of Bodies ceases to exist” (Staal 2017a). What is more, Staal’s programme of assemblism keeps on expanding through the artist’s collaboration with curator and dramaturge Florian Malzacher who, in his 2020 book, *Gesellschaftsspiele. Politisches Theater heute*, commented on Staal’s

*New World Summit*, the aforementioned *Théâtre des Négociations*, and Milo Rau's *General Assembly*, presenting the notion of assembly as a core form of contemporary political theatre (Malzacher 2020, 113–134). Since then, Malzacher initiated the pluri-disciplinary project *Gesellschaftsspiele: The Art of Assembly*. Based on his book, and conceived during the COVID-19 pandemic, the project seeks to “brin[g] together protagonists from various fields of art, politics and theory to speculate on the potential of assembly in a time of experiencing that nothing is certain—a time in which every form of physical togetherness has become precarious” (*The Art of Assembly*, n.d.).

- 5 In his book *The Audience*, theatre scholar Herbert Blau defined the audience as a “body of thought and desire” instead of a “congregation of people,” as a “consciousness constructed” instead of an “entity to begin with” (Blau 1990, 28).
- 6 Returning to Butler's *Notes* (2015) to interrogate the category of the public, Argyropoulou (2018, 215) asks: “How then may performance practices, publics, institutions and machines resist performing powerless publics and initiate instead functional and imaginative (micro) forms of a liveable life as ongoing processes of social improvisation?”
- 7 For another *assemblist*-type project, based on the ruins of a parliament and claiming an immanent democracy, see the work *Common Assembly* by architect collective DAAR (Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency) in Sandi et al. (2013, 150–177).
- 8 For the complete list of the Open Form Societies, see *Parliament of Bodies* (n.d.a).

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**Part IV**

**Artists Speak!**





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# Manifest 1: On Eating and Being Eaten

Notes on the zürich moves! 2019  
Research and Contextualisation

*Marc Streit*

I am starting off this input with a quote by bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins), an American author, professor, feminist, and social activist: “The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it’s to imagine what’s possible” (2006, 281). This describes pretty much my approach to realising projects and encountering and challenging my own norms—or rather, escaping from them.

I am the founder and artistic director of *zürich moves! festival for contemporary arts practice in performing arts* and was the deputy artistic director at Tanzhaus Zürich—a production house for contemporary dance—until the 30th of September 2019. I understand myself as a connector, networker, organiser, contextualiser, producer, and host in the field of contemporary performance and dance.

Every year, the *zürich moves! festival* is constructed around a different topic and builds a different curatorial context. The multifaceted platform creates time-based experiences and engages and challenges the embodied presence and abstraction of the body. The very core idea of the festival is to bring contemporary performance to more hybrid spaces, disrupting the distance between performer and audience, creating an artistic flow, and breaking the traditional and classical ideas of normative thinking. During the past eight editions, I forged the festival into a happening of artists and spectators—an intersection between art and life. I consider the spectator a co-inhabitant of the respective space and want to free them from being a passive observer. In this regard, I am not talking about participatory pieces but rather the way in which an audience is addressed and taken into consideration, and therefore engages on a very personal level with the respective work. This should grant access to the work itself and metaphorically displace me and bring me to another universe.

Live performance rooted in dance and theatre has always been my main interest, and the recent development and shift in the field keeps nourishing my enthusiasm. I am very much driven by the creative process in performance practice—in which failure and slippage are integral parts—as well as vulnerability and precariousness due to liveness and ephemerality. Precariousness is also reflected in the programming of contemporary performance

and dance, as the perception of the audience once again is as individual as its diversity.

I am interested in hybrid forms of contemporary performance.

By contextualising and queering both bodies and spaces, I am looking for experiences that push boundaries and investigate our contemporary society beyond physical performance.

Contemporary performance, for me, is about creating images and experiences for both the performer and the spectator.

What fascinates me most in the field of contemporary performance is the fact that we are dealing with real bodies in real time; yes, humans—an audience that must be considered not only in the artistic creation of pieces but also in the mediation and presentation of these artistic works. I am interested in collective experiences, in making things visible, freeing them from invisibility, giving them dignity and credit.

With my initiatives, I intend to gather people and foster real encounters. I consider art a metaphorical exile, a place of resistance and action, that can and should create new perspectives and new meaning!

My practice usually evolves out of a thematic focus and the various ways we coexist and inhabit the world. It frequently starts from a very personal urgency to look at socially relevant topics.

My research and the process of constructing a certain context is always inextricably tied to an overall discourse and the content of the respective artistic works that are being presented alongside each other. This process is the gradual assembly of building blocks, step by step, that in discourse, would form a whole. It is always a balancing act to frame an artistic work and yet give the work enough room to let it speak for itself.

In order to give you an idea and insight into my practice I would like to tell you about the eighth edition of *zürich moves!* which took place in Zurich from the 8 to 13th April 2019 and as an extended collaboration with *Atos de Fala* festival in Rio de Janeiro from the 28th of May to the 2nd of June 2019.

Have we in fact all become homeless? Did the subjective house dissolve, collapse, disappear? Where is identity? How can we construct an identity in this world where national, cultural, ethnic, religious, social, and sexual territories have lost their aura of truth, irreversibly denaturalized themselves, got mixed up in all possible ways, fluctuate or cease to exist? How can we rebuild a territory in this shifting world? How to get along with this disorientation? How to reorganize some meaning? How to conquer free zones of serenity? And this transnational chorus oscillates in variations on the theme, variations composed by affective positions that range from wonder to the apocalyptic. Hope or hopelessness, it's all the same: poles of a moralistic position that naturalizes a value system and uses it to interpret, judge, and predict what is going on—a happy ending or the end of everything.

(Rolnik 1998, 137)

During my research and while conceptualising the thematic frame, I let myself be guided by feminist perspectives and arguments, in particular, Carolin Emcke, Sara Ahmed, Audre Lorde, Rebecca Solnit, and Suely Rolnik.

Feminism brings human beings together. Feminism must take root everywhere because feminism has not yet been established everywhere. It moves against the flow and consistently insists upon something, time and time again, on the continuous existence of precisely those things that we wish to put an end to. Or possibly, feminism is a manner of starting anew. A feminist movement consists of various moments of a new beginning, as claimed by Sara Ahmed in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017).

I have travelled a lot; I work in an international cultural environment and wish to promote personal encounters. This reality entails a certain complexity and demands an adaptable outlook on globalised cultural production. As a result of focussing on cultural appropriation and anthropophagy, I came to reflect upon cultural cannibalism and the analysis of different cultures within the scope of contemporary cultural creativity and development.

Increasingly, artists and cultural workers, as well as organisations, take part in international activities. Common projects, exchanges, residencies, co-productions, and other forms of collaboration foster understanding for different practices and cultures and build bridges by ensuring personal encounters. Within the scope of such projects, *power relations* are not uncommon, because challenges created by unequal economic or technical conditions, or a lack of certain human rights, play a major role regarding the implementation of projects and influence them decisively. I have gained much practical experience realising numerous international projects and am aware that honest and, in part, also unpleasant discussions are part of the process and that, at the end of the day, they strengthen the trust of all partners.

I am consciously mentioning this in reference to the topic of the eighth edition of *zürich moves!*, as with this edition, colonial history, the representation of cultural minorities and globalised cultural production are obviously unavoidable topics that I had to take into consideration.

I consider art to be a metaphorical exile, a place of resistance and action, that can and should create a new perspective and new meaning.

I am interested in creating relational dynamics where art functions as an open, derivative, unpredictable, and challenging process.

(García 2018)

## Cultural Appropriation

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *appropriation* as: “The making of a thing private property [...]; taking as one’s own or to one’s own use” (OED 1989).

Cultural appropriation therefore describes cultural transformation. The discourse on cultural appropriation has been underway in the US, the UK,

and Australia since the 1970s and 1980s. It refers to the adoption of cultural elements by members of a different cultural group.

Cultural appropriation requires moments of negotiations and does not aim at definitive results.

(Hahn 2011)

The minstrel shows in late nineteenth-century America are a good example of today's understanding of cultural appropriation: painted *whites* performed different stereotypes to stultify and demean BIPOC for the amusement of a *white* audience.<sup>1</sup> Today, this is known as Blackfacing. Cultural appropriation is particularly controversial in contemporary society because individuals belonging to the dominant culture appropriate things belonging to Indigenous or minority cultures.<sup>2</sup> Those belonging to the dominant culture do not have to fear discrimination on the labour market, nor do they have to face possible police brutality due to their ethnicity. Cultural appropriation, in my opinion, always becomes relevant when there is an imbalance of power.

As Greg Tate, the American cultural theorist, argued in his book *Everything but the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture* (2003), when addressing cultural appropriation, you need to look beyond culture in the stricter sense of the term, i.e., past music, theatre, dance, or visual arts. Cultural appropriation is about culture in the broader sense, culture as a way of life or a form of perception, the way people lend sense to themselves and the world they live in.

A culturally modern, hybrid and fluid society does not legitimise violation or disregard minority cultures. However, political correctness should not be the sole incentive—permanent re-adjusting and questioning our own thoughts and actions are called for. This means constantly reflecting upon your own position in society and continually refreshing your cultural memory.

Just as respect and acknowledgement require recognition of the other; disregard and hate are often to be led back to misjudgement of the other.  
(Emcke 2016, 97–98)<sup>3</sup>

The diversity in our society, as well as nomadic lifestyles and work habits, lead us to question our identity, over and over again.

An inclusive society does not allow foreigners or the Other to be excluded from a dominant culture but ensures that they are met with interest and esteem, respect, and generosity.

In my case, I was primarily dealing with cultural appropriation within the context of contemporary performance and dance. How do we deal with a collaborative work process in contemporary performance? Does the collaborative creative process encourage appropriation, or does it help us practice cultural dialogue? How is appropriation reflected in transnational cultural

production? Obviously, when realising cultural and collaborative projects, a certain form of appropriation arises. The dimension and argumentation demand constant questioning and multidisciplinary reflection. I was—and still am—interested in the abundance of approaches towards this discussion, and particularly the philosophical one. To me, it is impossible to consider this moral issue and discourse without taking into account a philosophical perspective.

A pluralisation of perspectives is called for—a critical questioning of perception and knowledge that is often neglected in a dominant culture. By doing so, I would like to underline singularity because, after all, whether a Muslim, migrant, trans person, person of colour, or member of any other minority, we are all basically on a quest for happiness and dignity. Arguably, this is a fine line. I assume we are interested in discovering similarities and not primarily in identifying differences; this is the only way to give rise to empathy.

And now to the more specific discourse, which was used to contextualise the programme.

### **Anthropophagy—On Eating and Being Eaten**

[It isn't] about devouring the antagonist or colonizer; it is about liberating relationships from colonial intentions, not as a strategy to create a new art work but as a political act towards the relationships with the other.

(Cubas, n.d.)

Anthropophagy refers to the practices of the Tupinamba (Tupi), a group of Indigenous peoples, who populated a large part of Brazil before it was colonised by the Portuguese. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, prior to colonisation, the Tupi's cannibalistic ritual also involved eating captured enemies. This was an important component of the intercultural contact between the Tupinamba and the Portuguese assailants. Its ritualistic mechanism was an important element in the formation of a "new" Brazil, creating a new identity for the Tupi and a negotiation of one for the latter.

Eating the Other (the enemy), is an extreme form of physical dominance. This consumption of the Other was not a destruction—nor a defence—mechanism but meant mixing identities. The cannibalistic ritual allowed the Other to enter into the body of the devouring and thus form a new and strengthened creature. Anthropophagy is particularly interesting regarding assimilation and physical and erotic communication. The anthropophagous ritual could extend over months or even years; cannibalism was only one stage of the overall process. Because of the horror and frightening notion the ritual created in the eyes of the European intruders, it became the most referred to. In the current discourse of post-colonial thinking, this can also be problematic given the white context in which the concept of anthropophagy has been reformulated in twentieth-century modernist and tropicalist periods.

When we think of anthropophagy, we solely think of devouring slain enemies. The ritual, however, is far more complex. When an enemy was caught, they would remain with the women of the tribe for a long period of time. They were only killed after the process of assimilation, once a relationship with the Other had been established. The killing strengthened their own culture because of the victim's Otherness. Then, the anthropophagous ritual commenced, adhering to very precise rules. Only one person would not partake in it: the person who killed the enemy. They had to leave the tribe to find a second name, paint their body anew, and thus represent the presence of the slain enemy on their own body. Killing was the most radical form in the experience of Otherness. After the killer's return, they represented a form of contamination of their own culture with foreign elements. If this destabilisation could be dealt with, a new balance would form.

Anthropophagy was reinterpreted by modern society in twentieth-century Brazil, however, the particularities of the anthropophagous movement remained fairly unknown outside of the country. Tropicalismo (*Tropicália*) is the most widespread notion in this context and serves as an umbrella term for the movement.<sup>4</sup> Between 1922 and 1956, theoreticians of modern Brazilian society used the concept of anthropophagy as a metaphor for the appropriation and interpretation of new ideas from Europe in the local context. This provided post-colonial Brazil with a tool to blend the concept and methodology of the integration of art, culture, and political history.

In his essay "Manifesto Antropófago" ([1928] 1990), Oswald de Andrade illustrates how Brazil's modern society experiences cultural production that is simultaneously more local and more international. Even until today, "Manifesto Antropófago" serves as a paradigm, demonstrating, in an exemplary manner, the formation of a modern and cosmopolitan—albeit authentic—Brazilian culture that for a while now is no longer solely influenced by Europe. Furthermore, Andrade emphasises how this "new" culture breathes new life into the global cultural landscape. With cultural cannibalism, he fosters a juxtaposition of civilisation and barbarism, the modern and the primitive, the original and the derived.

Based on Oswald de Andrade's essay, Suely Rolnik, a Brazilian psychotherapist, culture and art critic, deduced the notion of *anthropophagous subjectivity*. Her text was published for the first time in 1998 for the 24th Bienal de São Paulo, the focus of which was anthropophagy. Rolnik attempted to underline the entanglement of artistic approaches on a global level with the correlation of cultural practice. Anthropophagous polemics, and the discussion of cultural appropriation, should never be reduced to a general picture or style but should serve as an opportunity for the continuous reformulation of a cultural and societal identity. In an interview, Suely Rolnik (2016) said:

You can understand the body in different manners. The body is part of the world. The other is not outside, as you would normally assume. The outer other is the other of political correctness that wants to be

represented properly. But the other is created by my subjectivity—it is not outside. Words hold power, which is why I always work on my wording, and the other is the most misleading.

Rolnik (2018) couples this understanding of subjectivity with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of percept and affect. Hybridisation and fluidity are therefore necessary for the construction of new universes and territories.

The continuous reinterpretation of anthropophagy always led to a social transformation. Anthropophagy serves as an important tool in dealing with the policy of subjectivity—the policy of the subject and mastering positive interaction with the Other. Since the shift to the right in 2016—for the first time since the military dictatorship of the 1980s—Brazil is once again suffering from tremendous inequality and brutal violence against minorities. Understanding the Other has therefore become more essential than ever in that it encourages a collective identity.

In 2019, *zürich moves!* hosted a research laboratory under the title, “On Eating and being Eaten.” The laboratory began in Zurich in April during the *zürich moves!* festival and continued in May in Rio de Janeiro during the *Atos de Fala* festival. Eight artists from Brazil, Switzerland and Germany participated in the lab and had the opportunity to exchange ideas around appropriation, collaboration, creation, and artistic practice in two very different landscapes of today's contemporary performance scene. The project was supported by COINCIDENCIA, an initiative from the Swiss Arts Council, Swissnex Brazil and Goethe Institut Rio de Janeiro.

## Notes

- 1 Regarding people, the adjective *white* is not a colour but an often-used connotation and attribution within the context of racism, dominance, and power, which is why it has not been capitalised and is in italics.
- 2 Members of the dominant culture/majority culture are all those people who, based on the ethnic attribution, *white*, benefit from societal circumstances.
- 3 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
- 4 Tropicalism or the tropicalist movement was a cultural movement in Brazil that developed under the influence of avant-garde artistic trends, as well as national and foreign pop culture. This movement defined goals that, under the military regime of the late 1960s, determined a large part of society and largely manifested in music and artistic outputs within the realms of fine arts, cinema, and Brazilian theatre. An example of this movement is Caetano Veloso's song, “Tropicália.”

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# Manifest 2: What Do We Want? Society! When Do We Want It? Now! “Come Together” and Its Discontents

*Wojtek Ziemilski*

You see them clearly. A cluster of people. They are together. They form a group of some sort. There’s an optimistic, upbeat vibe to them.

Now, they look at you. They seem genuinely interested. They start to speak to you. And although you are not alone, they tell you they want you—yes, you, specifically you—to join them. At first, it sounds a bit ridiculous, but they keep on going, becoming more and more convincing—funny, clever, seductive.

Oh, and by the way—they are performing in a show, on a stage. And you are sitting on the other side, as an audience member. Still and silent. Anonymous and apparently passive. What they want from you, what they ask, what they encourage you to do, is to change that. To join them on the stage. An actor: someone who acts. Apparently it’s that easy: go and act.

There is just one more thing: you have been warned that this is only a show. Just before the actors (?) appeared on the stage, the stage manager read the director’s letter stating clearly: this is not an interactive show. Don’t interact with the actors, there is a fourth wall, don’t get up, it’s important. All through the show, there is a huge sign reminding you of that first announcement: PLEASE DO NOT ENTER THE STAGE. Problem is, the performers, they seem oblivious to it. And it’s so simple. So bloody simple: “Come Together.”

*Theatre requires honesty, so I’ll tell you straight that we need 4–5 people, who would LIKE to be here with us. We’ll give you some micro tasks. I’ve been doing this for 30 years and now you can join me on the stage. Come here and perform.*

At the premiere, not a single person moves. They are all insiders. Too close for comfort. They are not here to build a commune. They *are* the commune. No wonder nothing new grows here. The superego knows perfectly how to deal with the titillation. *It’s all in the head.* In the tension between the impossibility and the potential. In the hypothesis that other minds think alike. And so, we *are* in this together. We—the audience—become the commune of resistance. Protecting ourselves from what we want. But how do we know? How are we to know what will happen if we do dive in? Well, we were told, weren’t we? Isn’t that enough? Do we really want to spoil the show? Ruin

everything? No, this is pleasant enough, imagining what could happen. The erotic is everything that precedes, prevents the consumption. Dreaming it is risky enough, exciting enough. Joining them on the stage? 'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. The wishing's the thing.

*Look—we're flooded by hatred; it surrounds us everywhere. And it is only getting worse. And here, on the stage, what bad can happen? In this context, coming here seems easy and, you know, why not?*

Then, starting with the second show, they start coming in: the spectator adventurers, the audacious audience, the brave, and the hopeful. They get carried away and fall into the illusion.

*What bad can happen to you here? What can go wrong?*

The protocol keeps evolving. The fear, at first, is that the audience may be overwhelming in their attempts to reach the actors. They can ruin the whole show by staying on the stage and demanding to be included. So, the ushers need to act quickly and very firmly. After a few shows we realise we were wrong—the spectators are usually quite timid and unsure if this is the right thing to do. Reacting firmly turns it into something more violent than it needs to be. So, the final protocol is: wait for the spectator to enter the white stage. Once they become part of the show, and are acknowledged as such, one of the ushers approaches them and tells them, in a calm and friendly way (smile!), that unfortunately they are disturbing the show and it cannot continue if they are on the stage. They are kindly requested to return to their seat. Meanwhile, the performers stop acting and move away, just as they would in any other show threatened by the intrusion of a spectator. If the spectator resists in any way, the performers leave the stage. The usher comes back two more times to ask the spectator to leave, and if it doesn't work, the spectator is left alone on the stage. This method proved to be very effective and gave enough space for the spectator's appearance, all the while making sure it was clear they were now on their own, and the show mustn't go on.

*Listen! You'll come here and together we'll create something different, a team, a community.*

One last important addition was: once the spectator left the stage (there wasn't a single occurrence of them not leaving at all), the performers returned and assembled to discuss among themselves where they should restart—and they always chose a fragment at least one to two minutes before the moment they were interrupted. That way the theatrical device is made even more transparent, and one could feel the urge to go onstage becoming even more paradoxical.

*You see? They're just sitting and that's it. It's difficult when you need to act. Come on, let's show we're Europeans and we can cooperate! It can be real integration!*

Some well-meaning spectators intervene many times in a row, or one after another, refusing to believe there is no hole in this performance which could open another door. It feels like a Greek tragedy, where no sign is strong enough to prevent yet another mortal from succumbing to the illusion of free will.

*Who smokes here? Don't raise your hands, I can already see who's smiling.*

*L: If you want to smoke, just come here. Theatre rules are simple: you can smoke on the stage; you can't do it in the audience.*

*L: Wojtek, you want a cigarette?*

*W: Sure, thanks.*

*I have one more cigarette if anyone wants. I'm waiting here for you.*

Okay, I admit it—over the years, the arrogance of so many of us, believing so conveniently that a quick introduction of “another world is possible” is enough to actually enter that world; the arrogance of that artistic, innocently or cynically optimistic and utterly ridiculous construction had become unbearable. All those performances claiming a different kind of participation, a different kind of (instant!) community, all those artists thinking of themselves as performative political magicians who would do wonders for the world, admittedly in a small black box, but still, or maybe even—thanks to that—with the select few, they would truly, truly heal the world. What's worse: it wasn't just us. It was the car producers, software producers (bloody Apple, damn Facebook), currency producers... And we keep buying it; we keep accepting the most ridiculous versions of the new Jerusalem.

*The two of you, you're here together, right? OK, so it's enough that one of you decides to get on the stage. Just imagine how much you'll gain if one of you does it. They say you find out most about another person in exceptional circumstances. That it's a test. For me, it's more a change of perspective. And you'll remember seeing this other person in a totally different light until the end of your relationship.*

A known writer intervenes. He is very confident. He refuses to leave. For 15 minutes. Literally. He stands on the stage, giving a beautiful address to the audience about the necessity of intervening, and taking part, and that he is absolutely sure something will happen any minute now, it's surely a trick, there is another level, something else will come out of it. He goes on and on. The ushers, two of them, are young and inexperienced; they are desperate and unconvincing. The man stays completely unfazed. Finally, a more experienced usher, who is, coincidentally, also my student and knows my work

quite well, arrives and shows the writer that he just spent 15 minutes alone on the stage and has prevented anything else from happening. I was not there during that show—had I been there, I would have probably thought, by then, that I made the most reactionary show I had ever witnessed. The writer realises his mistake and goes back to his seat, humbled.

After the show, he waits for the actors at the bar and tells them he is a fan of my work and I had made so many interactive and participatory shows that he was absolutely and positively sure there had to be an outcome, a different world, something. He couldn't get himself to believe that it was his own imagination running wild. At the bar he keeps apologising, thinking he ruined the show. The actors try telling him it's okay.

When he leaves, another spectator sees the group at the bar and approaches them. He tells them he loved the show but found the actor who came from the audience and pretended he wanted to stop the show completely unconvincing.

*W: Later you'll have great sex.*

*L: Well, it's not only about that...*

*W: But they will have great sex.*

*L: You know, when you type "How to Come Together" into Google, all the results will relate to having an orgasm. And we are dealing with coming together professionally, so we really know what we're talking about.*

*W: We know how to do it—just get on the stage.*

"Come Together," the gorgeous song by the Beatles urging us to do exactly as the title says, is actually "gobbledygook," to use John Lennon's own expression. In the late 1960s, the psychedelic drug guru Timothy Leary campaigned for president and asked Lennon to write him a campaign song. So, he did, making sure the text was nonsensical enough to never be useful for anything.

And yet, what remains, in all our heads, is the title. Oh, the gullible us. And the beauty of it—we can't resist it. We really can't. How can this performance be but a performance?

*Maybe it doesn't have to be such a grand entrance? Just something ordinary. The stage can be an ordinary place. Let's dim the lights a bit more and then someone enters. We won't look at you, there's plenty of space...*

A man high on drugs intervenes. It takes a while to convince him to get off the stage. He wants to pee on the stage; he is quite aggressive. He goes back to his seat but occasionally, gets up and tries to explain to the other audience members that we are bullshitting them. He doesn't believe in the fiction. He doesn't believe in the fun, either. He does it to save the audience from the fake prophets of communion. He is being asked to stop by the ushers and ends up leaving. Just before that, he approaches several spectators, telling

them: “Don’t you understand? Don’t you understand what is happening here? What is going to happen to you?”

*I understand you’re afraid now. I’ve been there. It’s like during a book signing event; there’s the Q&A, you really want to ask something, but you lack courage. Then it’s over and you regret it. On your deathbed, you only regret things you didn’t do.*

During the break, tables full of cocktail food are brought in and the spectators can come down for a snack. In the middle of the break, the intruder comes running back in, chased by two security guards, jumps on the tables, runs past them, but then gets caught by the guards and escorted outside. When the audience leaves at the end of the show, there is a police car parked in front of the main entrance of the theatre with its siren on. The man is sitting on the back seat, the light is lit. It’s the most theatrical scene I have witnessed in a long time. How can we build something on these never-ending layers of theatricality?

*This world only lasts a moment! It will be gone soon! This is the moment of truth when you can join us and create that utopian space of community! Right here, another Republic is possible, here in the place nobody believes in but in which we all believe.*

It starts off by somebody saying, “I will love you forever.” We all know that this is impossible. And the person who says it knows (and refuses to know) that this is impossible. They claim authority but don’t have it. The moment requires infinity. At least when you say, “I will love you forever” there is a certain amount of time you will be given. But the basic principle is: I don’t really mean it, because I couldn’t. We are both living the dream of it being so, and let’s keep on dreaming as long as we can.

Well, here is a theatre performance. And the hidden, implicit statement is: we will create a commonality, a space of togetherness, of sharing, an immediate society. And we all know this is unrealistic. Just as we know there is no forever, we are aware that there is no immediate society. There is no future for us. So, let’s keep on dreaming.

*That’s why we need you, people without this burden of theatrical process. You are theatre’s last hope.*

The constant, necessary feeling that a closer embrace is just around the corner.

My mum, who wrote about Grotowski during his Wrocław period and hung out with him a lot, told me the story of how he panicked when one of his open improvisation sessions turned into an orgy. That was not the point! Paradise is never now—it cannot be now. If anything, this is a postponement. The drive needs another outcome, a symbolic transformation.

We want to feel together, so we cannot come together. The communion cannot be. In that sense, catharsis is the basic and yet crucial realisation that we got carried away.

Of course, one possible, obvious reason is that primitive, spectacular architecture of actors and spectators. Yet the promise of another world promises just that—another world. It’s a world where we may be together. It just won’t be here.

*L: This scene will stay with you forever. You’ll go home and this is what you’ll see before falling asleep. Just because none of you moved their arse off their seat... I would hate theatre after this. I hate it!*

*M: Lena is now in absolute despair. And her evening is ruined.*

A child intervenes. Right in the middle of the crying scene. (The actors progressively become desperate, and one of them starts crying, using all her acting prowess, begging anyone to come on stage.)

We all panic. That was the one potential intervention we hadn’t discussed: a child. So simple. And so perfect in undoing the cunning construction. There is no spoon? Really? Why is a woman crying, then?

The child is ten.

Nobody reacts. The ushers are flabbergasted. It takes them forever to move onto the stage and ask the boy to leave. He has time to stay there with her, and console her, bent over her sobbing figure. Beautiful and disturbing, empowering and humiliating, fake and real. Together.

After the show, the actress who did the scene, Lena, tells us it was her son. We’re all terribly worried that we put her son in such a terrible position. He must have felt horrible. What a mess. Confusing theatre with reality—but of course, he’s just a child, and although he knows his mum is an actress, she was very convincing, and she’s his mother, for crying out loud!

Later that night, back at home, she talks to him about what happened. She asks him, what went through his head. Why did he go on stage? Did he not think she was acting? He answers: “Come on, mum. That’s so obvious! Someone is crying and asks for help. Why wouldn’t I?”

*You are the worst. The worst audience we’ve had so far. I mean it’s never easy, but at least two to three people do come on the stage. Sometimes everyone!*

Oh, bloody me. Now I’ve made myself a nightmare of a dystopia. With a little help from my friends, mind you, The Ironic Communitas Society is what we should be called, devising this absurd thing for the sick pleasure of a perverted society lover. This one stage manager (we call them *inspicjent* here, much more mysterious) saw it and she said it was terrible, because it didn’t respect the rules it set. Yes, dear, that is precisely what happens.

Why make a society that asks for participation but doesn't provide space for it? And nothing comes out of it? *Change we can believe in*. Sure, we can. So what?

*I'm extremely disappointed. You know, we're doing all this here and you just don't give a shit. We're asking you, begging you and you don't give a shit. And I'm fed up... One person, just one... Is this too much to ask for? Is this such a fucking challenge? One person on the stage... anyone...*

A group of high-school students intervene. They are well organised. They have been studying ethics, they have ambitious teachers, they *know* the importance of intervening. There are about eight of them. They stay for ten minutes. That is a long time. They are not sure what to do. They try interacting with the audience, but there is no traction. Two of them start playing hand games with each other. They leave one by one. Their attempt is beautiful, romantic, empty, and yet not futile—or futile and yet not empty. It's like Kant's experience of the sublime—it may not fulfil its goal, but the spectators of the event have the possibility to witness it and become inspired. Indeed. Only here it's more complex. It's not easy to say who and what is sublime, and who fails, and who is observing, and if there is not a temporary success happening here after all—people manage to be together. Not as they imagined it would be, not with the actors, not with the show, but maybe, just to exalt myself a little, somewhat like Rousseau wanted, being their own performance, enjoying their own state of becoming something else, without any outside assistance. Maybe just the frame. *Just* the frame.

*Come Together* was an attempt at coming together.



# Manifest 3: Torn Apart

*Ema Hesterová and Peter Sit (APART collective)*

I grew out of a place of impossibility.  
In an exhausted soil.  
Glued the body together when there was nothing to glue it with.

They were supposed to nourish me. But they didn't.  
I had to nourish myself.

They were supposed to guide me. But they didn't.  
I had to guide myself.

I fed the body and the limbs grew longer.  
Stronger limbs can carry a bigger body.  
A bigger body needs a bigger heart.  
A bigger heart feels more.

More feelings, more problems.  
Too many problems, a crisis.

They put pressure on me and sometimes, my limbs break.  
Sometimes one. Sometimes two.  
Sometimes all of them.

I get exhausted from all the healing.  
I get exhausted from all the feeling.

I try to repair. I fail.  
At least I have my limbs.  
And they have me.

We're all in this together.

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*We are living on the edge of our strength. We can't live like this anymore. And we feel it. The fucking system got us here. It's not capitalism anymore, it is something worse and we can't see the way out. Something worse is coming.*

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Maybe. Sometimes.  
There is no remedy.  
There is no cure.

There's only suffering. One can never be sure.

Struggling people of the world, unite.

\*\*\*

*All the emotions, anxiety and depression made me feel like a person trapped at the bottom of the ocean—in a kind of abyss. Not exactly at the bottom—imagine you are half a metre above the bottom and that's the place where you trapped yourself. You can't fall and bounce off, but neither can you flow up; you are just staring at the bottom, and it feels like infinite tension. I'd been trapped there for a while when suddenly my body dropped down, and my feet felt the ocean ground. It was such a relief, my anxiety immediately ceased. I felt a glimmer of steadiness and then I was able to look up, and in the absence of light, in the distance, I saw the sun's rays gently penetrating through the surface of the water—there was a glimpse of light. Usually, we are scared to be at the bottom of our abyss; what we want is to swim to the light and get above the water's surface. But that's not the goal. What we need to realise is that we will never be able to get above the water's surface, what we need to learn is to move along the axis of the abyss, navigate through the bottom, navigate around the light, and get to know the space in between. And space in between is fluid; not just fluid as a state but as a form in which length cannot be measured, so sometimes space in between can seem endless and the bottom of your abyss unexplained.*

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I can't do this on my own.  
All this is too heavy.  
They are tearing my limbs off.

Who's going to save me?  
Who's going to bring me back to life?  
How can I save them when I can't even save myself?

At least we have one another.  
Don't we?  
If we burn, we burn together.

My limbs. Wounded.  
My heart. Aching.  
My life. Stolen.

At least we have one another.

## ***In a Historical Perspective. Interview*** **with Susan Buck-Morss**

DOROTA SAJEWSKA AND MAŁGORZATA SUGIERA: *We feel very pleased that you agreed to take part in this interview which sums up issues addressed in the volume Crisis and Communitas. While keeping in mind your previous work, we would like to focus primarily on your truly inspiring book YEAR 1: A Philosophical Recounting (2021). Although from a different angle, you are interested in categories of collective belonging, among other subjects, which is also the topic shared by all articles gathered here. You call YEAR 1 “a project in the reconfiguration of knowledge” (8). By that you mean to radically overturn the basic epistemological preconceptions of modernity—primarily these conceptual frames that divide and order the record of human experience. In order to loosen our own boundedness to modernity’s categories, that in this transitional moment have become a form of entrapment, you consider the modern project of history as an entry point into the constellation of meanings that circle around concepts central to contemporary debates with a clear intention to undermine their fantasised stability. What is of importance for us, among those key concepts, are two words which appear in this volume’s title: crisis and community. Let us start with the first one to open our talk. As you underline in YEAR 1, the word crisis derives from krisis in koine—the commonly spoken Greek at the time—and your book intends to approach this term in a novel way, as a word for judgement in the book of Revelation. Then, you refer to Reinhart Koselleck’s “Crisis” to demonstrate that since the second half of the eighteenth century, the concept of crisis has become the fundamental mode for interpreting historical time and attributing power to change itself as, for instance, in Marx’s theory of crisis. Nevertheless, in YEAR 1, you do not elaborate any further on this concept and its use today. Could you kindly do it now? For instance, how could we destabilise the modern concept of crisis to make our shared consciousness of crisis less about a dreamy revolution and more about common practices that could produce a composite of political actors across national, ethnic, gender, etc. divides, as you explain in one of your earlier books, Revolution Today (2019)?*

SUSAN BUCK-MORSS: *Thinking of crisis today, images of the devastation of our environment immediately come into our minds. Some—floods, famines, wars, locusts, volcanoes, tsunamis, earthquakes—appear in the book of Revelation. These are natural events, disastrous to humans but not to*

the planet. While rare, they have been experienced by every generation. Our era, the late-Anthropocene, is unprecedented in the human-caused destruction of the planet in ways that could never have been predicted by the book's author, John of Patmos. To read into his book the inevitability of today's problems is to shirk our own deep responsibility for the alarming state of our planet. Now let us recall, as you note, that the word *crisis* means *judgement*. There is no ontology in the book of Revelation. Good and evil are the consequence of actions, not the identity of particular beings. This is another way of saying that people are judged by what they do, not who they are (their religion, their nationality, their skin colour). Moreover, to judge well is not easy, because we cannot be sure we are correct. And still, we are responsible, which is not the same as resilient. Judging requires courage as well as humility. It requires wisdom, which is not the same as raw intelligence.

So we need to clarify: The book of Revelation is not a prediction (only we moderns have the hubris to claim to know the future), but a prophetic (visionary) commentary on the events of the recent past, that can include a recognition of mistakes that have been made. Revolution is indeed not the goal of such reflection in our time. Not a forced break or rupture; but a brake, a slowing of movement so that others can climb aboard, a picking up of discarded pieces of past wisdom that have been thrown aside, a respect for how difficult it is to choose a course of action, how it requires training in the praxis of judgement. And the first rule of right judgement is to refuse the false dichotomy of *us* versus *them*. We are not the Other of each other.

DS AND MS: *We can only agree with what you have just said: we need urgently to change our understanding of what the word crisis means. It is certainly not a critical moment when some independent and higher force has put us, "modern Jobs," on trial. It is, indeed, a moment when we are judged by our deeds, as is the case with the increasing eco-eco crisis today. However, you also mentioned that to grasp the meaning of crisis in such a way, requires a training in the praxis of judgement. Could you flesh out what you mean by that? What kind of (common and individual) practices do you have in mind?*

SB-M: Our judgements would have to acknowledge that even people's best intentions are mediated by unequal relations of power, including those networks of global capitalism upon which all of our lives depend. Disrupting the global order means we need to saw off the branches on which we are sitting—some more comfortably than others. But none of us can make it through the present crisis unscathed, and none of us can survive alone. Édouard Glissant (1990) spoke of relationality as our necessary way of being-in-the-world. When floods or earthquakes strike, they evoke a strong sense of solidarity. This is the overwhelmingly common response. But when the flood that follows is a sea of refugees, there is fear. At these moments, those people who have been uprooted, who have personally experienced the vulnerabilities of crossing borders, can provide the

wisest counsel. Some examples come to mind. Angela Merkel's judgement in response to the 2015 refugee crisis: "Wir schaffen das." Jacques Derrida's reflections on being French-Algerian-Jewish in the book *Le Monolinguisme de L'Autre, ou, La prothèse d'origine* ([1996] 1998), that considers the anomaly: "I have but one language—yet that language is not mine" (1). The voices of those whose diasporic experiences have made judgements based on exclusionary identities intolerable, these are the voices to be treasured today. And only the presence of refugees in our midst can provide them.

DS AND MS: *While speaking about common practices, we have to remain mindful that the only significant political power that people (still) have today is through the institutions of the given nation-states in which they are citizens. This, for instance, seriously endangers even the physical survival of those who are denied a land-based nation-state which has become an existential situation for an increasing number of (political, ecological, etc.) migrants. One of the reasons you made the first century the topic of your book is, as you write yourself, that it can be paradoxically reclaimed as our common ground, whereas all complexities of cultural and religious intertwining in this period cannot be captured by the categories and concepts of traditionally told history. Even more, you often underline the fact that national histories act exactly as the litmus test for collective realities. Therefore, you intended your book to celebrate "diasporic consciousness that connects the fragments of history, rather than cosmopolitan universality that mistakes hegemony for wholeness" (41), and to demonstrate diasporic commonality in form-patterns that evoke the possibility of earthly cohabitation, of many worlds in one world, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro would have it. What form-patterns of a possible diasporic commonality do you speculate for our not-too-distant future?*

SB-M: It is possible to act politically within national institutions for goals that transcend their boundaries. I think this is different from an idea of "many worlds in one world." The world is singular, even if the experiences of it are multiple. Different cultures aren't really operating here as the definition of experience. Cultural communities have always been hierarchical, and being-together in a culture in no way guarantees acting justly with each other. What we have in common is that we are alive in *this* time, together. This is a radical idea of community, no longer based on dead ancestors, but on our co-inhabiting of the earth, here and now.

I do not want to romanticise diaspora. In our era, when sovereign nations claim ownership over pieces of the planet, homelessness can be catastrophic. When Philo wrote that Moses was without a homeland as a prerequisite for the truth of Mosaic law, he was speaking metaphorically (Buck-Morss 2021, 109). But the metaphor contains this insight: truth is not a possession that can be claimed and defended by excluding all others. Any such *truth* is by definition *not* truth by philosophy's own universalising standards. I find compelling the independent work of two modern philosophers, Agata Bielik-Robson and Souleymane Bachir Diagne, who concur with Walter Benjamin, that truth can appear only

in the process of translation. Diagne writes: “Philosophy can *only* be universal if it moves across differences” (quoted in Buck-Morss 2021, 34; original italics). Bielik-Robson writes of the necessity of “never pretending to abandon the realm of particularity,” but rather “making various languages clash, marry, meet, befriend, mingle with, and confront one another” (quoted in Buck-Morss 2021, 34). Both of these thinkers have multiple identities or *homes*: in Bielik-Robson’s case, Polish/British/Jewish; in Diagne’s case, US/French/Muslim/Senegalese. What people of diasporas have in common is training in the bridging of differences and with this, a mimetic capacity to discover analogies across presently isolated terrains. Analogical skills need nurturing in our era, and those who inhabit diasporic spaces can teach us how.

DS AND MS: *While proposing to think with analogies, you return to the tradition of anthropology, which has abandoned the classical episteme based on identity and difference in favour of a science based on analogies and implications. The subversiveness of your approach, however, comes down to making people of the diaspora particularly predisposed to such reasoning, that is, you decolonise the process of knowledge production, which was the key problem of anthropology as a science. While the anthropologist could enter the culture of interest in order to make as bold analogies as possible, at the same time, the relationship with the culture examined was one-sided and based on a power relationship. This, in effect, did not grant the examined subjects the right to analogously enter the culture of the researcher.*

SB-M: I wonder whether we need to question the imaginary implied by the phrase “entering a culture”? I wonder whether “cultures” can be thought of as bounded collectives at all? A confession: I never met a culture I wanted to call my own. Structures that claim to have cultures are notoriously patriarchal, constructed on racial/religious/ethnic exclusions, and ready to defend themselves by any (violent) means necessary. Culture is not the defining term of today’s political practices such as, for example, recognising racism globally, the #MeToo movement and struggles for Afghan women’s rights, or questioning the possible meanings of socialism that are not nation-bound in their imaginary forms.

DS AND MS: *Considering words such as crisis and communitas, in YEAR 1 you write that they “appear in the texts as philological passageways into the past, providing insights fruitful to philosophers who turn to history for inspiration” (169). Already in your groundbreaking book, Hegel, Haiti and Universal History (2009), you took up the issue of the inseparable knot between thoughts and histories. Claiming that Hegel’s source of inspiration for developing the master-slave dialectic had been an article about the Haitian Revolution published in Minerva, you demonstrate how deeply philosophy is anchored in time, on the one hand, and how much effort one needs to undo an apparent timelessness of philosophy, on the other. You also argue that eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers, such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, while emphasising freedom as a fundamental concept for Western modernity, ignored, for instance, the reality of actual slavery. However, it is neither enough to explore the temporal dimension of concepts*

and ideas in order to overcome the “timelessness” of philosophy and, subsequently, the “objectivity” of knowledge, nor to try and sufficiently loosen the knot of historical appropriation to look for another form of inheritance, “one that does not ventriloquize the past in present debates” (Buck-Morss 2021, 117). Nevertheless, in your aforementioned books, you have succeeded in convincingly connecting what hitherto seemed disconnected, irrelevant, distant, unrelated—or rather constructed as such; in discovering analogies across lines of difference; and pointing out analogies and building constellations. Could you describe your method of intervention into the history of philosophy as well as into the philosophy of history?

SB-M: Such good, difficult questions! I am saying that the conventional way of relating history and philosophy does not do justice to either endeavour. In historical research, truth is the discovery of the past without partisanship, and even if this knowledge will never be complete, never *all* of the truth, our own prejudices must yield to its findings. For philosophers, truth in its historical appearance is transitory, not a place of permanence for thought, but a sudden glimpse along the way. While we will never gain Truth as a possession, we cannot do without it as an idea. Historical relativism cannot take its place, or we leave ourselves open to the parody of truth that saturates political speech today. As philosophers, we cannot abandon the search for truth, not as the end-goal of philosophising, but rather the means, the method. Here *constellations* come into the picture. Once we free past events from the chronological teleologies into which modernity has positioned them, elements of the past can be juxtaposed in surprising and instructive ways. Rather than taking liberties with points of fact, we exercise freedom in the connections among these points, experimenting with their rearrangement—analogs replaces chronologics.

DS AND MS: *The stated goal of Hegel, Haiti and Universal History was to liberate the past from its particularities and reimagine human efforts in building a universal history. In YEAR 1, you have, in a sense, radicalised your approach, and argue that modern philosophical concepts are not only produced through how we perceive, interpret, and control the past, but also how we reproduce the differences on which modernity is based. Your book is, therefore, a kind of manifesto that urges us to leave modernity in order to let the past speak to, and with, us again and in a different way. To reimagine our common past and find a common ground rather than focus on deeply enriched differences, you discuss three carefully chosen works from the first century—works by people of multiple belongings but written in one common Greek language, called koine: Josephus’s *Bellum Judaicum*, Philo’s commentary on the book of Genesis (that he compares with Plato’s *Timaeus*), and John of Patmos’s book of Revelation. To what extent is your concept of a universal history also part of your recent book’s project? How are universal, global and common histories connected to each other? What place do localities have in this project of yours?*

SB-M: Localities are specificities, and truth can only become visible within them. Universality cannot be achieved by abstraction, which leaves

specificities behind. *Universal history* can begin at any place. It is a method, a praxis, not a concept or a thing. It questions epistemic categories that undergird present structures of power. The point of focussing on the first century is that the historical material of this alleged “beginning” has traditionally been allocated to exclusionary identities: Christian, Jewish, Roman, Greek—and this practice distorts the evidence. The idea is to recognise that what we have in common today is the inability to ground our differences by anchoring them in the past as a point of origin. Modern concepts pre-order past material in ways that reinforce contemporary claims of exclusion and hierarchies of power. That is what my book tries to expose. Making sense out of historical research on the first century requires the mimetic skill of translation across differences. It remains open, non-partisan, non-possessive, a “communist” method of inheriting the past (which is not the same as inheriting a common past). Analogical discovery does not eliminate historical particulars, but thrives on them. Some artists excel in this mimetic capacity. Musicians must be capable of it. The jazz composer and musician John Coltrane saw music as “a reflection of the universe” (quoted in Buck-Morss 2021, 98). Philosophers used to be better trained in mimetic skills than they are now.

DS AND MS: *That sound very intriguing, indeed. Therefore, it would be nice if you could elaborate a bit on the mimetic skills you have just mentioned. What exactly are these mimetic skills? It seems that they are quite different to what we find in dictionaries under mimesis. How useful are they? And how should/could they be practiced? Are they for artists and philosophers only?*

SB-M: The place of their practice is unbounded public space—performed with an eye towards a more-than-local audience, urging analogical actions in other locales. The practitioners are... just people. Philosophers and artists take their place among them. Since my earlier book *Revolution Today* (2019), which was about the street movements that began with the Arab Spring in 2011, the politically creative use of public space has proliferated. In Hong Kong (2019–2020) the new *revolution of our times* (時代革命) began with the call to *be water*; slogans included: “we fight on, each in her own way,” “nobody left behind,” but also a warning against *mutual destruction* (the colloquial Cantonese term 攞炒), and: “If we burn, you burn with us.”

In 2019, Chilean women massed in public space to sing together, “Un violador en tu camino” (“A Rapist in your Path”), written by the collective Las Tesis (2019), to protest against the impunity of gender-based violence. Their song echoed on the streets of Paris, San Francisco, Auckland, Oslo, Leipzig, and elsewhere. The ongoing global movements to protest against environmental degradation included the global climate strike of 2019 that involved 150 countries. The examples are multiple. They need to be judged, not in instrumental political terms, but in terms of the change of consciousness that is permeating an entire generation with a new vision of human solidarity, a new way of doing our work and living



our lives. Are these movements “socialist”? Yes, but of a new kind. Are they “anarchist”? Only because for the moment, new structures of rule are not yet possible to establish. Will they be successful? In a sense, by communicating a new political sensibility, they already are.

DS AND MS: *Digging a bit deeper in your recent book’s central question—how to read history philosophically—let us dwell on how to develop a communist method of inheriting the past. In YEAR 1 you underline that it “requires a task of translation that does not cover the past with the language of the present, but reads the fragments that remain against the grain of their appropriation by history’s winners” (226). How to read and write about the past without covering it with our way of thinking and language? After all, there are not only winners who appropriate history, today’s scholars do the same, do they not? We guess that even YEAR 1 could be read against the grain of your intention to demonstrate that you have done nothing more but fit the recent findings of antiquity experts and specialists—to whom you refer—into our present-day topical frame of economic and ecological crisis.*

SB-M: I am saying that to have the past speak to our present-day world we have to let go of claims to ownership of it. To cite Benjamin (again!): “For a piece of the past to be touched by the present, there must be no continuity between them” (quoted in Buck-Morss 2021, 70). Can we imagine the “facts” of the past as so many stars in the heavens, the lines of connection between which have an infinite capacity to clarify present situations precisely because of their distance, their remoteness, their disinterest in our own concerns (because the first century really does not care about us; it is not waiting for us to resurrect it). Benjamin’s brilliance, indeed, his wisdom, was to recognise that what distorts the writing of history is its appropriation by history’s winners. You can read that clearly in the *Life of Constantine* written by bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, church apologist for this first Christian emperor, who initiated the myth that “winning” against one’s enemies is proof of the truth of one’s beliefs (Buck-Morss 2021, 172). Chronologically ordered, the historical victory of worldly power is claimed as authentication of its truth. What a disaster! Beware of any history written to justify those in power. And one such justification is to see the meaning of the past as rational, as making sense of the world as it is ordered today.

To whom does a messianic text belong? The answer can only be the dispossessed (Buck-Morss 2021, 210). The brilliance of the African-American “womanist” reading of the Bible is to recognise the necessity of “tilting the hermeneutic mirror” so that it does not provide a reflection of our own world as presently arranged.

DS AND MS: *As YEAR 1 demonstrates, the work of translation relates to many interweaved threads of your thinking. First of all, translation refers to the linguistic strategies of naming reality which—as you show in a Benjaminian way—are always anchored in history and politics of its time. Since translation deals with temporality, you also insist that we should not only translate between times but also*

*distinctly change the temporal direction: “The past is not translated into the present but vice versa, the present into the past” (Buck-Morss 2021, 236). In translation, you further recognise the main task of critical philosophy which has to displace itself in history. Only through translation, you write, can we liberate ourselves from modernity, or rather, from meaning systems and structuring patterns that moderns have produced. Is such an overcoming, or even annihilation, of modernity necessary to rethink commonality today? What is the role of translation in the net of overwhelming contemporary global particularisms? Could diaspora, on which “the epistemic necessity of translation” (Buck-Morss 2021, 43) is based, be understood as a common condition able to free us from the trap of a nation-state?*

SB-M: I want to respond more clearly here to the issue of rethinking *commonality* today. Is it not remarkable that in the twenty-first century, the most powerful political actions we see are not simply the multitude on the street, but the organisation of people in public space as a spectacle, made possible by the new technologies of image production and distribution, a spectacle TO BE SHARED? Their goal is, of course, also directly political—the removal of government leaders has had some immediate (if not long-term) success. But they achieve something valuable in the very act of sharing these images. The demonstrators are communicating through their specificities precisely to a global audience—anyone, anywhere—in a practice of solidarity and a call for global judging of the rightness of their action. It is really awe-inspiring. It moves us to change our political understanding of community. And even if the emotional sense of community is fleeting, it is no less true. This is not instrumental politics. And it is not revolution in the modern sense. It is something new. That was the point of my book *Revolution Today*—a picture book, a photo album of all of these global self-representations, addressed to a commonality that is not yet in existence, to remind us of the power of those moments and to keep the images resonating in the present. Analogics is the constructive principle here as well.

DS AND MS: *Acts of sharing images mainly take place in social media, which are undoubtedly an effective tool for organising social movements or political protests of communities nowadays. However, social media are somewhat Janus-faced: on the one hand, they appear to be a democratic and communal space; on the other, they are an effective instrument of cyber-nationalism and a capitalist platform for alienation. The images shared digitally are not always a proper expression of emancipatory efforts and various forms of political activism; they sometimes also represent the obscenity of power and the language of conservative patriarchy, mediocrally appropriated and transformed into counter-revolutionary hyper-reality.*

SB-M: You are right, social media are not in themselves the answer. Technology alone is not determining of community. But there is something intrinsic to our new social media—the image-sharing capacity—that is democratic in form, that itself creates a new experience of politics, one that can bring together, potentially, a new, post-national democratic majority. From a global perspective, constituencies of white supremacists

are only possible as a minority. Nationalists can mimic each other, but global solidarity cannot survive in nationalist terms.

DS AND MS: *You end YEAR 1 with a clearly critical statement about the concept as a foundation and a core of philosophy. You write: “The concept is the second death of material life” (237) and “The concept is abstract, ahistorical, and can only be identified as a repetition of itself—class, patriarchy, empire—rather than the particular constellation in which crimes of history occur” (237). Should we understand what you write as a basic condition for an epistemological liberation, that we have to understand not only as a radical act of neglecting modernity and all concepts it has established, but also as an overcoming of the differences between many forms of knowing—between philosophy, politics and religion, prophecy and law, social life and art? In YEAR 1, you propose an extraordinary subversive re-reading of Antigone (81–95), showing that it is the eponymous heroine who actually embodies the common public will whereas Creon privatises the power! While analysing the book of Revelation, you underline the importance of oral and audial aspects of the text which is able to produce a community of hearers, in which you recognise a form of political protest and a revival of collective sensibility. What role do you thus attribute to aesthetic practices in the reconfiguration of knowledge about our common past and in the search for new forms of collective belonging?*

SB-M: Here is the most radical thing I am saying from a philosophical perspective: Concepts kill the life of truth. Class is not a philosophical key to truth until it emerges in a specific historical constellation. The same applies to empire or patriarchy. So much of theory today believes that it becomes deeper by bracketing out the empirics of analysis: governmentality, bare life, states of exception—these concepts emerged from specific historical analyses, but then were considered philosophically deeper by ridding themselves of this historical baggage so that they could travel unhindered around the globe. This method confuses abstraction with universality. Against this move, that is fundamental to modern phenomenology, I like to cite the critique of *négritude* as ontology made by the Nigerian novelist Wole Soyinka, in favour of historical concreteness: “A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude. He pounces.” Which is to say: “When you pass where the tiger has walked before, you see the skeleton of a duiker, you know that some tigritude has emanated there.”<sup>1</sup>

To move to the end of your question—I do think that the community of hearers, produced by the sharing of written texts, has similarities to the community of viewers produced by the global sharing of mass movements. These images are like sparks that travel distances to a planetary elsewhere; after *Revolution Today* was published (2019), there have been many more such demonstrations, not only Hong Kong and Chile, but also Malaysia, Russia, and crucially, Black Lives Matter that moved from the US to England to Nigeria and beyond. But of course, mass actions are not all inspirational. There are demonstrations of hate against the larger definitions of community, in favour of borders, racial and religious boundaries, and perhaps these too wish a global audience. Again,

judgement is demanded. And judging is not an easy task. If we cannot say that only some demonstrations are “progressive” (because progress itself as a modern concept is under scrutiny), then other criteria are called for. And here the idea of transcendence comes into view. I believe philosophy needs this idea, even if it can only be expressed in apophatic (negative) forms: the idea that what is, is not all there is (existence does not exhaust being), that our minds are not godlike, that human history does not own planetary history. Life is too awesome, the universe is too full of stars, *not* to question the hubris of the Enlightenment’s human-centricity. I find Philo’s comment moving, that Noah was chosen by God to be saved from the flood not because he was good, but because he was grateful. Gratitude requires humility. Of all the virtues, humility is perhaps the most lacking among us moderns. Benjamin noted that in big-city nights, the stars are not easily seen.

## Note

- 1 Soyinka made the initial remark at the 1962 African Writers’ Conference at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda, and elaborated on it two years later at the Berlin Arts Festival, Germany.

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