edited by caleb kelly, jakko kemper, and ellen rutten

imperfections

studies in mistakes, flaws, and failures

Imperfections

Thinking | Media

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Imperfections

Studies in Mistakes, Flaws, and Failures

Edited by
Caleb Kelly, Jakko Kemper,
and Ellen Rutten

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Putting together an edited collection is a fraught and uncertain endeavor, all the more so when your topic—imperfection—travels across a disciplinary and worldly range as vast as the territory that follows. What *is* imperfection, other than the opposite and negation of its ideal type of perfection? What might imperfections in art have to do with those encountered in navigating restrictive body type ideals—or, for that matter, the misshapen or miscolored fruits (not) found in your supermarket? How might imperfection relate to a range of other concepts and practices, from failure, to craft, to repair? If it's true, per Tolstoy, that "every happy family is alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," what could possibly connect across and group the vast landscapes of our imperfection(s), and make of them more than a (regrettable?) debris pile of losses, fragments, and shards? Could we truly flip the normative script on imperfection to regard such myriad mistakes, glitches, and failures as *good*, even *sublime*?

It turns out that the answer is yes. The essays in this volume show us what it might mean to take imperfection seriously, and as a potential form and resource in its own right—a feature, rather than a bug, as it were. The insights and lessons offered include the aesthetic: how are our notions of beauty adjusted to the conditions of the world (and vice versa)? How do these standards become normative, what happens to the people and things outside of them, and how do people react to this circumstance, from struggles of attainment to defiant rejection? They also include the political economic: from farm sectors of "imperfect" cows to the glitchy forms of political belonging and identity built by migrant and migratory communities. Throughout, we see the interplay of highly imperfect actors and situations with forms and ideals of perfection (read: standards; read: normativity) that function like a shadowy opponent (or dance partner?) throughout. In the process, "perfection" itself is brought down a notch or two, and we get a glimpse of the raw creativities and sly potentialities of imperfection, if given half a chance.

The comparative range of the book is captured in the section structure. In "imperfect shapes," we travel from art galleries to supermarkets, understanding how imperfect objects may be screened out and sidelined by a perfectionist aesthetics grounded in canons from aesthetic assessment to modern food marketing. We also see how alternative aesthetics can be

built, by reclaiming notions of "dirt" and "mistake" and by reframing flaws as markers of desire, uniqueness, and authenticity. In "imperfect sounds and systems," we move from electronic music and video games to archives and language models, showing how glitches and failures may be *integral* to the thing itself (rather than a blemish or distraction from the object or experience in question). In "imperfect selves," we move from selfies and body modifications to the literature(s) of exile, and see how the self itself may function as the most intimate and painful stage on which the drama of perfection may be played (and occasionally rewritten).

Interesting individually, the chapters take on additional life as a set—when we begin to see the patterns and connections linking things as disparate as imperfect fruit and the "dirt aesthetics" of post-Soviet art, glitch-driven video games, and the traumas of cultural exile and the fraught and partial forms of belonging they can give rise to. Lest we become too enthralled or sentimental—the goal is to question and take apart the binary, not just invert it—the volume also shows what we might term (irony intended) the *limits* of imperfection: the places where glitch prefigures loss, where failure incurs suffering, and being out-of-step with perfection exacts a personal and experiential cost.

To conclude with a last great virtue: the volume itself is gloriously imperfect. Not all threads are stitched, not all questions are answered, and not all lines of thought are woven through and across the chapters to a neat and bow-like conclusion. Like all edited collections, especially the good ones, it may even be missing a button or two. It leaves us puzzles and space to think with, thoughts to complete and fix, using our own grounded sense and experience of the world, so that the ideas themselves become in part our own—and yours will be different than mine. So in the voice of children's author Lemony Snicket: if what you like are perfectly structured arguments, arranged like cabbages in neat and careful rows, gleaming edifices of text that produce the last clear word on a subject, beyond which further thought and reflection is impossible and unnecessary—in short, if what you want is a perfect volume on imperfection—this book, dear reader, is not for you. For the rest, read on.

Introduction

Ellen Rutten

The trend to present the notion of imperfection as benefit rather than bother resonates today across a range of social disciplines and a wealth of world regions. As digital tools allow media users to share cheery selfies and success stories, psychologists promote "the gifts of imperfections" and point to perfectionism as a catalyst for rising depression and suicide rates among millennials.[1] As technologies increasingly permit composers and artists to polish their work, they, in turn, increasingly celebrate glitches, noise, and cracks.[2] As genetic engineering upgrades with swift speed, philosophers and physicians plea "against perfection," and supermarkets successfully advertise "perfectly imperfect" vegetables.[3] Meanwhile, cultural

[1] Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City: Hazelden, 2010); Martin M. Smith, Simon B. Sherry, Vanja Vidovic, Donald H. Saklofske, Joachim Stoeber, Aryn Benoit, "Perfectionism and the Five-Factor Model of Personality: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, January 6 (2019): 367–90; Paul L. Hewitt, Gordon L. Flett, Samuel F. Mikail, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach to Conceptualization, Assessment, and Treatment* (New York: Guilford Press, 2017).

[2] On this trend see, among others, Kim Cascone, "The Aesthetics of Failure: 'Post-Digital' Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music," *Computer Music Journal* 24, no. 4 (2000): 12–18; Caleb Kelly, *Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); Carolyn L. Kane, *High-Tech Trash: Glitch, Noise, and Aesthetic Failure* (Berkeley, CA: Luminos Press, 2019).

[3] For the citations see, respectively, Michael J. Sandel, *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), and Tesco, "Our Perfectly Imperfect Range," April 14, 2016, https://www.ourtesco.com/2016/04/14/our-perfectly-imperfect-range/, accessed March 9, 2020. See also, among others, Cheshire Calhoun, "On Being Content with Imperfection," *Ethics* 127, no. 2 (2017): 327–52; Ilona E. de Hooge, Marije Oostindier, Jessica Aschemann-Witzel Anne Normann, Simone Mueller Loose, Valérie Lengard Almli, "This Apple Is Too Ugly for Me! Consumer

analysts point at skewed perspectives, blurry images, and other "deliberate imperfections" and "effective mistakes" in new and historical cinema, painting, photography, and literature.[4] In less positive terms, scholars in fields ranging from disability studies to tourism critique a trend to fetishize imperfection and poverty. They warn against projecting privileged and, often, Western-biased feel-good stories onto the less privileged or frail.[5] As Yuriko Saito—a scholar in the philosophy of design and contributor to this volume—puts it, "there is something morally problematic about deriving an aesthetic pleasure" from "imperfections [that] indicate people's suffering and social injustice."[6]

Where does this growing critical interest in failures, flaws, mistakes, and other "imperfections" come from? Why do we witness it across so many different domains and disciplines? And how does praise for the imperfect "work," today and in earlier historical periods? In this book, we study these questions by synthesizing existing scholarship about aesthetics and logics of imperfection. We integrate the briskly growing but fragmented existing scholarship into the first transdisciplinary, transnational framework of imperfection studies.

Our volume is a spin-off of Sublime Imperfections—a research project that I coordinated at the University of Amsterdam between 2015 and 2020.[7] For this project, Ph.D students Jakko Kemper (a media theorist and coeditor of this volume), Fabienne Rachmadiev (an art theorist), and I studied and compared cultural and social practices in which the imperfect is praised. As part of our research, we invited experts from different scholarly and creative

Preferences for Suboptimal Food Products in the Supermarket and At Home," *Food Quality and Preference* 56 (2017): 80–92; N.a. (editorial), "Perfectly Imperfect: Defects in Nanostructures Have Their Advantages," *Nature Nanotechnology* 5, no. 311 (2010), https://www.nature.com/articles/nnano.2010.102.

4   For the citations, see Nicholas Rombes's *Cinema in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 27, and Mieke Bal's chapter in this volume, respectively. See also, among others, the research devoted to "imperfectionist aesthetics" by Peter Cheyne and James Kirwan as presented in https://imperfectionistaesthetics.wordpress.com/ (n.d.), accessed March 9, 2020; Virgil Nemoianu, *The Triumph of Imperfection: The Silver Age of Sociocultural Moderation in Europe, 1815–1848* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006); Bernd Stiegler, "1. Imperfection," *Still Searching* …, January 11, 2012, https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/26907_imperfection.

5   Yuriko Saito and Domnica Radulescu do so in this book; see also Saito, "The Role of Imperfection in Everyday Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, July 27, 2017, https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=797, accessed March 9, 2020; Siobhan Lyons (ed.), *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018).

6   Saito, "The Role."

7   For details on the project, news, and the project blog, see www.sublimeimperfections. org, accessed March 9, 2020.

disciplines to conceptualize their take on imperfection. On the pages that follow, they share their ideas in twelve chapters, an essay, and an epilogue. Each author offers the reader tools to craft more historically grounded and critically better informed conceptualizations of the imperfect.

In this introduction, I set the stage by doing three things. First, I map existing studies of imperfections and outline how we expand their findings. Next, I explain how we define and theorize the concept of imperfection in this book. I conclude with a short book overview, aimed at helping readers find their way through the chapters. This last bit matters: our publication is targeted at advanced scholars *and* junior students, as well as any reader interested in the disciplines that we bring together, from cultural analysis (of music, literature, fashion, art, design, and media) to marketing studies, and from history and philosophy to anthropology. With this broad audience in mind, the authors maintain a nontechnical narrative style—and although *Imperfections* works well as A-to-Z read, readers should have no problem in reading separate chapters as stand-alone pieces.

Studies of Imperfection: What There Is and What We Add

In case, so far, you both read and consulted the references in this introduction, you will have followed a lush underwater story of relevant research. This story is no more than a sneak peek: in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, research on imperfection as a productive category swiftly accumulated in fields as varying as design, (audio-)visual arts, literature, marketing, psychology, and genetics. In 2001, literary historian Ann Rigney presented "imperfection and chronic dissatisfaction" as formative components to historiographic thinking in *Imperfect Histories*.[8] In 2006, cultural historian Virgil Nemoianu envisioned a Romanticist "acceptance of imperfection" in science, psychology, and literature—and offered it as a useful lesson for the here and now—in *The Triumph of Imperfection*.[9] In 2007, philosopher Michael Sandel advocated a move away from perfectionist reasoning in bioengineering in *The Case against Perfection*.[10] In 2010, social work professor Brené Brown told readers of her best seller *The Gifts of Imperfection*: in times of media overload, we must accept our shortcomings to

[8] Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 11.

[9] Nemoianu, *The Triumph*.

[10] Sandel, *The Case*.

lead wholesome lives.[11] In 2012, the journal *Nature Nanotechnology* devoted a volume to "perfectly imperfect" nanostructures, while cultural critic Patrick Grant unpacked, in *Imperfection*, how the nonperfect transpires as a "condition of our … human solidarity" across religion, ethnic conflict, and the arts.[12] And finally, between 2017 and 2020, psychologist Paul Hewitt and others outlined the downsides of perfectionist reasoning in *Perfectionism*; disabilities scholar and activist Eli Clare critiqued ideals of cure and ableism in *Brilliant Imperfection*; and philosopher Heather Widdows critically interrogated "the demand to be beautiful" in *Perfect Me*.[13]

This list of book titles forms a mere tip of a swiftly growing iceberg of scholarly work that critiques perfectionist ideals and theorizes imperfection as a productive category. Valorizations of the imperfect are resonant (but underresearched), too, in increasingly loud debates on repair as answer to material deficit and sustainability issues; on craft in high-tech times; on the interrelated domains of glitch, noise, and *postdigital* studies (a scholarly subfield that unpacks the inextricable interlacing of off- and online in "our newly computational everyday lives"); on failure (ranging from Jack Halberstam's critique on "conventional understandings of success in a heteronormative, capitalist society" to costly research initiatives that, paradoxically, promise to "turn failure into success"); and on ecology and Anthropocene.[14]

In critical reflection on these and other poignant social concerns, the notion of imperfection is implicated and often mentioned—but what is lacking is a systematic theoretical framework. At the moment, conceptualizations of the imperfect as an affirmative category are resonant, but dispersed across disciplines and publications.

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[11] Brown, *The Gifts*. For Brown's vision on media see, for instance, ibid., p. 67.

[12] N.a. (editorial), "Perfectly Imperfect"; Patrick Grant, *Imperfection* (Athabasca: Athabasca University Press, 2012), 223.

[13] Hewitt, Flett, Mikail, *Perfectionism*; Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Heather Widdows, *Perfect Me: Beauty as An Ethic Ideal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), cover text.

[14] For helpful discussions to these debates, see, respectively, Steven J. Jackson, "Rethinking Repair," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality and Society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Kirsten A. Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 221–40; Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice: Critical Failures and Post-Digital Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Kane, *High-Tech Trash*; Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). For the citations, see, respectively, David M. Berry and Michael Dieter, *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), cover text; Halberstam, *The Queer Art*, cover text; and Isabel Fattal, "The Value of Failing," *The Atlantic*, April 25, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/04/the-value-of-failing/558848/, accessed March 23, 2020.

This is where our book makes a difference. In this volume, we synthesize the growing but fragmented critical reflection on the notion into a transdisciplinary, transnational conceptual tool kit. Unlike existing relevant studies, this volume is concept- rather than discipline- or region-focused: it brings together contributions by experts in music, art, media, cultural analysis, literature, marketing, anthropology, philosophy, design, and area studies from the United States, Western and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Australia. To optimally integrate theoretical and more practical considerations—a crucial aim for our topic, which resonates loudly in museums, shops, and on work floors—we paired scholarly analyses to work by curators, artists, and other practitioners in relevant fields. What the outcoming transdisciplinary and transnational approach looks like in practice and what its benefits are: to these questions we turn now.

What Are Imperfections and How Do We Study Them?

In this book we do not depart from one overarching, stable definition of the term "imperfection." Dictionaries do suggest that the word boasts cleanly delineated meanings: across different languages, they tell us that it stands for incompleteness, defectiveness, for a shortcoming, or for the state of being faulty, flawed, blemished, or unfinished.[15] Dictionaries offer equally clear descriptions of its antonym (and the word from which the term "imperfection" derives): *perfection*, they say, is all that is complete, fault- or flawless, intact, or blemish- and deficiency-free.[16]

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[15] This definition I base on dictionary definitions in Dutch, German, English, and Russian (the four languages that I know best), complemented with Chinese and Japanese; for input about these last languages, I thank my student assistant Dong Xia. We used these dictionaries: N.a., *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, n.p., online at https://www.dwds.de/, accessed November 12, 2019; Ton den Boon et al. (ed.), *Van Dale groot woordenboek van de Nederlandse taal* (Utrecht: Van Dale Lexicografie, 2005); Henry Watson Fowler, Francis George Fowler, and Della Thompson (eds.), *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Kirill Sergeevich Gorbachevich, *Bol'shoi akademicheskii slovar' russkogo iazyka. Izdanie 3* (Moscow: Nauka, 2004–); Xiandai Hanyu Cidian, 现代汉语词典 (*Contemporary Chinese Dictionary*). *Edition 7* (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2016); and Shogakukan, 大辞泉 (*Daijisen*), online at https://daijisen.jp/, accessed March 9, 2020.

[16] See, apart from the same dictionaries, on the word *perfection* and its meaning in Western, Asian, Pacific, and African languages: Shameem Black, Matt Tomlinson, Jack Fenner, "Perfection: An Introduction," *Australian National University*, April 24, 2017, https://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/perfection/perfection-introduction, accessed March 23, 2020; Martin Foss, *The Idea of Perfection in the Western World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton

The dictionary definitions are, however, silent on the question: who defines what is perfect and what not? Who decides what strays from set norms and standards? And who sets these standards in the first place? The answers to these questions vary for each situation where the term is used. They differ depending on whom you ask, too: the torn designer jeans that feel imperfect to some can strike others as sternly polished.

The same is true for the terms *failure*, *flaw*, and *mistake*: each refers to a state or quality that ranks as a deviation from a given norm—but their exact meaning is always in the eye of the beholder. Definitions of imperfection are especially tricky where the apparently opposing poles of perfection and imperfection flip-flop. Throughout the history of human thinking, perfect<>imperfect binaries have been reversed, and the traditionally negative term *imperfection* has morphed into a hallmark of positive values in domains ranging from politics to ethics and aesthetics.[17] A famous example from that last field is the claim by philosopher Karl Rosenkranz, in the 1850s, that "the concept of imperfection is relative" and that it can "outrank what according to reality" is "more perfect." "The flower," Rosenkranz clarified, "is counted imperfect in a botanical … register"—but "ranks higher than the fruit aesthetically."[18]

As the notion of imperfection is, just as its semantic equivalents "flaw," "failure," and "mistake," so fluid, in this book we refrain from asking what these concepts "really" mean. We concur with historians Steven King and Steven Taylor, who warn against "using an imperfect/perfect dichotomy as an analytical prism": rather than a fixed entity, they write, "the concept of imperfection and its construction has been an ever-present historical narrative in the broadly defined modern period."[19] This narrative is no

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University Press, 1946); and Władysław Tatarkiewicz, "On Perfection," *Dialectics and Humanities* 8, no. 2 (1981): 11–12.

[17] For the history of this trend from Plato onward (and in different world regions), see my book chapters "On Imperfection" (forthcoming; draft can be shared upon request) and "Affirmative Rhetoric and Aesthetics of Imperfection: A Genealogy," in *Miscommunications: Errors, Mistakes and the Media*, ed. Maria Korolkova and Timothy Barker (London: Bloomsbury, in print); see also Saito's claim in this volume that "even those who advocate imperfectionism often point out the complementarity of perfection and imperfection."

[18] Karl Rosenkranz, *Aesthetics of Ugliness* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 35.

[19] Steven King and Steven Taylor, " 'Imperfect Children' in Historical Perspective," *Social History of Medicine* 30, no. 4 (2017): 718–26; 720, 723. See also Clyde Taylor, who promotes "imperfection as a strategy of cultural resistance," but flags the unease and stigma that the notion can evoke in critiques of power (*The Mask of Art*: *Breaking the Aesthetic Contract—Film and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 272).

monolithic story, out there waiting for us to be unpacked: as our authors demonstrate, its outlines vary from one place and time to another.

In what we see as a more fruitful approach, our contributors explore how various historical and recent debates about imperfection (hence the plural "imperfections" in the book title) intertwine and feed each other. Rather than imperfection as such, they unpack *discourses of imperfection*—that is, the ways in which filmmakers, tea masters, marketeers, composers, social media users, farmers, and other social and professional groups talk about and valorize imperfection. Together the chapters unpack a web of four interrelated discursive motifs—*normativity*, *control*, *purity*, and *temporality*—that disclose how pleas for imperfection resonate and travel across different social practices.[20] This web of intertwining motifs also helpfully reveals paradoxes: after all, just as any rhetoric, imperfection-is-good talk is far from contradiction free.

Before I turn to a chapter overview, let me introduce the four motifs.

Normativity

Affirmative talk about imperfection tends to mark *norm* negations. As cultural historian and Russianist Andy Byford puts it, "categorisations of 'imperfection'" are inevitably "framed" by "normative regimes."[21] Praise for the imperfect brings to light—and, not seldomly, critically interrogates—conventions that otherwise might go unnoticed. "Mistakes," writes cultural theorist and video artist Mieke Bal in her chapter in this volume, "alert us to the ease with which we assume and endorse different kinds of norms." A skewed leg in a painting, a clumsily cropped face in a film shot: formal mistakes like these mark a "clash with conventions"; as such, Bal says, they emblematize "the productive effect imperfection can have." This effect is not unique for our age: Saito argues in her chapter that *imperfectionist aesthetics* arise when "an accepted norm of aesthetic perfection" is subverted—an aesthetic subversion that she already observes in fourteenth-century Japan, where Buddhist monk Kenkō admired a silk scroll wrapper that "has frayed at top and bottom."[22]

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20 For the conceptualization of the four motifs, I am grateful to Jakko Kemper, who first distilled (and offered brief characterizations of) the four red lines during our joint editorial work on this book.

21 Andy Byford, "The Imperfect Child in Early Twentieth-Century Russia," *Journal of the History of Education Society* 46, no. 5 (2017): 595–617; 595.

22 Kenkō Yoshida, *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*, trans. Donald Keene (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 70.

Discourses of imperfection question standards, but they also boast their own norms and standards. In her chapter on product marketing, Ilona de Hooge dissects the effectivity of such slogans as: "Naturally imperfect: Apples the way they actually look!" These slogans work, she argues, because they "focus … on the positive sides of imperfect products, such as their uniqueness or authenticity"—but consumers only buy an "imperfect" apple as long as it meets "intrinsic quality" standards. And they only want that "ugly" apple as long as it complies with beauty norms, as the hyperstylized visual language of "imperfect-food" marketing betrays.[23]

Control

Positive takes on the imperfect are tightly interwoven with notions of *control*. This relationship seems straightforward: pleas for imperfection promote openness to contingency or chance. Media theorist and artist Rosa Menkman sees *glitches* (electronic bugs), for instance, as the unforeseen-but-welcome "fingerprints of imperfection" that each medium boasts. A glitch, in her words, "represents a loss of control," akin to "th[e] 'nature'-generated sublime": "The 'world' or the interface does the unexpected."[24] Menkman's claim matches a longer list of pleas for imperfection that say: to enjoy beauty, freedom, or to otherwise live meaningfully, we must embrace control loss.[25]

Upon closer inspection, advocates of imperfection of course rarely truly abandon control. Curator, noise art scholar, and coeditor of this volume Caleb Kelly writes in his chapter that contemporary media artists embrace contingency *and* build self-made instruments to regain "control … to their tools" in reply to a "loss of access to the media in the digital studio." Poet and fashion theorist Linor Goralik observes a similar paradox in her chapter on jewel design. In "the new visual culture," she writes, wearers of face-distorting designs do two conflicting things simultaneously: they release "perfect control" over their facial expressions *and* they "pass" the same "control … to an inanimate object."

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[23] For examples see the sophisticated photo design of Berlin-based catering collective Culinary Misfits (whose initiators "rejoice over the unperfect, every newly discovered misfit"), http://www.culinarymisfits.de/en/misfits/; or the online marketing of Portuguese coop Fruta Feia (Ugly Fruits). To promote their produce, Fruta Feia uses a cartoon in soft green and orange/purple hues and the slogan "Beautiful People Eat Ugly Fruit," https://frutafeia.pt/en/the-project. Both links accessed March 9, 2020.

[24] Rosa Menkman, *The Glitch Moment(um)* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011), 11, 30–1.

[25] For two other examples, see Sandel, *The Case*, 72–83, and Brown, *The Gifts*, 120–3.

Menkman also spots paradoxes in glitch art and music. With time, as she puts it, glitch morphed from "machine 'spontaneity'" via "conceptual glitching" to "glitch design"—that is, "a controlled, consumed and established effect."[26] The cases that we explore in this book often boast a similar friction between spontaneity and (at times, deeply commodified) conscious effects.

Purity and Perfectibility

Advocates of the imperfect problematize *ideals of purity and perfectibility*. They challenge populist and other political, religious, and aesthetic manifestations of these ideals and unearth the power relations that render some bodies imperfect and expendable, others perfect and worthy of preservation.[27] Feminist thinker Joan Rothschild has conducted helpful studies of these power relations. In a comparative study of Enlightenment-era odes to "the perfectibility of man," eugenicist "concept[s] of 'pure races,'" and perfectionist rhetoric in genetic counseling, she writes: "the dream of human perfectibility masks a darker motivation to eliminate all that does not meet its increasingly heightened standards."[28] Our authors map critical discussions of this dream of perfectible humans—and other animals. Anthropologist Oscar Verkaaik, for instance, studies historical *regimes of perfection* and protests to these regimes in "purebred" cow farming.

Pleas *against* purist reasoning are not always as inclusive as they seem, however. Take *Misfit* (2017), a high school comedy around popular Dutch vlogger Djamila. Protagonist Julia is a schoolgirl who bravely rejects groupthink and the pressure to look and live perfectly. At first sight, Julia's story warns children for what media theorist Patricia Pisters, in her chapter in this book, calls *cruel perfectionism*—that is, the "impossible-to-live-up-standard" that "the perfect life" and "the perfect body" represent, especially

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26 Menkman, *The Glitch Moment(um)*, 55, 65.

27 On ideals of perfection and perfect bodies in politics, religion, and/or the arts, see, among others, Foss, *The Idea*; Joan Rothschild, *The Dream of the Perfect Child* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Widdows, *Perfect Me*. For studies of the same topics that foreground the concept of imperfection, see Grant, *Imperfection*; Leela Gandhi, *Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy, 1900–1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Sandel, *The Case*; and Alexis Shotwell, "A Politics of Imperfection, a Politics of Responsibility," April 25, 2017, https://alexisshotwell.com/2017/04/25/a-politics-of-imperfection-a-politics-of-responsibility/, accessed March 11, 2020.

28 Rothschild, *The Dream of the Perfect Child*, 5, 53, and cover text. The first citation is a phrase coined by French Enlightenment philosopher and mathematician Marquis de Condorcet, who argued in a treatise "that the perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite" (Antoine-Nicholas Condorcet, *Outlines of a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, Chicago: G. Langer, 2009, 4).

for young women, in the social media age.[29] "Do you want perfect pics on Instagram or … a snapchat? Be a misfit," Julia and her friends tell peers, in a social media post that oozes empowerment and body positivity.[30] The same Julia is, however, impeccably dressed, impressively pretty, and slim to the point of gauntness. The film ends with her (and her equally good-looking boyfriend's) uncontested victory at a talent show.

   Misfit illustrates a point that several authors of this volume drive home: in some cases, valorizations of imperfection consolidate rather than undermine ideals of immaculate success.[31] In those cases, critiques of the pure and perfect sooner hurt than help vulnerable social groups.

Temporality

Saito distinguishes between two narratives of perfection and imperfection: *atemporal* (in which, say, "a deformed body … is deemed imperfect") and *temporal* (in which a "prime state of an object … is considered perfect," to then deteriorate) *narratives*.[32] Our contributors explore both types, and the temporal imperfection narratives that they study—in, say, talk about worn clothes—tell us much about the workings of time. These narratives reveal that, rather than mere problems to be tackled, processes of entropy and decay are inherent to material and life cycles. Kemper theorizes this situation in his chapter by introducing the notion of *chronolibido*—a concept that philosopher Martin Hägglund uses to unpack a temporal ambivalence in human desire. "Desire," Hägglund says, "is *chronophobic* since whatever we are bound to or aspire for can … be taken away from or be rejected by us" *and* "desire is *chronophilic*, since it is because we are bound to or aspire for something that can be lost that we care about it." *Chronolibido* is a useful conceptual tool for unpacking imperfection rhetoric, which, in Kemper's words, "is indexical to time's passing and all that it ushers in (finitude, decay, degradation, contingency)." Praise for imperfection can also build on the opposite of decay, as when artists celebrate childlike immaturity; art theorist Tingting Hui discusses this strategy in detail in her chapter.

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[29] In introducing the term *cruel perfectionism*, Pisters relies on thinking by cultural theorist Laurent Berlant and critical feminist Angela McRobbie; see her chapter for details.

[30] Erwin van den Eshof, *Misfit*, NewBe, 2017, https://www.netflix.com/title/80994162, accessed March 11, 2020.

[31] Kane makes a similar point on professed versus actual failure tolerance when she discusses "the largely superficial messages from Silicon Valley and self-help cultures—to embrace weaknesses and defect" (*High-Tech Trash*, 3).

[32] Saito, "The Role."

Discourses of imperfection can, in short, reconcile us with the passing of time (and, by implication, with the threat of death). They are not problem free though. Scholars of *ruin porn*, as the trend to aestheticize urban ruins and rundown buildings is called, know this well. In media theorist Siobhan Lyons's words, ruin porn "allows us to view, as if in a museum, something uncompromisingly real and consequential, but without having to engage completely with the dire consequences it realistically provokes."[33] The same is true for the related phenomenon of *poverty porn*, which literary scholar and writer Domnica Radulescu studies in her contribution to this book. Radulescu highlights the "dangers of idealizing imperfection" by critiquing the quasi-bohemian, *faux*-deteriorated looks of "authentic" Flamenco bars and other tourist projects that romanticize Roma precarity. As she illustrates, Flamenco tourism uses a "voyeuristic" aesthetics of decay to commodify products "by oppressed communities … suffering abject poverty."

Normativity, control, purity, temporality: our author's studies of these recurrent motifs offer readers tools to make sense of contemporary discourses of imperfection-as-bonus; to historically contextualize these discourses; and to understand their internal frictions.

By pointing at these frictions, we by no means aim to dismiss pleas for imperfection. The trend to hail the non-perfected, if far from unprecedented, understandably gains momentum today, in a period that scholars define as *mediatized*, *digitized*, or even, as we saw, postdigital.[34] At a time when, as one imperfection adept calls it, we are "bombarded" with ongoing media messages that tell us "exactly what we should look like, how much we should weigh, how often we should have sex, how we should parent, how we should decorate our houses, and which car we should drive," it is not surprising that tendencies to perfect lives and looks are under growing suspicion.[35] The preoccupation with imperfection makes sense, too, in the economic reality of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Specialists call this age an era of "experience economy," "aesthetic economy," or "emotional capitalism."[36]

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[33] Lyons, *Ruin Porn*, 3.

[34] Thomas De Zengotita, *Mediated* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005); Thomas Reed, *Digitized Lives: Culture, Power and Social Change in the Internet Era* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Berry and Dieter, *Postdigital Aesthetics*.

[35] Brown, *The Gifts*, 67. On mediatization and the public "economy of suspicion" (15), see also Boris Groys, *Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

[36] Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Oxford: Polity, 2007); David Michalski, *The Dialectic of Taste: On the Rise and Fall Tuscanization and Other Crises in the Aesthetic Economy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

To each of these economic paradigms, aesthetic and affective experiences are formative. It is not hard to understand why experience- and emotion-focused consumers and producers are interested in imperfect looks and shapes: in the words of one influential marketing study, "flaws," "rawness," and the "imperfect" act as "hallmark for authenticity," and authenticity is "what consumers really want" today.[37] In Ilona de Hooge's chapter, we return to this market-driven preoccupation with authenticity in more detail.

Pleas for imperfection, in short, emerge for good reasons. Commodified or not, they can and have, moreover, facilitated important ecological, economic, and political interventions. In what follows, we take this societal potential seriously by defying hardboiled critique in favor of what philosopher Bruno Latour calls a more "cavalier attitude" to relevant texts and claims.[38] Part of this book's value lies in our authors' ability to read between lines and uncover hidden assumptions; but our contributors ask *not*: What is right or wrong about the habit of lauding imperfection? But rather: What is the story behind that habit?

One thing is certain: in this story, technology plays a lead role. Discourses of imperfection often arise in response to drastic socio-technological shifts—from nineteenth-century industrialization to the digitization of our age. Social and media historians have demonstrated that major technological shifts of this type inevitably actuate collective dreams, fantasies, and fears.[39] These collective emotions, they say, merit close attention today: in the words of sociologist Adi Kuntsman, in a "time of constantly changing digital communication technologies," there is a "need to think about feelings, technologies and politics *together*" rather than as isolated paradigms.[40]

This is what such a concerted thinking exercise teaches us about discourses of imperfection: when cultural producers and consumers face new communication technologies, they rethink and worry about existential values—especially values which, in their eyes, technological acceleration puts at stake. Technological transitions trigger dreams about perfecting life and art *and* phobias for the downsides of these dreams. Throughout the history of technology, they have sparked fears that what critical theorist Michael Betancourt has called the "idealized/supposed perfection" of new technologies

[37] Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 54.

[38] Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 241.

[39] For relevant studies see, among others, William Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination; Launching Radio, Television, and Digital Media in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); José van Dijck and Sonja Neef (eds.), *Sign Here! Handwriting in the Age of New Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

[40] Adi Kuntsman, *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2.

will obliterate self-expression, authenticity, humanness, and mental well-being.[41] These core human values are what advocates for imperfection seek and find in the non-polished and flawed. Not coincidentally, the same values resonate throughout the debates about norms, control, purity, and time that we study here.

Chapter Outline

The contributions to *Imperfections* are grouped into three parts, devoted to, respectively, imperfect shapes, imperfect sounds and systems, and imperfect selves.

The chapters in Part I explore the lure of *imperfect shapes*. More than one plea for imperfection boils down to a plea for non-perfected forms—in art, film, or food design, for instance. Which analytical tools and concepts are most helpful for the study of imperfect shapes—and of those who promote these shapes?

In our opening chapter, Yuriko Saito studies the role that notions of imperfection play as criteria for aesthetic judgment in everyday life. Saito sees in *perfectionist aesthetics* a dominant but environmentally, morally, and socially problematic aesthetic paradigm. *Imperfectionist aesthetics* is her proposal to promote, instead, the values of imperfection—an open-minded attitude, for instance, ethically grounded interaction with the material world, and a critical stance toward social ills. Saito does not reject perfectionist aesthetics altogether, however: she uses a comparative analysis of US-based, British, and Japanese social practices to advocate an *inclusive aesthetics*, in which both forms of aesthetics coexist in cautious balance.

In Chapter 2, Mieke Bal uses the word 'mistake' to denote an act of revolt against the requirement of perfection. As she demonstrates, in specific, often small incidences, mistakes inspire us to reflect on what a medium affords. Moving between literature, painting, and film, Bal explains how such *effective mistakes* can travel across media—not as a one-sided translation of one work or artistic language into another, but in an *intermedial conversation*. Within this dynamic, mistakes act as transgressions: they draw attention both to interactions between media and to the social norms against which they sin. To Bal, mistakes thus enforce an active attitude—one to which audience participation is crucial.

Cultural historian and Russianist Yngvar Steinholt also studies the nexus between imperfection and audience engagement. The crack in the cup,

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[41] Betancourt, *Glitch Art*, 8.

smear on the painting, stain on the fabric: Steinholt conceptualizes these as *imperfectionist approaches*—that is, artistic strategies that invite viewers to "complet[e] the incomplete." What happens, he asks in Chapter 3, when these approaches play first fiddle, as they do in the work of Russian art activists Aleksandr Brener, Oleg Kulik, and the Voiná group? Steinholt analyzes the *dirt aesthetics* of these artists, who, rather than entering their local art canon, confront it to this day.[42] In his view, they critique perfection not by praising flaw as artistic method but by idealizing the dirty, filthy, or abject—notions that, in post-Soviet Russia, rank as direct opposites of the canonized art object.

In Chapter 4 we move from arts to supermarkets. As marketing scholar Ilona de Hooge points out, about a third to one-half of all produced food is wasted, in part because supply chains and consumers refuse to produce or buy *imperfect foods*. She uses this term for products that stray from perfect standards not on the basis of main defining product aspects (quality, safety) but on such peripheral product aspects as shape or date labeling. De Hooge's interview studies reveal that effective marketing can tweak producer and consumer willingness to produce, sell, or purchase imperfect foods. She sees promising venues especially for attempts to frame flaws as a plus—as hallmarks of authenticity, for instance, or of uniqueness.

Part II of this book is devoted to *imperfect sounds and systems*. Its contributors compare flaws in noise art, music, games, archives, and language models. To these and other acoustic, linguistic, and referential systems, contingencies and decay are default, not deviation. How do composers, game developers, archivists, and other system designers deal with imperfections? How do they conceptualize the nonideal? And which analytical tools help us in studying sounds and systems where these categories turn from taboo into asset?

In Chapter 5, sound historian Melle Kromhout zooms in on electronic compositions from the 1950s by influential Belgian composer Karel Goeyvaerts. Kromhout demonstrates that electronic sound technology triggered visions of sonic purity and perfection *and* confronted musicians with the physical limitations of technological mediation. His analysis reveals a paradox: if electronic media initially seemed to allow ever greater control over sound, the physical processes that occur inside a medium's black box always entail contingencies that frustrate this control. Ultimately, however, it was exactly this impossibility to obtain perfect sonic control

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[42]   In employing the notion of dirt aesthetics, Steinholt was inspired by the concept of *dirt[y] media* as introduced by Caleb Kelly in a lecture "Dirt[y] Media" at Goldsmith's College, April 17, 2015, https://www.gold.ac.uk/calendar/?id=8528, accessed March 23, 2020.

that inspired Goeyvaerts and others to embrace chance as resource for sonic exploration.

In Chapter 6, Caleb Kelly investigates instruments quite unlike the carefully perfected instruments that audiences typically expect. The traditional violin, for example, is built to exacting craft standards; the violinist diligently rehearses until they can play a piece precisely as the composer wants, without error. Contrary to these and other traditions of perfection, the Australian, (South and North) American, and European experimental instrument builders and performers whose work Kelly studies defy faultlessness. Their instruments—handmade, cracked, and structurally rickety—are built to allow for contingent, unexpected outcomes. Kelly unravels the logic behind these, as he calls them, sonic *imperfection strategies*.

The Dutch video game *GlitchHiker* (2011) was programmed to expire; it is now no longer playable. In Chapter 7, Jakko Kemper examines how its makers used a glitch aesthetics that more than one expert frames as "imperfect." By linking *GlitchHiker*'s glitch-based accent on finitude and fragility to Hägglund's notion of *chronolibido* (introduced above) and to scholarship on repair, Kemper reveals how the game fostered a sense of care and empathy in its audience.

GlitchHiker's imperfection- and finitude-oriented ethos, Kemper concludes, is really a plea for sustainable modes of relating to technology, and a critique on Silicon Valley's commercial philosophy of frictionless design.

If Kromhout, Kelly, and Kemper deal with visual-acoustic systems, the last two chapters in Part II ask: what role can imperfections play in archival and linguistic systems? Literary historian Ernst van Alphen takes us to a pitch-dark archive—that of the Holocaust. In a comparative reading of Dutch and French on- and offline Holocaust exhibitions and (art) books, Van Alphen points to the *functional imperfections* of memorial lists. These lists are frequently messy; they lack the perfect information that archival systems promise; and their compilers continually have to remove or add names. Van Alphen endorses rather than solves this archival failure. He also endorses another, more fundamental, type of archival imperfection. Over time, the referentiality that legitimizes the lists' productiveness vanishes. Van Alphen pleas for welcoming this *referential imperfection*: it gives a new function to memorials that otherwise become obsolete.

In Chapter 10, Tingting Hui revisits a biblical drama. The Tower of Babel is traditionally seen as a traumatic disunion of humans from the perfect language of God. In Western readings of the Babel story—which inspired linguists, philosophers, and artists to search for a primal divine language—multilingualism and translation are unwanted results of the tower's fall. Hui studies Chinese artist Xu Bing's more positive take on the tale. Xu's

installations prompt viewers to ponder questions like: What is a perfect language? What is perfect language use? In Hui's view, Xu probes the idea of an *imperfect language* at two levels: he shuns views of language as perfect communication tool *and* ideals of perfect language users.

In our final book section, four authors analyze *imperfect selves*. In Grant's words, "ideas about perfection and about the self are closely bound up with one another": the sense of an autonomous self "develops in the gap between people's actual imperfections and the ideals to which they aspire."[43] Which strategies do we employ in mediating the breach between personal shortcomings and ideal standards—with photos, fashion, or the stories we tell about ourselves, our bodies, and our homes? How do writers and designers critique classic norms of perfect, pure selves? And which problems arise when ideals of a perfect self are projected on other animals than humans?

Our inquiry into imperfection and selfhood starts with a study of selfies by Patricia Pisters. As she demonstrates, the habit of mediating and picturing selves is age-old, but the *cruel perfectionism* that resonates in selfie practices (and that I discussed earlier in this introduction) is unique for the context of present-day capitalism. Pisters uses findings in cognitive neuroscience and critical feminist thinking to theorize the selfie as *pharmakon*—that is, as both a poison (which spawns distorted self-images and obsessive compulsive behavior) and remedy (which is conducive to healthy rather than perfectionist self-perceptions) for our quest to know our selves.

Chapter 11 is an essay on body normativity by Linor Goralik. She explores such face-distorting wearables as Li's *Perfectly Imperfect* mouthpieces (for a photo of the jewels, see Chapter 11). In Goralik's view, their wearers cross what she calls the *third line of body control*. During socialization, she argues, children learn to control, respectively, bowel movements and urination (body-control line one), gestures and poses (two), and facial impressions (three). By perfecting these skills, individuals perfect the crucial art of performing emotions, so as to communicate thoughts, feelings, and gender or class parameters. Wearers of face-distorting art, as we saw earlier, lose perfect facial control, but at the same time, they pass this control to inanimate objects.

Loss of control is also central to the trauma of exile. In Chapter 12, Domnica Radulescu pairs research to personal testimony to study the question: how do exile experiences transform into artistic products? Her study of drama and literature by exile artists from Eastern Europe, herself included, demonstrates that traumatic experiences can spark innovative aesthetics of loss. But

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[43] Grant, *Imperfection*, 1 and 5.

Radulescu warns against idealizing the pain of migration and poverty, and against appropriating cultural production by Roma minorities in particular. Instead, she flags the importance of personal stories in the creation of survival strategies and *imperfect spaces of belonging*.

If Radulescu unravels the nexus between imperfection and belonging, our last chapter interrogates the relationship between imperfection and love. Oskar Verkaaik juxtaposes Dutch strivings to create perfect dairy cows and efforts to preserve "imperfect" breeds. He examines praise for the so-called Polder Panda—a local cow breed whose productivity ranks as substandard—within debates on sustainable farming. Critics of rural capitalism say that the dairy farm infrastructure favors cows that are alienated from their original biology, whereas the Polder Panda is imperfect in terms of milk output but more in tune with its environment. Verkaaik unpacks the historical roots of the debate. He demonstrates that, throughout cattle breeding history, we witness recurring regimes of perfection *and* praise for "imperfect" cows in terms of admiration and love.

In the epilogue, curator Joanna van der Zanden examines and compares the languages of imperfection that meet and intersect in the different chapters.

Conclusion

Our work offers a valuable step but not, of course, a final word in the study of imperfections. With case studies from China, Peru, the United States, Russia, Rumania, Germany, and other locations, we offer a broad empirical gaze; but a yet more inclusive research scope—one that includes, say, Zambian or other African cases—is bound to nuance our findings. The same is true for disciplinary width. We crafted a broad disciplinary menu; but in future research, our insights could be thickened with the conclusions that immunologists, legal scholars, and other experts have drawn in studies that valorize the flawed and imperfect.[44]

In spite of this need for further inquiry, our authors expand existing scholarship in two important ways. One: in combining a plethora of transdisciplinary practices, they broaden the empirical horizon of existing, mostly monodisciplinary studies of imperfections. Two: they offer a useful theoretical tool kit for students and scholars in cultural studies, psychology,

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[44] See, for instance, Alberto Mantovani, "Reflections on Immunological Nomenclature: In Praise of Imperfection," *Nature Immunology* 17, no. 3 (2016): 215–16; and Sanford Levinson (ed.), *Responding to Imperfection: The Theory and Practice of Constitutional Amendment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

bioengineering, and the other domains in which imperfection theorizing quickly gains critical mass.

With this introduction, I opened the floor by introducing imperfection studies as a field of scholarly inquiry; by sharing our take on imperfections in this book; and by mapping our authors' main theses. I hope that their efforts help readers to historically contextualize and understand the pervasive present-day interest in imperfections.

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Part I

Imperfect Shapes

The Aesthetics of Imperfection in Everyday Life

Yuriko Saito

Introduction

The notions of perfection and imperfection were the subject of lively discussion in eighteenth-century Western aesthetics. One motivating factor was the perceived need to justify what came to be regarded as the imperfect state of the earth and its bumps, warts, and scars, such as mountains, valleys, grottoes, and the like. These irregularities ruined what was once assumed to be a perfectly smooth and beautifully proportional "mundane egg." In response, Thomas Burnett proposed *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681–9) to explain that the great deluge caused by humanity's sin destroyed the once perfect state of the earth. Soon after, those intellectuals who embraced the emerging scientific account of order and regularity of nature's workings offered an aesthetic justification of the earth's imperfection.[1]

Many eighteenth-century philosophers and advocates of the picturesque argued for the aesthetic value of imperfection, understood as irregularity and disorder. They found these qualities in mountainous landscapes, ruins, old objects showing wear and tear, and deformed creatures sometimes referred to as "imperfections of nature."[2] Picturesque aesthetics transformed landscape gardening from formal geometry to a semblance of wild nature.

In this chapter, I revisit and expand upon ideas that I formulated earlier in my article "The Role of Imperfection in Everyday Aesthetics."

[1] See Basil Willey's *The Eighteenth Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1961), Chap. II; and Marjorie Hope Nicolson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).

[2] Joseph Addison, "The Pleasures of the Imagination" (1712), in *Essays in Criticism and Literary Theory*, ed. John Loftis (Northbook: AHM, 1975), 143.

It also created the cult of ruins that included the construction of artificial ruins.[3]

   This historical example represents a typical narrative regarding the *aesthetics of perfection and imperfection*. In this narrative, an accepted norm of aesthetic perfection—whether regarding landscapes, gardens, or architectural structures in the case of the eighteenth century—is questioned and challenged, giving rise to *imperfectionist aesthetics*. The same narrative resonates with particular force in the sphere of art. This is indicated by the many examples discussed in this volume: "willful mistakes" in Flaubert's writing in *Madame Bovary*; Mieke Bal's directional strategies that defy conventional filmmaking in her *Madame B*; a celebration of cracks, dirt, and glitches in contemporary music; artist Xu Bing's challenge to perfect language by inventing characters that look like Chinese but aren't; and creations by contemporary fashion designers that emphasize imperfect body shapes and socially unacceptable bodily expressions. I can add many contemporary works of art in textile, ceramics, and metal that promote such imperfect qualities as cracks and signs of repair.[4]

   These examples indicate that the notion of imperfection has provided, and continues to provide, inspiration for creativity and imagination in art, giving rise to rich and thought-provoking experiences in the audience. What should be noted is that the imperfectionist aesthetics underlying these works of art presupposes a norm of perfection—correct language, clean musical sounds, or the undamaged state of objects, for instance—to which they offer rebellion or critique. The realm of art is a space in which various norms can be challenged; norm negotiation constitutes art's raison d'être particularly today.

   When it comes to our everyday life, while there are plenty of examples of challenge and rebellion, the power of societal norms, including perfectionist aesthetics, seems rather strong. My focus in this discussion is notions of perfection and imperfection in *everyday aesthetics*—that is, aesthetic discourse that explores issues of our daily lives that are not captured by commonly held art-centric aesthetics. Aesthetics is certainly not the only dimension of everyday life in which the norm of perfection is invoked. It is often used to evaluate, say, individual achievements, systems, and

3   See *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden 1620–1820*, ed. John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990) for excerpts from primary sources. For commentaries, see John Dixon Hunt, *Gardens and the Picturesque: Studies in the History of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); and Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989).

4   See Kiff Slemmons, "On Imperfection," *Metalsmith* 28, no. 1 (2008): 26–9; Allen S. Weiss, "The Toilet Bowl and the Tea Bowl," *ArtUS* 27 (2009): 80–5; Allen S. Weiss, "Cracks," *ArtUS* 29 (2010): 62–7; and Lois Martin, "Patina of Cloth," *Surface Design Journal* 28, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 16–21.

technologies.[5] While aesthetics is sometimes referenced in these matters—as when we praise an elegant system or a beautiful technological solution—my main concern here is the dimension of aesthetics that is directed toward the sensuous appearance of material objects. Furthermore, while contemporary art projects often blur the distinction between art and life by creating an art event in an everyday setting and encouraging participation, everyday aesthetics specifically addresses those aesthetic experiences that are gained without the intervention of art.

Thus, what follows is a reflection on the role of perfection and imperfection in everyday aesthetics, as we interact with the world and manage our daily lives. I will first present examples and consequences of *perfectionist aesthetics* from contemporary everyday life, followed by examples of responses promoting an *imperfectionist aesthetics*. After presenting the philosophical underpinnings of perfectionist aesthetics, I outline moral and aesthetic reasons in support of imperfectionist aesthetics. However, I will argue against *indiscriminate* promotion of imperfectionist aesthetics for both aesthetic and social/political reasons.

My discussion primarily builds on everyday life in the United States today. However, I draw theoretical considerations of imperfectionist aesthetics from two past examples outside of the United States: the eighteenth-century British picturesque and the Japanese *wabi* aesthetics associated with the tea ceremony that has been practiced since the sixteenth century. Both aesthetic movements stand out as influential historical exceptions to the preponderance of perfectionist aesthetics.[6] Although culturally and historically distant from the present-day United States, I believe that their arguments for imperfectionist aesthetics go beyond their respective context and are relevant and helpful to this day.

Perfectionist Aesthetics in Everyday Life

Despite the artistic treatments of various types of imperfection cited above, a perfectionist aesthetics seems to prevail in everyday affairs in the United States today. However, perfectionist aesthetic ideals often impact negatively

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5 See Simon Winchester's *The Perfectionists: How Precision Engineers Created the Modern World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018). On imperfect systems, see also Part II of this book.

6 David Lowenthal observes in his study on the Western aesthetics: "the balance of evidence … shows general dislike of age and decay." *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 127.

on individual well-being, environmental sustainability, quality of life, or the state of the world. Let me give some examples.

For quite some time, Americans have been obsessed with creating a 'perfect' lawn that is a velvety smooth green carpet bordered by well-manicured bushes. One book on the so-called American "lawnoholic" preoccupation is subtitled: "The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn."[7] Its creation and subsequent maintenance incur considerable environmental cost: heavy use of water, fertilizers, herbicide, fungicide, insecticide, and fuel for lawn equipment, such as lawn mowers. Furthermore, this mode of landscaping is hostile to such living creatures as birds and butterflies, and it poses risks to human health and safety. In contrast, environmentally friendlier gardens consisting of wildflowers and community gardens that grow vegetables in urban areas are often objected to on the grounds that they are messy, disorderly, and unkempt in appearance and are thus considered aesthetically inferior to the monoculture of the green lawn.[8]

The effect of perfectionist aesthetics has reached supermarket shelves as well, as Ilona de Hooge demonstrates in detail elsewhere in this volume. Harvey Blatt, an earth scientist, points out, too, that the "apparent perfection" of "strangely uniform and incredibly shiny red tomatoes and picture-perfect peaches" results from discarding "deformed" and "ugly" fruits and vegetables—think two-legged carrots, cucumbers that are too curvy, and green peppers with an extra lump.[9] According to one estimate, the process of weeding out imperfect fruits and vegetables by both farmers and supermarkets wastes one-third of the total fresh produce grown in the United States. Furthermore, the carbon footprint for growing them is considerable, and rotting fruits and vegetables that end up in landfills emit methane gas, a major contributor to climate change.[10]

It is well recognized that today's consumerism is guided by aesthetics. Quoting a shopper's declaration that "aesthetics … is why you buy something,"

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[7] Ted Steinberg, *American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007). See also Virginia Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); and Georges Teyssot, "The American Green: Surface of Everyday Life," in *The American Lawn*, ed. Georges Teysott (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 1–39.

[8] Diana Balmori, "Beauty and the Lawn: A Break with Tradition," in *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, 2nd ed., ed. Fritz Haeg (New York: Metropolis Books, 2010), 13. Also see William McDonough and Michael Braungart's *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 86 and 119.

[9] Harvey Blatt, *America's Food: What You Don't Know about What You Eat* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), vii. The following estimate regarding food waste also comes from this work.

[10] Conor McGlone, "Asda's Ugly Veg Drive Divides Supermarkets," *ENDS Report* 480 (February 2015): 40.

Virginia Postrel, a political and cultural writer, argues that today's consumer culture operates on "the aesthetic imperative."[11] It is a widely known secret, too, that the past industry practice of planned obsolescence regarding functionality is replaced by perceived obsolescence, sometimes also called aesthetic obsolescence.[12] Objects are perceived to be aesthetically obsolete in the following two senses even if their functionality remains intact: (1) when they are no longer fashionable because their style ranks as outdated and (2) when they show signs of aging by repeated use, wear and tear, and accidental damages. These two ways of privileging newness comprise the perfectionist aesthetics in consumerism.[13]

This perfectionist-driven aesthetic imperative encourages the phenomenon of "fast fashion," causing the accelerated pace of production of objects ranging from clothing and automobiles to hi-tech gadgets like iPhones. Consumers are compelled to seek more fashionable, stylish, and up-to-date goods and to replace older objects with newer ones when they start showing signs of wear and tear, even if they still function perfectly well. The resulting never-ending cycle of production, consumption, and disposal is responsible for resource depletion, environmental degradation, mounting garbage, not to mention human rights violation in those developing nations where many goods are manufactured and developed nations dump their garbage.

Another set of problematic consequence of perfectionism is the human body. Such efforts to achieve an ideal physique as extreme dieting, cosmetic surgery, use of steroids, and tanning booths often harm a person's health, and even lead to death, as tragically shown by French fashion model Isabelle Caro, who died of malnutrition in 2010. As Patricia Pisters's chapter in this volume indicates, pursuits of perfection can take a heavy toll on one's mental health as well.

In addition to compromising health, many people whose bodily appearance falls short of societal ideals suffer from various forms of discrimination. Obesity, deformity, disability, and unattractive facial features work against employment, acceptance to a certain group, and interpersonal

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[11] Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 8. See also the scholarship on today's "aesthetic economy" and "emotional capitalism" as referenced in this book's introduction.

[12] See Stuart Walker's *Sustainable by Design: Explorations in Theory and Practice* (London: Earthscan, 2006), 58, 87, 140–2; and Kate Fletcher's "Durability, Fashion, Sustainability: The Processes and Practices of Use, Fashion Practice," *Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry* 4 (November 2012): 223–36.

[13] See my "Consumer Aesthetics and Environmental Ethics: Problems and Possibilities," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 76, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 429–39.

relationships, not only damaging one's self-esteem and quality of life but also adding yet another kind of injustice in today's society.[14]

These examples indicate that our everyday aesthetic judgments are often guided by a degree of conformity to the societal norm of perfection. They also indicate that various forms of perfectionist aesthetics in everyday life lead to problematic consequences, such as environmental harm and social injustice. The recognition that perfectionist aesthetics is implicated in creating those negative consequences has given rise to a number of contemporary responses in art, civic projects, commerce, and industries. I now turn to some of these examples that advocate an imperfectionist aesthetics.

Imperfectionist Aesthetics' Responses

An imperfectionist aesthetics resonates, first, in landscape design. As has been mentioned before, wildflower gardens and community gardens are typically criticized for their messy, unkempt appearance compared to the perfectly maintained and manicured gardens primarily consisting of a green lawn. However, this aesthetic standard is challenged in different landscape projects: community gardens that are proliferating in urban areas; public art projects that feature native plants and wildflowers, such as Piet Oudolf's Lurie Garden in Chicago's Millennium Park and New York City's High Line; and art projects that replace green lawns with edible plants, such as an American artist Fritz Haeg's *Edible Estate* (2005–).[15] These gardens shift the landscape paradigm from the monoculture aesthetic of the green lawn to a rich diversity of colors, shapes, textures, and sometimes fragrance. They celebrate vivacity and liveliness because of the frequent visits by birds and butterflies. In addition, these gardens, often supported, created, and maintained by community residents, generate a sense of community pride, neighborliness, and environmental stewardship.[16]

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[14] See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Deborah Rhode, *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Sherri Irvin (ed.), *Body Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Heather Widdows, *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[15] Fritz Haeg, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, 2nd ed. (New York: Metropolis Books, 2010). See examples at http://www.fritzhaeg.com/garden/initiatives/edibleestates/main.html, accessed March 1, 2017. Also see Sue Spaid's *Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses and Abandoned Lots* (Cincinnati: Contemporary Art Center, 2012).

[16] Balmori, "Beauty and the Lawn," 13. Also see McDonough and Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*, 86 and 119.

As discussed by De Hooge in this volume, food marketing is another domain where multiple initiatives challenge perfectionist aesthetics. Supermarkets in Europe and the United States have started to promote "Inglorious Fruits and Vegetables" and "Produce with Personality."[17] With strategic placement and favorable lighting, these campaigns highlight the unique beauty of products that traditionally rank as imperfect. These products even star in artistic works, such as Uli Westphal's photographic project, *Mutatoes*.[18]

Contemporary designers concerned with today's overconsumption also offer design strategies to reduce waste and facilitate products' longevity. Some examples are: (1) choosing materials with a multicolored, variegated, and/or irregular surface that "absorb wear and tear in ways that do not detract from the overall appearance of the object";[19] (2) leaving objects unfinished to encourage consumers to actively engage in completing, transforming, and personalizing them to facilitate an intimate and personal "life *with* a product" in addition to "the life *of* a product";[20] and (3) highlighting the (hi)story of an object from its origin to store-shelf to encourage consumers to develop a holistic understanding and respectful appreciation and to continue its story through alteration, repair, and other active interactions with it.

Here the practice of repair deserves special attention. Once a common part of people's daily lives in the United States and elsewhere, repair has become neglected in a consumerist age that treats various manufactured goods as disposables. Thanks to initiatives such as repair cafés, repair manifestos, and the right to repair legislations, this practice is making a comeback.[21] Indicative of its popularity is the growing acceptance of visible repair. Alison Gwilt, a fashion design theorist, points out that the traditional repair of clothes requires invisibility. For example, adding a patch to hide a hole or a rip traditionally requires fabric and thread that match the ripped garment's color and texture, so that the appearance of repair is minimized. This assumes that a visible indication of the repair is aesthetically inferior

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17 They are the campaigns of Intermarché, a French supermarket chain, and Giant Eagle, a US supermarket chain, respectively.

18 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8a4GqSaQcU and http://www.uliwestphal.de/mutatoes/index.html, both accessed on March 1, 2017.

19 Walker, *Sustainable by Design*, 87.

20 Lance Hosey, *The Shape of Green: Aesthetics, Ecology, and Design* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2012), 107.

21 The "Repair café" initiative is gaining global momentum. The author of the epilogue in this volume, Joanna van der Zanden, is a cofounder of this initiative. See https://repaircafe.org/en/, accessed May 1, 2019. The first Repair Manifesto was issued in 2009 by a Dutch group, Platform 21, which was soon followed by a California company, Ifixit. At the time of writing, twenty states in the United States passed the right to repair legislation.

to the invisible or inconspicuous repair, not to mention the undamaged appearance.[22] Ultimately, our interest in keeping the object's surface as close to the original state as possible is motivated by the presumed aesthetic superiority of the appearance of perfection, which encourages signs of wear and tear and damage to be made as inconspicuous as possible.

In contrast, visible repair by advocates of imperfectionist aesthetics, both professionals and laypeople, celebrates signs of damage by rendering them prominent and aesthetically pleasing. The most common example is proudly displayed patches and stitches on clothing.[23] Some art projects also feature visible repair, such as Daniel Eatock's *Visible Vehicle Repairs* (2017–) that results in two-colored cars; Rachel Sussman's *Sidewalk Kintsukuroi* (2016–), which appropriates the Japanese traditional repair method called *kintsukuroi* (gold repair) in repairing sidewalk cracks; and Jan Vormann's *Dispatchwork* (2007–), in which, across different parts of the world, he repairs the crumbling edifice of brick structures with Lego pieces.[24]

Many practitioners of visible repair are inspired by the Japanese tradition of *kintsugi* (or *kintsukuroi*), an art of repairing cracked pottery with visible filling, often with gold, that became popularized with the establishment of the tea ceremony in the sixteenth century. They also gain inspiration from the Japanese fabric repair termed *boro*, which mends tattered clothes with equally tattered fabrics to the point where almost every part is replaced. This mode of repair was born among the poor out of the necessity of making do with scarce resources, similar to quilt-making in the American South.[25] The aesthetic effect of these repaired objects is stunning and today they are often exhibited in museums. They illustrate vividly that the so-called imperfections

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[22] Alison Gwilt, "Producing Sustainable Fashion," in *Shaping Sustainable Fashion: Changing the Way We Make and Use Clothes*, ed. Alison Gwilt and Timo Rissanen (London: Earthscan, 2011), 59–73.

[23] Ibid. Also see Katrina Rodabaugh, *Mending Matters: Stitch, Patch, and Repair Your Favorite Denim & More* (New York: Abrams, 2018) for innovative examples of visible repair.

[24] See examples at https://eatock.com/books/visible-vehicle-repairs/, http://www.rachelsussman.com/portfolio#/sidewalk-kintsukuroi, and https://www.janvormann.com/testbild/dispatchwork/, all accessed on November 22, 2019. For examples of both invisible and visible repair, see RISD Museum publication, *Manual* 11 (Fall 2018), dedicated to the subject of repair.

[25] For *boro*, see Timo Rissanen, "Designing Endurance," in Gwilt and Rissanen, *Shaping Sustainable Fashion*, 130, and Sasha Rabin Wallinger's "Mottainai: The Fabric of Life, Lessons in Frugality from Traditional Japan," *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 10, no. 3 (November 2012): 336–45. For quilts, see John Beardsley, William Arnett, Paul Arnett, Jane Livingstone, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2002) and John Beardsley, William Arnett, Paul Arnett, Jane Livingstone, *Gee's Bend: Women and Their Quilts* (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2002).

associated with damage and repair can become aesthetic assets instead of defects, thereby supporting the basic tenet of imperfectionist aesthetics.

As for countering the negative consequences of the norm of bodily perfection, we witness a growing movement to include various body types and differently abled bodies as dancers, stage performers, and fashion models to promote public awareness of body positivity. One example is the Swiss campaign called "Because Who Is Perfect?" that features five mannequins whose bodies—one model has legs of different length, another uses a wheelchair—traditionally rank as imperfect.[26] This kind of inclusiveness and celebration of diversity is a welcome antidote to perfectionist norms regarding the human body, whose extreme version can include white and Aryan supremacism. Furthermore, a movement is on the rise among beauty product industries not to photoshop images in advertisements in order to showcase diverse facial features and skin conditions.[27]

Thus, the perfectionist aesthetics that has dominated our everyday life is undergoing much needed changes today by these specific applications of imperfectionist aesthetics.

However, rather than these applications in themselves, what interests me are the philosophical underpinnings of imperfectionist aesthetics and their beneficial consequences when compared to perfectionist aesthetics. In order to explore these philosophical foundations, I shall first present the conceptual framework that supports perfectionist aesthetics.

Theoretical Framework for Perfectionist Aesthetics

The aforementioned examples of perfectionist aesthetics suggest two fundamental desiderata: permanence and uniformity. Let's first consider the reasons for privileging permanence. To regard inevitable signs of aging and breakage as aesthetically negative degradation and deterioration implies a yearning for permanence of material objects in their perfect

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[26] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8umFV69fNg, accessed March 1, 2017.

[27] One of the most recent and notable examples in the United States is CVS Pharmacy's "Beauty in Real Life" campaign launched in January 2018 that was featured in *Glamour* (Rachel Nussbaum, "We Need More Beauty Ads Like This Totally Unretouched Skin Care Campaign," January 25, 2018, https://www.glamour.com/gallery/babor-unretouched-skin-care-campaign and Zoe Weiner, "CVS' New Photoshop-Free Ads Were Produced by Women," April 19, 2018, https://www.glamour.com/story/cvs-photoshop-free-beauty-ads, both accessed January 25, 2019). Also see Anne Marie Todd's "The Aesthetic Turn in Green Marketing: Environmental Consumer Ethics of Natural Personal Care Products," *Ethics & the Environment* 9, no. 2 (2004): 86–102.

condition. Favoring timelessness over vicissitude and impermanence goes back to Plato's theory, which identifies reality as Forms or Ideas that are immutable and exist beyond and apart from the empirical world. A more recent powerful force behind the penchant for permanence of the material world is the Enlightenment agenda, which equates the good life with a life free from the constraints of nature. This ideal is best exemplified in Francis Bacon's utopia *The New Atlantis* (published posthumously in 1626), which can be taken as a blueprint for technological advancement. Most of the future projects that he conceptualizes—airplanes, submarines, genetic engineering, and holography, to name a few—have today been accomplished. Bacon expects that we humans are capable of creating an ideal world on this earth, populated with perfectly and permanently functioning objects that help us overcome limitations placed on us by nature, including impermanence and the vicissitudes of the material world.[28]

This stance of privileging permanence manifests itself in various social practices. Architectural practice is one of them. As Rumiko Handa, herself an architect, documents, architects tend to exert what she calls an "authorial authority" that prohibits any modifications once a building is completed.[29] At the time of completion, the structure is deemed perfect and any change, whether intentionally inflicted or naturally developed, ranks as a deterioration, a fall from grace. Some architects even dictate the activities and objects used within their designed space, regardless of the lifestyle and wishes of its users. Frank Lloyd Wright, for instance, was notorious for designing everything within the space, including furniture and even plates, so as to create an overall harmony. In Philip Johnson's Glass House, "even table-top bric-a-brac are discreetly marked with indications of their correct location," making the space "unlivable as a domestic space," according to one critic.[30] Architects' desires and attempts to freeze buildings and things in them at the time of completion reflect an unrealistic expectation that defies the reality of the lived world.

This penchant for permanence is also reflected in today's industrial production system. The identity of a manufactured object is defined as the end state of the production process when it is in mint condition. Any deviation from this condition is considered defective, deficient, or degraded—in short,

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[28] Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis. 1626.* https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2434/2434-h/2434-h.htm, accessed February 27, 2020.

[29] Rumiko Handa, *Allure of the Incomplete, Imperfect, and Impermanent: Designing and Appreciating Architecture as Nature* (Oxon: Routledge, 2015).

[30] Kevin Melchionne, "Living in Glass Houses: Domesticity, Interior Decoration, and Environmental Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 191.

imperfect. Information-and-technology scholar Steven J. Jackson terms this privileging of the end result of a production process a "productionist bias" and instead calls for what he terms "broken world thinking," which foregrounds "erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as our starting points."[31]

The productionist bias promotes another tenet of perfectionist aesthetics: uniformity. Industrial production is premised upon the uniformity and consistency of manufactured goods. Any glitches in the production process result in defective goods; these are often discarded or sold cheaply as "factory rejects" because of "slight imperfections." This ethos favoring uniformity guides not only factory production but also other forms of perfectionist aesthetics that I listed before, such as fruits and vegetables without defects and deformity, the green lawn that features uniformly smooth surfaces without weeds or brown spots, and human bodies without deformities or blemishes. We can interpret this rejection of diversity as another legacy of the Enlightenment, which accords high value on universality, uniformity, consistency, and context-independence. This ethos has come under increasing criticism, particularly today by those who question the colonialist practice of imposing Western-centric worldviews and one-size-fits-all solutions on different cultural practices and geographical conditions, without respecting their specific contexts.

Thus, perfectionist aesthetics can be understood to be directed by a philosophy and practice that favor uniformity, context-independence, timelessness, and non-changeability. In response, imperfectionist aesthetics challenges perfectionist beliefs for philosophical, moral, and aesthetic reasons, and uses these criticisms to support an alternative view. I explore its criticisms in the next section.

Moral and Aesthetic Support for Imperfectionist Aesthetics

First, there is a moral argument in support of imperfectionist aesthetics. One of the necessary ingredients of our moral life as we interact with others is that we do not impose our ideas and ideals on them but rather become a good listener and respect their own reality, dignity, and integrity. Instead of focusing on the fairness, neutrality, and universality that characterize

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[31] Steven J. Jackson, "Rethinking Repair," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kristen A. Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 221.

Western justice-centric ethics, care ethics, proposed primarily by feminist thinkers, emphasizes the paramount importance of respecting the singularity of an individual in our ethical life (see on the nexus between ethics of care and aesthetics of imperfection Jakko Kemper's chapter in this volume). Lawrence Blum, a moral philosopher, states that "care morality is about the *particular* agent's caring for and about the *particular* moral patient. Morality is not (only) about how the impersonal 'one' is meant to act toward the impersonal 'other.'"[32]

There is a structural similarity between aesthetics and care ethics. An early proponent of ethics of care, Nel Noddings, explains the structural analogy between aesthetics and care ethics thus: "The receptivity characteristic of aesthetic engagement is very like the receptivity of caring. Consciousness assumes a similar mode of being—one that attempts to grasp or to receive a reality rather than to impose it."[33] Although not specifically discussing the parallel between aesthetics and care ethics, Ronald Hepburn, a British aesthetician, similarly observes that aesthetic experiences of art are possible only "when we see it … as an inherently valuable, irreplaceable artifact, whose message … is *individualized* by its embodiment in that *unique* object."[34]

Engaging with the other, whether a person or an art work, in its singularity, requires open-mindedness and a willingness to meet it on its own terms. Art is particularly effective in this regard, according to pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. He states that the moral function of art is "to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, [and] tear away the veils due to wont and custom." Specifically, "works of art are means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other forms of relationship and participation than our own."[35]

Iris Murdoch's notion of "unselfing" can be understood similarly. Concerned with the fact that "our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self- preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world," she claims that "anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue."[36] Consequently, she regards the appreciation of good art as the

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[32] Lawrence A. Blum, "Gilligan and Kohlberg: Implications for Moral Theory," *Ethics* 98 (1988): 476–7, emphases added.

[33] Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2nd ed., updated (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013), 22.

[34] Ronald W. Hepburn, "Life and Life-Enhancement as Key Concepts in Aesthetics," in *The Reach of the Aesthetic: Collected Essays on Art and Nature* (Hants: Ashgate, 2001), 12.

[35] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Press, 1958), 325 and 333.

[36] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 82.

reward of successful unselfing that helps one "transcend selfish and obsessive limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility."[37]

I believe that this moral function of art stated by Dewey and Murdoch can be applied to everyday aesthetics as well. Although art is the best vehicle for cultivating an open-minded and respectful attitude that helps overcome a self-centered and uncritical worldview, everyday aesthetic experiences can also aid in this moral education. In this regard, perfectionist aesthetics is morally problematic for its failure to attend to and respect the individual singularity of an object, whether it be a consumer product that has seen better days, a weed-filled garden, or a deformed human body.

In addition to this moral shortcoming, the second argument against perfectionist aesthetics concerns the price we pay by unduly limiting our aesthetic palette. Those objects that are considered imperfect are more challenging for aesthetic appreciation than perfect objects that offer easier beauty. However, precisely because of this difficulty, imperfect objects can provide a richer aesthetic experience and help cultivate a sharper sensibility.

Here, historically noteworthy movements that celebrate imperfectionist aesthetics, namely the eighteenth-century British picturesque and the Japanese *wabi* aesthetics, are helpful in explaining the benefits of widening one's aesthetic horizon.

Picturesque Aesthetics

One of the early advocates of the eighteenth-century picturesque, William Gilpin, acknowledges the beauty and elegance of Palladian architecture with its symmetry and orderly design, but recommends that "should we wish to give it picturesque beauty, we must use the mallet instead of the chisel, we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps. In short, from a smooth building we must turn it into a rough ruin."[38] According to Gilpin and other advocates of the picturesque, such as Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price, the experience of ruins requires a fine-tuned aesthetic sensibility—one that appreciates their complex, irregular, and asymmetrical shape, interplay of interior and exterior spaces, and rough surfaces due to destruction, weathering, and plant growth in crevices.

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[37] Ibid., 85.

[38] William Gilpin, *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape: to Which Is Added a Poem, on Landscape Painting* (1792) at http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004863369.0001.000/1:4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext, accessed March 1, 2017, 7.

In addition to the purely sensuous appeal of irregularity and signs of damage or decline, imperfect objects stimulate the imagination that enriches their aesthetic appeal. Joseph Addison, writing in the early eighteenth century and foretelling the subsequent development of picturesque aesthetics, for example, characterizes our aesthetic experience as "the pleasures of the imagination" and identifies the great, the uncommon, and the beautiful as the causes of such pleasures. Among them, the uncommon stimulates our mind and "it is this that bestows charms on a monster and makes even the imperfections of nature to please us."[39] Addison claims it is the imagination that "makes the most rude, uncultivated parts of nature administer to his pleasures" and helps discover "a multitude of charms that conceal themselves from the generality of mankind."[40] For Gilpin, ruins again serve as the prime example of imperfect beauty. The imagination becomes engaged as we contemplate their original state, the cause of their transformation, and the parallel transience of human life. His contemporary Knight summarizes the source of the specific pleasure of picturesque beauty thus: "As all the pleasures of intellect arise from the association of ideas, the more the materials of association are multiplied, the more will the sphere of these pleasures be enlarged."[41]

Wabi Aesthetics

Another well-known historical example of imperfectionism, Japanese *wabi* aesthetics, was established with the tea ceremony in the sixteenth century, long before the popularization of picturesque aesthetics in eighteenth-century Britain. Initially proposed as an alternative to the prevailing taste for opulence and luxury, *wabi* aesthetics, like the picturesque, also celebrates irregularity, rough surfaces, asymmetry, and defects in tea bowls, other implements, and tea huts. These qualities often result from aging processes or occur accidentally during the creative process—think of an unexpected run of the glaze or the adherence of ashes and bits of straw on the pottery surface. Some other times, tea masters create these effects by a destructive act, as when they break one handle of a vase.[42]

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[39] Addison, "Pleasures," #412, 142.
[40] Ibid., #411, 140.
[41] Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805), in Hunt and Willis, *The Genius of the Place*, 181.
[42] See my "The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 4 (Fall 1997): 377–85.

Wabi aesthetics gives a specific term to a long-standing Japanese aesthetic sensibility informed by the Buddhist notion of the impermanence of everything. A prominent example is a series of essays written in the fourteenth century by Yoshida Kenkō, a retired Buddhist monk. Kenkō extols, for instance, the beauty of a silk scroll wrapper that "has frayed at top and bottom, and the mother-of-pearl [that] has fallen from the roller."[43] He also argues for the beauty of cherry blossoms when they are falling rather than at the height of blooming, although he recognizes that this appreciation is challenging to many, because "people commonly regret that the cherry blossoms scatter."[44]

As with the picturesque, the activation of imagination underlies the aesthetic appeal of *wabi.* Kenkō poses the rhetorical question whether an aesthetic pleasure is gained only through the eyes: "Are we to look at the moon and the cherry blossoms with our eyes alone?"[45] In answering, he declares: "How much more evocative and pleasing it is to think about the spring without stirring from the house, to dream of the moonlit night though we remain in our room!"[46] For the same reason, Sen no Rikyū (1522–91), the tea master who established *wabi* aesthetics, criticizes those who lament a landscape devoid of flowers and colorful foliage because they "are merely capable of taking pleasure in the colorful sights which appear to their physical eyes alone."[47] Kenkō invokes a poignant appreciation of a festival's aftermath—when various objects used in the procession are taken apart and a sense of desolation sets in—by drawing (just as fans of the picturesque will do later) a parallel to human life: "You realize with a pang of grief that life is like this."[48] Formative to his appreciation is the imaginative engagement with something that is considered to have declined from the height of its aesthetic appeal (to the eye).

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[43] Kenkō Yoshida, *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*, trans. Donald Keene (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 70. In the text, I follow the Japanese custom of putting the family name before the given name, but the order is reversed in the citation information to be faithful to the English publication of the translation. With historical figures, such as here, however, it is customary to refer to the first name.

[44] Kenkō, *Essays*, 115.

[45] Ibid., 118.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Sōkei Nanbō, "Record of Nanbō" (Sen no Rikyū's teaching recorded by his disciple, Sōkei Nanbō), in *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan*, ed. and trans. Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 156–7.

[48] Kenkō, *Essays*, 120.

Consumer Aesthetics

Engaging the imagination as an aesthetic benefit, as advocated by the picturesque and *wabi*, is particularly pertinent in our dealings with contemporary consumer products. Today's demand for the new and fashionable results at least in part from the fact that many consumer products are mass produced and soon carted off to a dumping place on the other side of the globe. This geographical distance between the consumer and the object's origin and afterlife makes our typical relationship with them one of alienation, disconnection, and disengagement. As David Orr, an environmental educator, points out, the problem is that we do not often see the true ugliness of the consumer economy and so are not compelled to do much about it. The distance between shopping malls and the mines, wells, corporate farms, factories, toxic dumps, and landfills, sometimes half a world away, dampens our perceptions that something is fundamentally wrong.[49]

Today's relationship between consumers and products has thus become rather dysfunctional. A design educator, Stuart Walker, characterizes this state of affairs "a severe detachment from our material world" and "a lack of understanding and a devaluing of material culture"; we have become "increasingly divorced from an intimate connection with things."[50]

This disengagement renders consumer goods mere objects on the store shelf with no history or story to tell. However, the fact is that they are not mere "stuff" devoid of life stories; we just have not activated our imagination to listen to their individual stories. Far from being story-less, an object undergoes quite a journey during its production process and continues this journey into its so-called "afterlife" in the junkyard. The story is often dark, featuring environmental problems and human hardships. While this dark story may not necessarily render the aesthetic value of the object negative, it makes its aesthetic appeal more complicated and possibly richer, though perhaps creating unease and discomfort. It renders its sensuous appeal more fragile and precarious. If we do purchase an object, feeling the weight of its past dark history and the likely continuation of a dark future story would encourage a more respectful interaction—one of caring for it and prolonging its longevity by repairing when needed, rather than treating it as a disposable item to throw away at the first sign that it no longer satisfies our aesthetic appetite.

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[49] David Orr, *Nature of Design: Ecology, Culture, and Human Intention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 179.

[50] Walker, *Sustainable by Design*, 53, 54, and 53.

Imperfectionist aesthetics thus widens our aesthetic horizon by open-minded acceptance and appreciation of, as well as imaginative engagement with, those objects and situations that fall short of what is normally seen as their perfect condition. Such interactions enrich our aesthetic life and cultivate a morally sensitive attitude in our engagement with the world. If a person's notion of beauty consists only of a perfectly maintained Palladian architecture, blossoms in full bloom, the monoculture of a green lawn, well-formed fruits, and unblemished objects of daily use, we can safely judge that her aesthetic life is not as rich as it can be. Alternatively, suppose that technology becomes advanced to the point that all manufactured materials can self-heal, thereby retaining their perfect condition permanently and alleviating the need for care, maintenance, and repair.[51] While such a scenario may be welcome for things like airplanes and bridges, I suspect that our life will become impoverished due to the lack of diversity of objects for appreciation, as well as the loss of opportunity for active engagement with the material world through maintenance, care, and repair. Thus, as historical thinkers from various world locations have taught us from the fourteenth century onward, imperfectionism is beneficial to our aesthetic and moral life.

Arguments against Indiscriminate Imperfectionist Aesthetics

Thus far I have been discussing the benefits of imperfectionist aesthetics in general. But my promotion of imperfectionism does not imply that I reject perfectionist aesthetics by default. I believe there are reasons against an *indiscriminate* adoption of imperfectionist aesthetics. Let me explore these issues.

Some imperfectionism advocates systematically elevate imperfection above perfection. The aforementioned picturesque praise for imperfection in architecture, gardens, and artifacts is always accompanied by a criticism of perfection, such as found in perfectly symmetrical, orderly gardens. Kenkō's celebration of cherry blossoms past their glory as "worthier of our admiration" is accompanied by his claim that "only an exceptionally insensitive man" would find beauty only in flowers in full bloom.[52] Rikyū's teaching recommends that tea ceremony implements "should, in every way and aspect, fall short of perfection," and some tea masters, as said, intentionally

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[51] For this thought experiment, see Daniela K. Rosner's "A Beautiful Oops," *Continent* 6, no. 1 (2017): 77–80.

[52] Kenkō, *Essays*, 115, emphasis added.

damage objects used in the tea ceremony.[53] These statements and acts all indicate that both advocates of the picturesque and tea aficionados regarded imperfect objects as aesthetically superior to perfect objects.

This tendency to elevate imperfection above perfection is an understandable protest against the common perception of imperfectionism as aesthetically challenging or requiring a cultured sensibility. However, I believe that the matter is not a case of either/or; it is rather a judicious coexistence of both. Let me offer both aesthetic and sociopolitical reasons against an indiscriminate promotion of imperfectionism.

First, if one of the reasons to support imperfectionism is to promote an *inclusive aesthetics*, perfectionist aesthetics should retain its place in the aesthetic discourse. After all, even those who advocate imperfect beauty caused by damage, wear, and aging effects would most likely appreciate the perfectly smooth and lustrous appearance of a lacquerware piece when it is finished by the craftsman, an apple with a perfectly round shape, and the smooth skin of a youthful body. The different aesthetic appeals of lacquerware with crackled surfaces, an apple with an asymmetrical shape, and wrinkles marking an aged face do not negate the beauty of these perfections.

Second, even those who advocate imperfectionism often point out the complementarity of perfection and imperfection. It is instructive to consider again the aforementioned historical examples. The picturesque movement appeared in Britain when the land was being rapidly marked by checkerboard-patterned hedgerows due to the enclosure movement. The geometrical monotony of enclosed fields is best broken by landscaping utilizing picturesque aesthetics. Conversely, William Marsden, a British historian and linguist with pioneering scientific works on Indonesia, praises the regularity and order of a pepper garden *after walking through a jungle* in his 1783 report from Sumatra. However, he claims that "a pepper garden cultivated in England would not … be considered as an object of extraordinary beauty; and would be particularly found fault with for its uniformity."[54]

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[53] Sen no Rikyū in *Nambōroku o Yomu* (*Reading Nambōroku*), ed. Isao Kumakura (Kyoto: Tankōsha, 1989), 45. Translation taken from Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu, *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 146.

[54] William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra* (1783), cited by Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 263. Immanuel Kant criticizes Marsden's praise for a pepper garden by claiming that "all stiff regularity (such as approximates to mathematical regularity) has something in it repugnant to taste; for our entertainment in the contemplation of it lasts for no length of time, but it rather … produces weariness." However, Marsden's text reveals that his praise is contextual. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1974), 80.

It is also instructive that advocates of *wabi* aesthetics often point out the aesthetic effect created by a contrast between perfection and imperfection. In the words of the fourteenth-century tea master Murata Shukō, "A prize horse looks best hitched to a thatched hut."[55] While *wabi* tea highlights an irregularly shaped tea bowl, cracked vase, and crooked wooden pillar, all of these irregular and misshapen objects are placed against the geometrical pattern of *tatami* mats.[56] If everything, including the floor, in the tea hut is irregular and misshapen, most likely the overall effect is more grotesque than the *wabi* appeal. On the other hand, if the perfectionist aesthetic pervades everything, as in Philip Johnson's Glass House, the effect will most likely be stiff and rigid, not allowing much free play of the imagination.

Thus, the ideal relationship between perfectionist and imperfectionist aesthetics can be characterized as a judicious balance between them, rather than an indiscriminate promotion of everything perfect or everything imperfect. If it is problematic to adhere to perfectionist aesthetic ideals by rejecting other possibilities, the same applies to promoting imperfection as exclusive aesthetic ideal.

Negative Aesthetics

In addition to this aesthetic criticism, there are moral, social, and political considerations against indiscriminate support for imperfectionist aesthetics. Today we witness an increasing attention to *negative aesthetics*, which challenges traditional aesthetic discourses' focus on beauty. In *Everyday Aesthetics* (2007), Katya Mandoki devotes considerable attention to exposing the "fetishes" of Western aesthetics.[57] One of these fetishes, according to her, results from what she calls the "Pangloss Syndrome," characterized as "the tendency to deal only with things that are nice and worthy, good and beautiful," through "a surgical operation of systematic exclusion of all phenomena that are not positive and useful in their supply of pleasure and nice thoughts."[58] However, she observes that we are confronted with "the disgusting, the obscene, the coarse, the insignificant, the banal, the ugly,

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[55] Cited by Kōshirō Haga, "The *Wabi* Aesthetic," translated and adapted by Martin Collcutt, in *Tea in Japan: Essays in the History of Chanoyu*, ed. Paul Varley and Isao Kumakura (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 196.

[56] See Marc Treib's "The Dichotomies of Dwelling: Edo/Tokyo," in *Tokyo: Form and Spirit*, ed. Mildred Friedman (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1986), 122.

[57] Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

[58] Ibid., 37.

the sordid" and other negative aesthetic qualities, which she calls aesthetic poisoning, every day.[59]

Another noted contemporary aesthetician—Arnold Berleant, who coined the term *negative aesthetics*—identifies aesthetics as "the theory of sensibility," rejects the common association of aesthetics exclusively with art and beauty, and calls attention to occasions and environments that trigger an experience that "offends, distresses, or has harmful or damaging consequences."[60] By analyzing many cases that involve different relationships between the aesthetic and the moral, including pollution, commodification, political propaganda, and urban planning, Berleant stresses the importance of developing an awareness of "aesthetic deprivation," "aesthetic damage," and "aesthetic harm." Positive aesthetics—the focus of the traditional aesthetics discourse—delights, enlightens, and uplifts our sensibility and contributes to human flourishing. Negative aesthetics, on the other hand, dulls, numbs, or assaults our sensibility, stifles creativity, and compromises our well-being and quality of life. He calls for the need to acknowledge this existence of aesthetic negativity.

I do not think that anybody would believe that we live in an aesthetic utopia with no need for improvement. Unfortunately, negative aesthetics exists in today's world and in our lives, ranging from muzak in malls to gaudy billboards, street litter to offensive landfill smells.[61] They also resonate in such imperfect-looking objects as peeling paint, a dilapidated house with broken windows, weeds growing in sidewalk crevices, and tattered clothes worn by homeless people. These instances of negative aesthetics in everyday life result from a lack of choice suffered by the economically disadvantaged, instead of conscious aesthetic decisions made by them.

I previously advocated for an open-minded approach and cultivating an aesthetic sensibility to be able to appreciate these signs of imperfection. Part of the reason to do so were the environmentally and socially harmful consequences of adhering to perfect aesthetic ideals. However, by the same token, if examples of imperfectionist aesthetics indicate social ills and injustice, it is problematic not to regard them as instances of the negative aesthetics that disclose that things are not quite right and need improvement. There is something morally repugnant about deriving an aesthetic pleasure from the signs of social ills suffered by others.

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[59] Ibid., 38.
[60] Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), 155.
[61] For examples of negative aesthetics in today's world, see Berleant's *Sensibility*, Chapter 9, "The Negative Aesthetics of Everyday Life," 155–74.

Indeed, both picturesque aesthetics and *wabi* aesthetics were criticized for this reason. As early as 1790, writer and women's rights activist Mary Wollstonecraft was critical of the picturesque estate where "every thing … is cherished but man," and "the eye … had wandered indignant from the stately palace to the pestiferous hovel."[62] Half a century later, the famous art critic John Ruskin was also critical of "the heartless 'lower picturesque' delight in the look that an old laborer has, not knowing that there is anything pathetic in his grey hair, and withered arms, and sunburnt breast."[63] The *wabi* aesthetics associated with the art of tea ceremony became a target of pointed criticism in the eighteenth century by Dazai Shundai, a Confucian scholar:

> Whatever tea dilettantes do is a copy of the poor and humble. It may be that the rich and noble have a reason to find pleasure in copying the poor and humble. But what should those who are, from the outset, poor and humble find pleasure in further copying the poor and humble? … All that a tea dilettante does is to copy everything which looks poor and shabby.[64]

Today, many instances of imperfectionist aesthetics, such as shabby chic, grunge fashion, and distressed looks, invoke charges of elitism, classism, and dilettantism. Wearing an expensive pair of jeans sporting rips, tears, frays, patches, and faded color may remind some of Marie Antoinette playing at being a milkmaid, others of appropriating the appearance of a homeless person. Furthermore, although ripped clothes may indeed offer a counterpoint to fast fashion's obsession with the ever new in the sense of not showing wear and tear, as soon as they become a fashion trend, they themselves are bound to become out of style, thereby contributing to fast fashion. The façade of shabby houses of the economically disadvantaged residents of Gee's Bend—a small community in Alabama where stunning-looking quilts are created—certainly offers inspiration for quilt patterns, but I doubt that they have a positive aesthetic appreciation of the expression of poverty they are suffering.[65] The same is true for today's so-called ruin porn and poverty tourism in cities like Detroit and New Orleans, where physical

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[62] Mary Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Men" (1790), in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 58.

[63] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, cited by Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 166.

[64] Dazai Shundai, *Dokugo* (1816), cited by Hiroshi Minami, *Psychology of the Japanese People*, trans. Albert R. Ikoma (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 90.

[65] See Beardsley, Arnett, Arnett, Livingstone, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* and Beardsley, Arnett, Arnett, Livingstone, *Gee's Bend: Women and Their Quilts* for examples of the residents' houses.

manifestations of social ills and suffering morph into an object of the gaze primarily for nonresidents.[66]

Calling attention to instances of negative aesthetics in our lives and experiencing them as negative is important because of what I call the *power of the aesthetic*. The aesthetic manifestations of imperfection communicate social problems more powerfully and effectively than things like statistics regarding poverty rates. Our sensibility, assaulted by these negative aesthetic experiences, affects us immediately and viscerally, and I believe that it is important that they affect us this way. The term "aesthetic" does not necessarily refer to something positive and pleasurable, if we remain faithful to its original value-neutral meaning of having to do with the senses. Similarly, 'appreciation' does not always mean something enjoyable. It means having a deep understanding of something, which includes things like difficulties and problems. Accordingly, it is important that we cultivate sensibility and activate imagination so that we develop an appreciation of negative aesthetics in the sense explained.

Does this consideration regarding negative aesthetics mean that those objects resulting from or bearing witness to social ills and injustice should be eradicated or replaced? I believe that the issue is more complicated and that it requires a carefully considered and individually tailored judgment. For example, some, but perhaps not all, ruined structures that result from a war or an evil human deed should be preserved as historical witnesses and cautionary reminders of "never again" for the future generation.[67] Similarly, Sannon Lee Dawdy, an anthropologist, argues against completely eradicating the traces of destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and replacing them with a sanitized version of what things used to be or, worse, their Disneyfication for consumption by tourists. She instead argues for a judicious preservation of patina, which she defines as "a medium of aesthetic value *perceived* to have accumulated through time that represents the social palimpsest" and supports "a process of both accumulation and decay that

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[66]　See on poverty tourism also Domnica Radulescu's contribution to this volume. For the analysis of "rustalgia," "Rust Belt chic," or "Rust Belt porn" regarding the American Rust Belt represented by Detroit, see Renee M. Conroy, "Rust Belt Ruins," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Ruins, Monuments, and Memorials*, ed. Jeanette Bicknell, Jennifer Judkins, and Carolyn Korsmeyer (New York: Routledge, 2020), 121–32, as well as Kate Wells, "Detroit Was Always Made of Wheels: Confronting Ruin Porn in Its Hometown" and Christopher T. Gullen, "Gods and Monsters: A Solastalgic Examination of Detroit's Ruins and Representation," both in *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay*, ed. Siobhan Lyons (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 13–29 and 31–44.

[67]　See my "Reflections on the Atomic Bomb Ruin in Hiroshima," in Bicknell, Judkins, and Korsmeyer (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Ruins*, 201–14.

must be kept in a cared-for balance."[68] Ultimately, both my discussion of perfectionism/imperfectionism in everyday aesthetics and Dawdy's view on patina are a call for recognizing, appreciating, and working with the material world that never stands still.

In conclusion, my examination of perfectionist and imperfectionist aesthetics in everyday life underscores the power of the aesthetic. Aesthetics in our lives tend to be dismissed as dispensable luxury or superficial fluff. However, I hope to have shown how the quality of life and the state of society and the world are significantly affected by aesthetic considerations. Aesthetics can direct our decisions and actions in everyday life, offer a paradigm shift, such as the shift from perfectionism to imperfectionism, counter negative consequences of our decisions and actions, and provide a powerful and effective instrument for exposing social problems. It therefore behooves us to develop respect for this power of the aesthetic, cultivate aesthetic literacy and vigilance, and ultimately use it to improve and enrich our lives.[69]

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[68] Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Patina: A Profane Archaeology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 5 and 16.

[69] The original and much different version of this chapter was first presented at the Symposium on the Aesthetics of (Im)perfection held at the University of Tokyo (April 2017) organized by Peter Cheyne, and published in *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 15 (2017). It was further revised for this volume after presentation at the Imperfections conference (March 2019) organized by Ellen Rutten. I thank both organizers for inviting me to the respective meetings and the participants in both events for stimulating discussion and much food for thought. Scott Cook edited the final text, for which I am grateful. Last but not least, I thank the coeditors of this volume for their comments and edits on the earlier drafts of this chapter.

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Making Meaning with Mistakes

Mieke Bal

Introduction: Mistakes and Meaning

One of the most perfectionist literary writers, Gustave Flaubert, made "mistakes." He was unorthodox in his grammatical uses of verb tenses, in his refusal of a plausible proportion of direct discourse, and in his deployment of incongruous comparisons. I will argue below that he willfully made mistakes in order to shake up the automatism with which readers presuppose transparency in their routine use of language. This is especially remarkable in the case of such a meticulous word artist. But other artists, including great ones, working in different media, did comparable things. Below I will call on modernist painter Edvard Munch to argue he also made such willful mistakes. The meaning of mistakes goes farther and becomes more complex when we consider relations of difference between media. For, there is more to this artistic behavior than a self-reflexive attention to the artists' own medium.

   As Yuriko Saito recalls in her timely reminders of the continued effects of aesthetic values on political and social life in this volume, there are movements and currents that "celebrates … irregularity, rough surfaces, asymmetry, and defects" (Chapter 1, this volume, p. 36) To her, "thinkers from various world locations have taught us from the fourteenth century onwards [that] imperfectionism is beneficial to our aesthetic and moral life" (Chapter 1, this volume, p. 39) Saito connects this affirmative take on imperfection to a moral open-mindedness, and the necessary value of relinquishing control over objects, including over nature. Imperfection, in current artspeak, is a refusal of the formal perfection that conventional criticism requires, now that electronic media are providing the means to achieve it. Such revolts can be punctual,

and I want to distinguish those from overall willful imperfection as an overall strategy for a work. I use the word "mistake" to denote an act rather than a trend; a willful and punctual case of "imperfection"; a symptom of a revolt against the requirement of perfection, but in specific, often small incidences. With "willful" I seem to be alluding to authorial intention, but this is not my interest.

I propose to bracket authorial intention. In combination with "willfulness" this may seem contradictory. But it is a paradox only, an apparent contradiction. I am talking about the "will" of the artwork, in the sense that the mistake has an effect, if only we heed its pointing to norms and rules. Whether or not the artist has the kind of effect and meaning in mind that I derive from the mistakes, the point is that such mistakes alert us to the ease with which we assume and endorse different kinds of norms of technical—linguistic or painterly, videographic or sonic—perfection. The authority of the artist is not at stake; I want to explore the authority of norms. I focus in particular on the *intermediality* of mistakes. Moving between literature, painting and film, I raise the question if and how such effective mistakes can find their equivalents in other media without translating them and thereby distorting what each medium allows. Then, an intermediality emerges that is not a one-sided adaptation of one work into another, nor a translation of one artistic language into another, but a dynamic I call an intermedial conversation. This is where my punctual mistakes fit in with Saito's nuanced account of perfectionism and imperfectionism as aesthetic trends with social consequences.

In a triangular conversation, I will analyze some of such mistakes, selecting ones that seem typical within the use of each medium. Moving between literature, painting, and film, I will examine if and how such effective mistakes can find their equivalents in other media without translating them and thereby distorting what each medium allows. In this move I imply a slight disagreement with Virgil Nemoianu, who contends that literature is the domain par excellence where the imperfection of mistakes is most readily displayed. Without unwarrantedly ignoring what has been called "medium specificity," I resist any attempt to prioritize and essentialize different mediums. Nor do I wish to separate form from content, or to equate imperfection with loss, as he seems to do. Instead, an intermediality emerges that is not a one-sided adaptation of one work into another, nor a translation of one artistic language into another, but a dynamic I would propose to call an intermedial conversation. Nor is the discussion limited to formal issues. Instead, I hope to make the case for the intertwinement of formal aspects such as the mistakes in question, and their political and aesthetic effects.[1]

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[1]   For Nemoianu's argument see his *Imperfection and Defeat* (Central European University Press, 2006), 3.

This inquiry is part of what is now commonly called "artistic research"—research of which the working method or mode is doing and making the work about which one has questions. I have been involved in this from the moment I realized the surplus value of making art as a form of analyzing cultural issues. Inevitably, in image-thinking, the researcher, when an academic, also participates as an artist. Hence, I participate myself in this inquiry. As did, by the way, Leonardo da Vinci, who can be seen as its inventor, when he sought to visualize his abstract ideas and considered painting the ideal way to do that.[2]

As it happens, without being aware of this as an artistic issue, Michelle Williams Gamaker and I, when making the film *Madame B* (2013), have also made willful mistakes. Initially simply because when they occurred we liked the effect, but we eventually began to see the meaning that emerged from them. Thus, the idea of examining mistakes more generally and in depth began to dawn on me. Retrospectively, in the endorsement of mistakes—different, of course, since our medial position was different—we realized we were being *loyal* to Flaubert's novel, in a specific sense: loyal to its aesthetic and political positions. Nevertheless, rejecting the idea of making an "adaptation," we flaunted our indifference to "faithfulness"—to personality traits of characters, even their age; to similarity of events, and other elements usually considered in terms of faithfulness.[3]

Historical Mistakes

My first encounter with such effective "mistakes" happened decades ago. I noticed it because I endorsed the view that the present consists of *multiple perspectives*. Consider Rembrandt's "Bathsheba at Her Bath" from 1654 (Figure 2.1). We see that she crosses her legs. Now, try to do this. Try to cross your legs and put your feet the way she does. You cannot do it! Because the foot is on the far side of her knee while the calf is on this side of her knee. This is physically impossible.

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[2] I developed the concept of "image-thinking" as an alternative to the problematic "artistic research" in *Image-Thinking: Artmaking as Cultural Analysis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2022). See Francesca Fiorani and Alessandro Nova, *Leonardo's Optics: Theory and Pictorial Practice* (Venice: Marsilio Editore, 2013), esp. 265–92.

[3] There are many excellent studies on adaptation, but here I want to draw attention and pay homage to the argument of the great specialist of adaptation studies, Thomas Leitch, who published an article in 2003 ominously titled "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory." Needless to say, the normative concept of "faithfulness" is high on his list.

Figure 2.1 Rembrandt, *Bathsheba at Her Bath* (1654). Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

What does that mean? It is generally assumed to mean—if people notice it at all—that Rembrandt made a mistake. In my view, Rembrandt is making a point about narrative. The spectator looks from the front and sees a nude, really a nude. She is a bit shy so she looks sideways, but it is a nude. You get to see her body and you can think, hum, I wish I had that body at my disposal. Which is exactly what the other, barely visible character in the story, King David, is thinking. He is a focalizer. But there is also this other woman who is a servant, and who is cleaning Bathsheba's foot—the foot that is logically in the wrong place. Making her ready for royal rape. And so, this is a bad story, a story of abuse. But how can you make a story of abuse so that the spectators get it in their present, not to imitate the abuse but to reflect on it?

I imagine Rembrandt is making a collage of two genres. One is the nude that entices people to desire Bathsheba. The other is the narrative, which is in the direction from her to the servant and the man who is spying from the roof; this is what is going to tell the story of rape. What she has in her hand is a letter. That letter has no direct bearing on the story, other than being an allusion to the letter that the king has sent to the head of the army to say "put her husband in the line of danger." In the biblical story Bathsheba never sees that letter. But, with the crumpled letter and the melancholy look, she is already in a sort of subjection and acceptance that her life is going to change. Her husband is going to die and she is going to be taken by the king. It is a completely different story from the one we see at first sight, of a nude woman presented for your pleasure. Then you notice that because of the foot directed to the left and behind where it should be, she is not there for you. You can conclude that she is basically in that nasty narrative. So, there are two stories in the painting, two "takes" if you see it as a film: one take from the front and one take from this side, in a montage that combines them. That tells you that there are multiple focalizing positions.

You are made *aware,* you can even "feel," that there are not one but at least two images, stories; two genres even. It is also a play on the genre of narrative. That is, for a smart artist like Rembrandt, you can assume he must have had his tongue in his cheek. For the teacher or the general public, the question is, how do you get others to be sensitized to this? I do it a lot in the Louvre where this painting hangs. I stand there and I see people look, and when I see them slightly puzzled, I often say: "Have you tried to do this; cross your legs and put your foot on the other side?" Oh, yes! That is difficult, you can't do that. No, you cannot, and we start to talk.

I think that on an unconscious, or maybe even on a conscious level, viewers think Rembrandt made a mistake. Well, he was a good painter, so don't worry. Rembrandt doesn't make mistakes of such magnitude. Do you see this woman? What would be her position if she wasn't directed in your direction, her body more compatible with her gaze? In my book *Reading Rembrandt* (1991), in which I develop such arguments, my view of Rembrandt was a construction in the present of looking. An anachronism if you like, but one we always necessarily "commit" when writing on art because looking can only occur in the present. Working with anachronism is taking yourself seriously and taking responsibility for your interpretations, the narratives you construct.[4]

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[4]   This example was developed at length in my book and later taken up in a book of interviews on teaching (Jeroen Lutters, *The Trade of the Teacher*: *Visual Thinking with Mieke Bal* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2018)).

Face It

Like the other arts, cinema also has its rules, even if, as an intermedial art form producing multimodal texts, it must by definition stay away from the "medium essentialism" that has plagued the study of art for so long now. One example makes this clear: in documentary, it is crucial that the interviewee does not look into the camera but slightly to the side. This is a rule so strong that it is often the first critical remark I get when showing my films. Thus, the invisible interviewer is indicated but not seen. The point is that the "subject" is the person represented. I have always found this a false modesty, insincere, and the resulting image seemed to be turning the interviewee into an animal in the zoo; objectified, instead of a participant in a dialogue with the viewer. The viewer is rigorously kept outside. Let's face it: this is (epistemically) false and (ethically) wrong. Moreover, there is nothing about this tradition that pertains to the medium of film or video. It is entirely conventional. If considered a "mistake" it is, in this respect, a clash with conventions, and as such it can have the productive effect imperfection can have.[5]

A resistance to the perfection enabled but then also demanded of the contemporary electronic media with their high-definition technology can make us forget that artists have for a long time played with the edges of what art can do, and what it should not do. I am not confining my discussion to the post-1989 period, but consider such artistically strategic collisions with the rules of a medium and its conventions of all times. In his "glitch theory," according to which sonic and visual mistakes are invariably effective, Michael Betancourt discusses examples from different periods.[6]

Instead of the insincere convention of making interviewees not look at the viewer, which I mentioned above, in my video installation *Nothing Is Missing* (2007), I attempted to achieve the opposite goal: a very personal interaction between interviewer and interviewee, which I made to coincide with that

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5   On the position of cinema within the realm of media and the resulting methodological issues, see, for example, Jørgen Bruhn and Anne Gjelsvik (eds.), *Cinema between Media*: *An Intermediality Approach* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018). On a conceptual discussion of intermediality and multimodality in the two wider perspectives of semiotics and communication, see Lars Ellerström's contribution to the volume *Meanings & Co*: *The Interdisciplinary of Communication, Semiotics and Multimodality*, ed. Alin Olteanu, Andrew Stables, and Dumitru Borţun (Berlin: Springer, 2019).

6   Michael Betancourt, "Motion Perception in Movies and Painting: Towards a New Kinetic Art," *CTheory*, October 23, 2002; and Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice*: *Critical Failures and Post-Digital Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2017). In this respect, Ernst van Alphen's recent book on photography, significantly titled *Failed Images: Photography and Its Counter-Practices* bases the entire theory of photography on mistakes in the sense of disobedience to conventions. This book is highly illuminating for my conception of "mistakes" as imperfection in this chapter (2018).
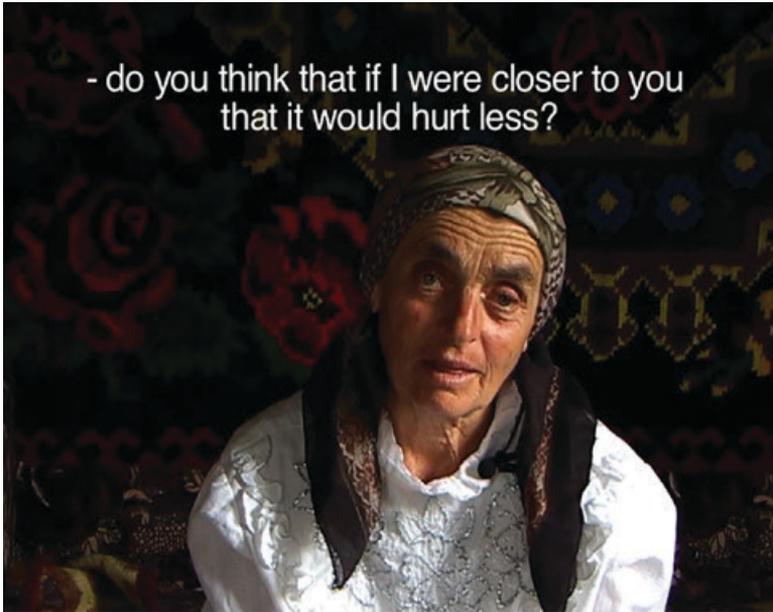
Figure 2.2 Mieke Bal, *Nothing Is Missing* (2007). Elena listening to her son Simion speaking to her from behind the camera. Video still from 17-channel video installation. Courtesy of the artist.

between the speaker and the viewer. In that project, mothers of migrants talk about their child who left in migration: an obviously emotionally loaded topic. I made the willful mistake of showing the mothers looking straight into the camera, while the interviewer, often the migrated child who is visiting her, or another intimate person, is positioned behind it. Thus, the person looks at the viewer, for affective contact, and at the interviewer at the same time (Figure 2.2). That the interviewers are intimates doubles the effect of the mistake, or the refusal of the convention. The dialogue is a real one, whether or not the interviewer needs to prompt the mother to talk. My mistake, according to the classical rule of interviewees looking obliquely to an invisible interviewer, had meaning. What is more, the effective making of meaning depends on this dispositif.[7]

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[7] For an analysis of this project, see Mieke Bal, "In Your Face: Migratory Aesthetics," in *The Culture of Migration: Politics, Aesthetics and Histories*, ed. Sten Pulz Moslund, Anne Ring Petersen, and Moritz Schramm (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015). For more on my experimental documentaries, as well as fiction films, see http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/.

From this and other experiments with breaking the rules of documentary, I have learned the meaningful deployment of "mistakes": aesthetic decisions that go against habits or rules, which are thereby anticonventional forms of imperfection. Here, the issue was primarily one of communication, on the level of affect. The face of the speakers—the mothers with their ambivalent emotions, the pain of missing their children and worrying about them, yet also their support of their children's determination to get a better life—becomes strongly semiotic, meaningful, precisely due to the mistake of making them address the viewer directly. It is as if the position of the camera vis-à-vis the two speakers, and the composition of the image, participate as much in the conversation as the words spoken and the facial expressions.

In *Nothing Is Missing* this was a decision made beforehand, purposefully. But quite often, it is only in the editing process, when I notice a mistake, that I decide to keep the "wrong" footage in, and place it so that the montage gives it meaning. This experience served me well in the large project *Madame B*. An example from my fiction films ("theoretical fictions") is the opening sequence of this film, a feature film made concurrently with a series of video installations responding to Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (1856). I have written about this project and the stakes that motivated making an audiovisual work that places Flaubert's contemporaneity—his fierce critique of his time—into our contemporaneous culture of "emotional capitalism," a cultural economy that instils in people the unfulfillable desire for constant excitement. This is a contradiction in terms; excitement is by definition temporary. But capitalism needs to cultivate the illusion that it is not or, at least, that it is possible to replace one form of excitement by another. Slightly shifting the critical focus from "bêtise" (stupidity) and "idées reçues" (clichés) to a stronger focus on emotional capitalism was a way of being loyal not in spite of, but *through* being unfaithful: a mistake in faithful adaptation.[8]

Here I am interested in Flaubert's "mistakes" and cinema's potential for different but somehow equivalent mistakes. Most conspicuous are his grammatical oddities, especially with verb tenses, the idiosyncratic use of the conjunction "and," and unsuitable, bizarre comparisons. All these mistakes,

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[8] See Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), for this illuminating concept, defined thus: "Emotional capitalism is a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing what I view as a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behaviour and in which emotional life – especially that of the middle classes – follows the logic of economic relations and exchange" (5). Prophetically, Flaubert describes the syndrome explicitly in chapter II, 5: "Then the desires of the flesh, the longing for money, and the melancholy of passion all blended into one suffering, and instead of putting it out of her mind, she made her thoughts cling to it, urging herself to pain and seeking everywhere the opportunity to revive it."

instances of imperfection, are forms of activating readers.[9] If I am interested in his "mistakes," so strange in a novel by an author known for perfection, it is also because of an academic "mistake" I have been willfully making since 1999: anachronism. I see in Flaubert's mistakes a precinematic form of "cinematism." The cinematic quality of Flaubert's writing is generally recognized, and critics are not worried about the anachronistic feature, since Flaubert predated the invention of cinema.[10]

But rather than claiming some vaguely prophetic stylistic talent, I want to allege this is an argument for what I have termed "pre-posterous history." This seemingly astonishing property of Flaubert's writing, in other words, solicits a reversal of the usual chronological view according to which the technical invention of cinema has influenced artists and writers. While this is doubtlessly true, I argue that the opposite also holds. Artists creatively imagined and "imaged" situations that called for the invention of cinema. Instead of tracing the influence of cinema on art, therefore, I take the term "the cinematic" not as a concept that causally explains the paintings but as a frame; as an entrance into a discussion of looking at images—still as well as moving—as a mobile relationship between image and viewer.[11]

Double Movement, Montage, and Incoherent Space

One form of anti-chronology is the said opening of the film *Madame B*. There, Emma stands alone and, in the end of the credit sequence, falls out of a ruined house. This image is narratively functional; it predicts the

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[9] On imperfection as a tool for activating audiences, see also Saito and Kromhout in their contributions to this volume.

[10] With apologies for citing my own work, which I do to avoid the two academic mistakes of self-plagiarism and repetition, in what follows I refer for the conception of history to my book *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[11] On preposterous history, see Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*. For an illuminating reference to the cinematic quality of Flaubert's writing, see Pierre-Marc de Biasi, *Gustave Flaubert*: *Une manière spéciale de vivre* (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 2009), 319–21. De Biasi examines the way Flaubert took notes for possible "sets," visited actual sites, and studied possible "takes." He also draws attention to the fact that Flaubert called his outlines "scenarios." These scenarios, or scripts, have been published in a belated complete edition of all the drafts, versions, and preparatory notes (Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary. Oeuvres complètes, Tome I. Edition nouvelle établie, d'après les manuscrits inédits de Flaubert, par la Société des Etudes littéraires françaises, contenant les scenarios et plans des divers romans, la collection complete des Carnets, les notes et documents de Flaubert, avec des notices historiques et critiques, et illustrée d'images contemporaines*. Paris: Club de l'Honnête Homme, 1971). This publication is my primary source.

Figure 2.3 Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker, *Madame B* (2013). Emma (Marja Skaffari) precariously standing in ruined house. Film still. Courtesy of the artist.

unhappy ending, undermining narrative suspense through anachronism. The "mistake" it contains is a particular deployment of the narratological device of focalization that is unorthodox in cinema. You see Emma in the ruined house that stands for her ruined life—an implicit comparison; or a metaphorical image (Figure 2.3). But the mistake is that the image is slightly wobbly, indicating a handheld camera. Why not use a tripod and make a perfect image? That typical cinematic "imperfect" feature usually signifies a claim to authenticity—which is a standard I don't see as relevant in art. It can also be the consequence of the presence of others, but here, no others are to be seen. I was actually criticized for this unmotivated wobbliness. A stable

image is like a "third-person" narration: a ploy to suggest objectivity. An unstable image, suggesting the opposite, must be justified by the visibility of the focalizers.[12]

Here, however, the barely visible movement has a double meaning. It "metaphors" Emma's instable position. I turn the noun metaphor into a verb to underline the dynamism, the activity of process. And the wobbliness points to the presence of invisible, anonymous others: focalizing witnesses. These others, whom we do not see in the image but only in that slight movement, witness Emma's ruin. Do these witnesses look on with empathy, or with relishing, as the neighbors do in the novel? We see this anonymous and indeterminate witnessing several times later in the film, when Emma is alone, including at her own wedding. In the opening sequence it predicts the indifference, even hostility toward Emma's problems in her environment. This predictive imaging is loyal, not faithful to Flaubert. He predicted, let's say, Marx and Freud, but with very different means: the former by showing the capitalist exploitation and ruining of people, here Emma; the latter by depicting an unhappily married woman as "hysterical."

The not-quite-stable image hints at spying, meddling, or possibly empathizing others, compelling the film viewers to realize their own affective response. The handheld camera creates the audience as a "*nous*," the "us" from Flaubert's opening sentence. "Nous" is the novel's first word, even though after a mere few pages, this witnessing "nous" disappears. This mistake by omission is a meaningful decision on the part of the novelist. After involving readers as witnesses, the "nous" can be left to the readers. It sets the tone, distributes the roles, and can be dispensed with further. In the same vein, in loyalty but without emulating the medium of literature, because we as viewers are "with" the moving camera, no viewer of the film, in 2013 and after, can claim that the mid-nineteenth century does not concern us.[13]

When, in 2015, I was invited by the Munch Museum in Oslo to curate an exhibition from their extensive collections and to include the exhibition pieces of *Madame B*, I had an opportunity to reflect more on cinematic and narratological imperfections, as well as on painterly ones, and see the differences among the three media. It turned out that Munch was, like Flaubert, a master of meaningful mistakes. Here, since Munch's art is

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[12] On strategic aesthetic uses of handheld camera work, see Pepita Hesselberth, *Cinematic Chronotopes: Here, Now, Me* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[13] This and the other "mistakes" are primarily the work and initiative of cinematographer Christopher Wessels. When filming the ruined house sequence, he had a tripod with him but chose to film the sequence both with and without using it. As the film's directors, Williams Gamaker and I decided to use the take that contained mistakes, rather than the perfect one.

visual and hence implicated in rendering spatial situations, I limit myself to imperfections in the rendering of space.

In the wake of its long tradition, linear perspective is the royal road to perfection in the depiction of three-dimensional space in the two-dimensional medium of painting. Munch drew attention to this tradition by making mistakes against it. He would exaggerate the depth of field, making perspective overly steep. Or he would deploy linear perspective but at the same time break up the unity of the field that it construes. He did this most emphatically in his masterpiece *Workers on Their Way Home,* from 1913 to 1914, where three central figures each emerge from a different "take," one filmed frontally, one from above and from the side, and one cropped to indicate he is on his way out of the frame. On both sides, an excessively high perspective positions the smaller figures that together constitute the mass of workers.[14]

Something like this breaking up of the space happens in the lesser-known painting Uphill with a Sledge (Figure 2.4) but in a different fashion. The snow is painted in heavy white, gray, and sometimes bluish impasto in curls and waves. The man in a green suit is situated closer to the picture plane than the sledge puller, if we think in spatial terms; it is as if he is just passing by without paying the slightest attention to the heavy work of the other man. That main character has no face, no eyes, really just something like a snout, and only one leg is visible. The colored shape at the left top of the painting seems closer to the mountain, as if it is even larger—small as it is—than is plausible to the realism-seeking eye. The different volumes of the hill are made of blue, green and dark brown lines, with their own shadows. One sees volumes better from some distance than from up close. That the central figure takes more space of the picture plane than the cityscape down at the fjord is a normal effect of distance, but the imperfect perspective makes this discrepancy ambiguous.

The painting's spatial effect comes from an exaggerated perspective, but one that is not unified. It is not simply elongated but tilted, or dipping. On the left half of the image we see something without the presence of humans. This is a view from above that emphasizes the steepness of the hill and makes the shape below (in the depicted scene) or above (on the flat image) entirely flat. At first, I made a mistake of interpretation. I thought this was a cargo boat. It

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[14] Among Munch scholars who mention the cinematic is Arne Eggum who calls *Workers on Their Way Home* a "study in movement" (in *Edvard Munch*: *Paintings, Sketches, and Studies*, trans. Ragnar Christophersen. Oslo: J.M. Stenersens Forlag A.S., 1984, 253). The catalogue for the exhibition *Edvard Munch: The Modern Eye* (Lampe and Chéroux) pays serious attention both to the cinematic aspect of the works and the photographic activities of the artist. I have analyzed *Workers* in *Emma & Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic* (Oslo: Munch Museum/Brussels: Mercatorfonds; Yale University Press, 2017), 27–32.

Figure 2.4 Edvard Munch, *Uphill with a Sledge* (1910–12). Oil on canvas. Munch Museum, Oslo.

was as if I was seeing it not just from the top of the hill but from a bird's-eye view, straight above it. But on closer inspection, I saw that my misreading was caused by another spatial particularity. If it is a protrusion of the land into the fjord, it still has a deceptive shape at both ends that had me fooled. In that case, it offers a mirror image of houses and their reflection in water.

The larger left part of the image is shot from above but not straight up; a bit more obliquely, not from a bird's-eye view or from the frontal position, which would be the two opposed views of either my misreading or the realistically correct one. The scene seems to have been shot from the top of an adjacent hill. But this is not a single "take" either. The picture of the man pulling the sledge makes him more sharply diagonal than is humanly possible without losing one's balance. Hence, he must have been shot from an oblique position, which emphasizes his struggle with the steep height and the heavy burden he is pulling. The man in green, in contrast, although right next to the sledge-puller in the flat image, is standing straight up, walking effortlessly, as if on a flat plane. This must be a frontal take of his side from eye level. But he seems smaller, narrower, as if more distant, than the hard-working sledge puller. The spatial organization makes the painting look more like a collage or multiscreen film than a single image. This gives the viewer the task to reconcile these different positions physically.[15]

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[15] Playing with spatial organization is more than a protest against the domination by linear perspective, see Nanna Verhoeff, "Surface Explorations: 3D Moving Images as Cartographies of Time," *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma* 4 (2016): 39–58. Her commentary

These incongruities in depicted space originate not only in the cinematic but also in the precinematic device of editing, or montage. Most famously, in his book *Film Form* (1949), Russian avant-garde filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein reflected on the aesthetic effects of various strategies of montage. Perhaps surprisingly, the key example he alleges is Flaubert's precinematic *Madame Bovary*. Eisenstein cites not a visual but an aural example of montage, explained through the famous scene of the *Comices agricoles*, the annual market during which Rodolphe seduces Emma and becomes her first lover. Eisenstein analyses the discourses that intermingle, of the officials and the would-be lovers, a hotchpotch that many Madame Bovary films have taken on board as an audio montage. For him, montage is conflict.[16]

The concept of montage, with the discrepancies montage creates, also helps us understand the aspect of mistakes in Munch's painting. The key decision Eisenstein made in alleging an audio image rather than a visual one implies a clear statement on the intermediality of cinema. The double movement of the wobbly image, the self-affirming exaggerated perspective, and the montage of different takes within one frame of the paintings, or in a single scene, as in the novel, all make the works moving, in more ways than one. They move viewers and readers into asking questions, and thus questioning their routine ways of reading and looking.

The most important opponent, in this, is realism: the assumption that what we have before us corresponds to reality, including a fictional world, by means of smooth representation, or perfect depiction. Thus, whereas Flaubert's novel is, supposedly, a classical example of realist literature, the mistakes militate against this assumption. And Munch, who was trained in the tradition that in Norway was called "naturalistic," denaturalized his scenes, turning depictions into images, to be contemplated in a questioning of the possibility and the desirability, both aesthetic and political, of the naturalism the art academies of his day took for granted and viewed as the norm.

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shows how Werner Herzog's 3D film *A Cave of Forgotten Dreams* both espouses the natural walls that support the millennia-old cave paintings and designs a "cartography of time" that brings the long-gone past to life in an animation. Her analysis demonstrates the cultural relevance of the self-reflection of the medium of 3D film, the moving image more generally, and exploration in time and space together. Verhoeff examines the layeredness of time and space in the moving image, and as such, her article can be considered a fundamental theorization of the movement of images.

[16] Sergei Eisenstein, "Through Theatre to Cinema," in *Film Form*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, [1949] 1998), 12–13. On Eisenstein's view of montage as conflict, see David Campany (ed.), *The Cinematic* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 30. This conflictual nature of montage does justice to the willful incongruities, both in Flaubert's transitions in "takes" in his descriptive passages and in Munch's spatial dis-arrangements.

Double Effects: Mistakes against Realism

"Mistakes" are characteristic of Munch as well as Flaubert. And while these artists differ greatly and target the different media in which they work on these media's own terms, the simple fact that they both deploy an aesthetic of mistakes brings these two artists closer together. They both undermine cliché views of realism. The devices I discuss here are mistakes in relation to a norm of technical perfection, but according to the standards of realism only. This is remarkable, in view of the tenacious interpretational tendency to turn Flaubert's novel into a model of realism. The work of Jonathan Culler is crucial in its revision of the conception of realism in Flaubert. Instead of the aim of transparency that realism is supposed to pursue, these devices attract attention to the medium itself. Inducing viewers to make reading mistakes is one way of drawing attention to the ambiguities of painting. On the part of the artist, shifts, errors, glitches, blurs, bad cropping, and mistakes in perspectival drawing are all examples of a movement from one image to another that deploys the technical elements of the medium to make a change.[17]

Artists have always cultivated the boldness of daring to make what would be considered mistakes by, for instance, the conservative judges of the art academies and art criticism—what I have mentioned above: habits turned rules. Such mistakes can have an avant-gardist flavor.

Willful mistakes make viewers consider the medium and its lack of transparency. Calling them cinematic is my way of bringing together the kind of mistakes Munch makes in his paintings, Flaubert in his writing, and Williams Gamaker and I in the videos. The property of cinematic mistakes is that they have double effects; one self-reflectively medium-oriented, and one specific, generating meaning for the work at hand. I would like to insist that the one is meaningless without the other.

A wonderful "mistake" in Munch that addresses the portrait and its genre of portraiture through challenging the medium is the gleaming reflection in the lorgnette of the figure in the *Portrait of Karl Jensen-Hjell* (1885) (Figure 2.5).

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[17] See Jonathan Culler, "The Realism of Madame Bovary," *Modern Language Notes* 122 (2007b): 683–96. A good starting point of self-reflection of mediums is Rosalind Krauss's widely read book *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. Annotation by Joanna Slotkin (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000). Janna Houwen discusses the contested concept of medium specificity with great subtlety in a discussion of differences between film and video (*Film and Video Intermediality: The Question of Medium Specificity in Contemporary Moving Images* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). On mistakes, which he calls glitches, see Betancourt, "Motion Perception in Movies and Painting"; and Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice*.

Figure 2.5 Edvard Munch, *Portrait of Karl Jensen-Hjell* (1885). Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur og design/The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo.

Øivind Storm Bjerke writes succinctly about this reflection: "It functions both as an eye-catcher and to emphasise the significance of observation in a visual culture that is dominated by the sense perception of surfaces."[18] The conjunction of the motif of observation by the figure and the viewer makes their gazes meet in that visual culture. The surplus value of Munch's "glitch," which anachronistically looks like a pixel, is the attention to surfaces; both as the root of "superficial" as an ideological criticism, and as the proliferation of

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[18] Øivind Storm Bjerke, "Meaning and Physicality in the Art of Munch," in *Cinema between Media: An Intermediality Approach*, ed. Dieter Bruhn, Jørgen and Anne Gjelsvik (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 51.

the presence of reflections, prominent in the then relatively new phenomenon of shop windows. It is a well-rehearsed criticism of (post)modern visual culture that the multiplication of surfaces promotes a superficiality of social and individual life.

A cinematographer about to capture the gleam in an eyeglass would risk being scolded for such a blatant "mistake," but it can easily happen. A painter must make a special decision to achieve the gleam. Munch's brush is speaking to a colleague painter, and probably considering the latter too conservative, too realistic, encouraging him to be more daring. Used tongue-in-cheek, the word "mistake" makes visible how traditionalist judges censor innovations while making their judgments appear self-evident and without the possibility of questioning them. Like a post-1989 avant-gardist, Munch foregrounds what "normally" remains invisible. We can see this as an alternative realism, of the kind Culler analyzed.[19]

In Flaubert, this kind of strategy of errors often uses verb tense incongruities to shock readers into paying attention to the texture of the work and the limits of language—his equivalent of the attention to flatness, reflection, and dis-unified spaces in Munch. In Munch's painting, the cinematic quality can be enhanced by the fact that the image quality seems to be due to a camera that limits depth of field. It is almost as if we see camera movement and change of focus—two notorious "mistakes" in filming that, along with cropping, can also be used to enhance certain aspects and meanings. In this respect the painter is freer than the cinematographer. He can, and does, vary with sharpness and blur regardless of how the depth of field justifies it, whether it is shallow or deep. This is most radical in *Uphill*.

An example of a verb tense irritant in Flaubert's novel comparable to Munch's variations of "camera handling" in *Uphill* and *Workers* is the first sentence of chapter 5 of the third part of *Madame Bovary*. Emma has just begun her liaison with Léon. She has plotted a way of seeing him weekly, with the pretext of piano lessons (III, 5). This is our scene 7 of the video installation, *Loving Léon*. It is installed as a single-channel, large-screen projection in a dark space with rows of red-velvety chairs, meant to suggest a (romantic) cinema theatre that at the same time has the dimension of a homey living room. "C'était le jeudi" (It was Thursdays), begins Flaubert's chapter that described the liaison. The verb tense indicates routine. The

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19   Thus, they confirm Foucault's statement on invisibility as a key property of fiction: "Fiction consists … not in showing the invisible, but in showing to what extent the invisibility of the visible is invisible" (Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits*. 4 volumes (Paris: Gallimard, 1994)).

detailed narration of the small events that precede the encounter with her lover, all in the *imparfait* of routine, are plausible enough as iterations.

The passage ends, however, with the following sentence that, in isolation, would be considered a grammatical mistake: "Puis, d'un seul coup d'oeil, la ville apparaissait." (Then, in the blink of an eye, the city used to appear; my translation). The suddenness implied in the adverbial clause ("in the blink of an eye") is contradicted by the tense of routine ("used to appear"). Routine, by definition, cannot interrupt; it lacks temporal agency. Yet, using the passé simple of interruption would also have been awkward, since the entire passage describes what happens every week, on Thursdays. There is no "correct" way to say this. Flaubert constructs a temporal equivalent to Munch's broken spaces; an incongruity that constructs a strong focus on an aspect that matters, but that could otherwise have remained unnoticed.

Preceding this sentence is a clause that "explains" the apparent contradiction: "afin de se faire des surprises, elle fermait les yeux" (in an attempt to surprise herself she used to close her eyes). Rather than a simple mistake, this is the use of language to irritate and thus alert readers. In self-deception and captured in emotional capitalism's lure of permanent excitement, Emma tries desperately to recover the thrill of a liaison that already, we can gather, bores her.

Closing her eyes is a Flaubertian form of "looking sideways" (my concept for the exhibition in Oslo). In other words, this is Emma's avoiding to face others, and reality. Also, it is an example of Flaubert's prediction of the tragic ending by means of subtle indications.

How to be loyal to this without being faithful—in other words, how to convey a similar sense of self-deception without attempting to imitate the play with verb tenses? We have tried to make this self-deception tangible by filming reiterated beginnings of the amorous meetings in the same hotel room. In this series of beginnings, the images show the difference between the initial excitement and the subsequent boredom on Emma's face. Using her face as a projection screen is our way of rendering the subjectivity of the narrative prose. The change, from desire to boredom, in just two consecutive sequences is our way of doing what the writer did with the verb tenses.[20]

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[20] Flaubert's "wrong" use of the *imparfait* has been discussed widely in the critical literature. See the precious collection by Didier Philippot (ed.), *Gustave Flaubert: Mémoire de la critique* (Paris: PUPS, 2006).

Double Meanings: Telling Imperfections

The mistakes in literature, painting, and video I have so far pointed out all do more than self-reflect on their respective mediums. While seemingly anti-narrative, they contribute to the meaning of the narrative itself; they give it, to use the word tongue-in-cheek, more depth. They make the story into literature, the picture into an image; the film into a tool to show without telling, or telling otherwise, and thus to avoid explicit statements. These mistakes all add up to a sense of imperfection as a tool for self-reflection. In our video installations we have, in addition to camera movement, also deployed the mistakes of blurs and excessive cropping to enhance the social isolation of the main character, and her being looked at by invisible others as a response to her own "looking sideways." This is clear, for example, in scene 3, *Wedding*, where observing and gossiping guests surround Emma with contempt. The sense of isolation, resulting in loneliness, is not so much the consequence of her looking sideways in a literal sense, but of an avoidance of dialogue, which amounts to the same. Her insecurity is expressed by an excessive cropping of the image of her face when she is getting ready for the wedding ceremony, asking the friend who is doing her makeup if she looks all right (middle frame of Figure 2.6a–c). These three mistakes make the scene decisively imperfect.

In *Uphill with a Sledge*, both the man pulling the sledge and the figure in green are barely readable, blurry figures, consisting of stains of paint rather than clear brushstrokes. The main character, a patch of blue and brown paint, has a snout by way of a face, which makes him look like a wolf in human clothes. This is one of the effects of the overly steep perspective indicated by the path that runs up from his body to the upper right. His legs are molten into a single one, his left arm also seems to be missing. The bright suit of the man on the right may have been colored for chromatic effect of contrast, rather than for profilmic reasons. The contrast between their colors attracts so much attention, making viewers notice the rough brush work—hence distracting from the narrative of the effort the left man is making—that it makes the painting almost abstract. Abstraction, like everything else in looking at art, is in the eye of the beholder. Hence, the viewer is free to consider the abstract work with color or the depiction of a narrative event.

Color is one of the aspects that painting has in common with cinema, although not yet generally in Munch's time. The artist used color not only to transgress the boundary between picture and image and, in the wake of that distinction, between figuration and abstraction. He gave color synesthetic
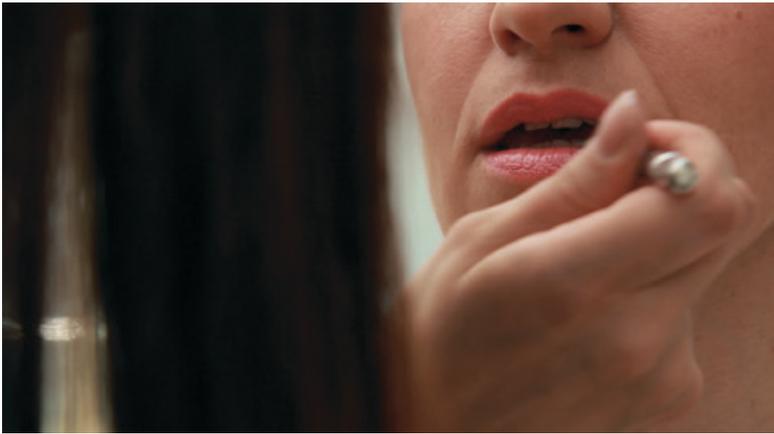
Figure 2.6 Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker, *Madame B* (2013). Three mistakes in the Wedding scene. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist.

functions by means of allusions: in a medium that serves the sense of sight only, he "argued" through painting that sight is never alone; that the other senses participate in sense perception. This brings us to another form of interrelation, what I have termed intership: a form that has also been called multimodality.[21]

Flaubert deployed sound and color-coding for political effect. An instance occurs in the seduction scene during the *Commices agricoles*, the prime example of montage for Eisenstein. A bent-over old servant who receives a medal for fifty years of service in subaltern, abject subordination is dressed in blue, white, and red, as a mute protest of the lowly against the lie of the French flag. There is an even closer connection between Munch and Flaubert in their inclusion of "sound tracks," when we consider how, according to some scholars, *The Scream* also has a soundtrack. In that motif, color is used to suggest sound; not to color-code the political message as in Flaubert, but to color emotion. If viewers "hear" the scream in the colors, both are instances of synesthetically working signs that transgress the boundaries of their respective media. The comparison, or framing of the one through the other, shows both the similarity—synesthetic signification—and the differences—the use of color, political in Flaubert, emotional in Munch.[22]

In Munch's art, the moments that the figuration is confused—almost erased—by abstraction are key to our understanding of the ambiguity that is his primary political issue and position. Frequently, it is in the blurring, the emptying out, or the lack of focus of the depicted eyes that the limit of figuration becomes the site of resistance to the relentlessly persistent romanticism; not shaped but, precisely, left unshaped. Areas of unclarity in paintings of love scenes, for instance, point to another side of the figuration of love. From physical movement, then, the work guides us to consider movement as persuasion, but not solely intellectually; moving us to change, to act, or to refuse. Unclarity of color in realistic terms is also couched in uncertain color in Flaubert's novel. It is well known that the olor

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[21] On intership, see Mieke Bal, "Intership: Anachronism between Loyalty and the Case," in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 179–96. There was actually an extensive use of color in early cinema (see Giovanna Fossati (ed.), *Fantasia of Color in Early Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015)). On Munch's use of color to express sound in *The Scream*, see Ydstie, "'Painting Is What the Brain Perceives through the Filter of the Eye,'" in *Edvard Munch: The Modern Eye*, ed. Angela Lampe and Clément Chéroux (London: Tate, 2012), esp. 259. See also Clarke's close analysis of *The Sick Child* from 1885 to 1886 ("Originality and Repetition in Edvard Munch's *The Sick Child*"). On color in relation to abstraction, see the last chapter of Mieke Bal, *Endless Andness*: *The Politics of Abstraction According to Ann Veronica Janssens* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). I learned about multimodality from Lars Ellerström ("Modelling Human Communication: Mediality and Semiotics").

[22] On the mute protest, see De Biasi, *Gustave Flaubert*, 245.

of Emma's eyes varies between blue, green, gray and black, depending on who is looking at her.

Munch declares the line between figuration and abstraction nonexistent; for him, it is an ideology that traps us within a binary opposition whereas continuity is subtler and more complex. Preposterously responding to Foucault, Munch "argues" that visibility does not depend on sharpness.

Flaubert, the makers of *Madame B*, and Munch deploy "mistakes" in their art, enhancing the medium itself. The blur and variation of depth of field tell us that we are not watching a transparent depiction of a pro-filmic reality, but a crafted image. Similarly, the uneven application of paint of which Munch was a master keeps us aware that what we see is not a real-life situation. Instead of avoiding the realistic illusion by eliminating figuration altogether and moving toward pure abstraction, the artist keeps the figuration in sight while emphatically showing how it is made, using abstraction to do so. Mistakes can be a mediator between the false opposition of figuration and abstraction.[23]

Art historian Nils Messel recalls that "mistakes" had always been Munch's strategy—and the target of the conservative criticism that was in fact Munch's implicit target. He writes: "In Munch's art the naturalistic critic saw and cherished what Frits Thaulow once called Munch's 'astonishing "*courage de défauts*" [dare to make mistakes]'." That is, "his audacity to accept that art was not to copy nature, but to give a highly personal, subjective impression of it." Rather than the word "impression," I would use "fusion" here, as in "subjective fusion" (De Biasi's term). It is what Culler drew attention to when he argued that frequently, narration and focalization positions—the two forms subjectivity takes in narrative—remain undetermined, undecidable. Such subjective fusion renders the ambiguity that Munch's mistakes also foregrounded.[24]

The moment when, in the Wedding scene of the video installation, Emma and the priest supposedly talk together without having anything to say to each other is rendered in an exceedingly blurred image. This is a literal rendering of subjective fusion, where the fluid image shows two people without in the least foregrounding subjectivity. The composition shows Emma from the back, hands holding her purse behind her back, the priest consuming a piece

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[23] Bjerke sees abstraction as the consequence of "a loose painterly treatment of colour where the references to specific objects almost dissolve" ("Meaning and Physicality in the Art of Munch," 52).

[24] Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 1974 (revised ed. 1985; 2006). Thaulow cited by Messel, "Edvard Munch and His Critics in the 1880s," in *Madonna*, ed. Ingebjørg Ydstie (Bergen: Vigmostad & Bjørke/Munch Museum, 2008), 166.

f the wedding cake. It suggests a schoolgirl being either scolded or seduced by someone who has power over her. See the first image of Figure 2.6.

Subjective fusion is at stake in all those passages where, as Culler has so persuasively argued, it remains unclear if focalization must be attributed to Emma or to the narrator, so that the reader must make autonomous decisions. One reason for this is the wish to solicit compassion for Emma, who is caught in boredom. Culler describes this state as a process with double meaning astutely as

> a literary category of the first importance; it is the background against which the activity of reading takes place and which continuously threatens to engulf it. The strategies of reading and interpretation must be understood as attempts to avoid boredom, and, on the other hand, boredom itself is a literary device whose usefulness modern literature has increasingly forced us to appreciate. To recognize the potential sources of boredom in a work and the different rhythms of reading which can be used to neutralize them is to discover important facts about its structure.[25]

Comparable to those fur caps which bring the distant view into an excessively close cropping is the image in the Wedding scene, when Emma is being prepared, "made beautiful," and driven to insecurity (see the middle frame of Figure 2.5). Here, her subjectivity is not fused but eliminated. As a bride, to be handed over from her father to her husband, she is completely objectified. In the third image of Figure 2.6, when the beggar woman—an unfaithful version of the blind beggar in the novel—takes over and ridicules Emma in her song, this party-spoiler is cropped, while her sharpness pushes the bride and groom back as small blurs.[26]

Eisenstein's choice for an audio image as the key example of montage is not as surprising as we might think once we realize that Flaubert was obsessed by the sounds of his words and sentences. The rhythm of reading and the sounds of the text mattered to him so much so that he strolled through his garden saying his sentences out loud, as if tasting them. In the installation sound also performs the boredom. In most of the scene where Emma is at home, bored out of her skull, not a word is spoken, while a clock is ticking relentlessly.

[25] Culler, *Flaubert*, 19. For a lucid and succinct overview of the concept of and debates on performativity, see Jonathan Culler's chapter "The Performative" in *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007a), 137–65.

[26] This beggar (played by Lila Köngäs-Saarikko) shows up as early as Emma's wedding, whereas in the novel the blind beggar comes in during the affair with Léon. In both works they are coming around during the death scene.

Solitude and boredom merge into a single, exasperatingly durational state. We see Emma arrange dry flowers, remove a spider, pick up a tea glass, and gaze at her own reflection in the teaspoon.

Meanwhile, the young neighbor Léon appears, in turn in an over-the-top, unmotivated closeup. But although unmotivated, such a mistake is not meaningless. This incongruous closeup that makes no sense outside of Emma's desire suggests he may be interested in Emma, even stalking her. A narrative imperfection predicts the liaison to come. After some time, she gets up from the couch, starts washing the dishes, and sees Léon, long after the viewers have seen him. She goes to the door, opens it, and they look at each other. This mutual look initiates a new phase. If something is bound to happen, it is due to that silent mutual gaze. Flaubert describes Emma's perception of Léon's passing by, his craving for her, yet incapability to do anything about it, their mutual longing without contact. Short as the take is, it stretches out time while nothing happens (in chapter II, 4).

Later, we see the two as they walk in the forest. This insinuates or, for those who know the novel, recalls what in Flaubert's text is an over-the-top exalted conversation. Condensing this episode with that of Emma's pregnancy and her wish to have a boy because "men at least are free," the image is implicated in its performativity, in the incomprehension between the two would-be lovers. In our version, Emma suddenly sees a baby boy playing in the sand. Moved, she rushes up to him. Léon, walking by her side, sees nothing. The spectator sees the baby—and making the vision more plausible, the baby shouts with delight; a sound that, like the ticking clock, we hear "with" Emma. Only then, in the next take, Léon and the viewer see the empty patch of sand. The baby is a ghost, a vision, an expression of Emma's desire to have a boy, which in turn betrays that she is pregnant.

Because they are subjective, the two images are incompatible. But because of the time-based medium, they succeed each other in linear time. The spectators see and hear the baby too, even though the idyllic forest-scape and the fairy-tale sunset derealize the scene. Only after seeing the baby they see the empty area. In the mirage of the baby boy the two characters are put on the same level of "hysteria." Emma hallucinates; Léon tumbles from his romantic cloud into his failing imagination. The dilemma of whether it is mad to expect happiness or to be unable to imagine it dawns on the viewer, who cannot at first make out the logic of the scene. The mistake in narrative logic, again, activates the viewer and reflects on the medium with its relentless linearity.

When one jumps from one art form to another, as I have done here, mistakes begin to take over and bring art to life. Artworks that faithfully follow the rules and their predecessors tend to remain flat, even when made with

perfection. The episode of the first, failed infatuation with Léon, ending in the birth of Emma's daughter, has the Flaubertian rhythm of long durational thoughts and brief, instantaneous (non-)events. In the middle of a chapter is the brief statement: "The baby was born one Sunday morning, about six o'clock, at sunrise.—It's a girl! cried Charles. She turned her head away and fainted" (II, 3). Hours of labor, the information, the reaction: all this in a mere twenty-one words; the tension between duration and instantaneousness is at work. In the video, this takes the form of a scream that interrupts a pedantic and anachronistic conversation (which nevertheless responds to Flaubert's staging of that between mother nursing versus hiring a wet nurse) about home versus hospital childbirth, between Charles and Homais, immediately followed by the newborn's crying. That Emma faints upon hearing that the baby is a girl, and not the hoped-for boy, is telling. The baby's crying metaphorically connects to Emma's deploring her status as a woman, always disappointed, confined, unable "to taste the pleasures of the world," the desire for which was instilled in her by the lures of emotional capitalism. Is this a bad mother or an oppressed housewife? The viewer is drawn in to reflect on this issue.

This is crucial for the novel, because the character ruins herself by making fatal mistakes, following her desires and believing in her illusions, but from there to the frequently uttered judgments that she is stupid, romantic, a bad mother, and more is ignoring the novel's artistic achievement. But also, it is ignoring the specific Flaubertian realism, which is not based on illusions of transparency, but a relentless, mercilessly ironic indictment of the culture in which the novel is steeped. In that sense, nothing of the events can be considered punctual, or instantaneous. Everything, in light of Flaubert's critical ambition, is part of a descriptive discourse.[27]

Mistaken Identities

These examples of mistakes all have as their primary characteristic the double meaning they produce. They signify an element of the narrative or the scene. But they also de-naturalize the medium of the artwork. The mistakes tell us what the medium is that the artist deploys. We can say that the medium

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[27] To Michael Fried, instantaneousness is one of the characteristics of Manet's modernism (*Manet's Modernism, or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 291); the two temporalities are material qualities of the painted surface. Instantaneousness suggests that the painting can be seen in one glance. I don't believe it ever can. To me, the temporalities are more important in "cinematicity," subjectivity and its fusion, and experience.

becomes visible through the imperfections. But they also make us question its homogeneity—what Rosalind Krauss, among others, has called "medium specificity." This questioning leads not only to a loosening of the boundaries between media but also to a "discussion" between media, a genuine intermediality. And it facilitates an awareness that the artwork is more than a transparent rendering in some medium of a story, an event, a person, a thing. The self-identical nature of each medium is thus undermined. The media can communicate among themselves, but more importantly, this communication can only happen with the help of the reader or viewer.[28]

The relevance of such intermedialities for our communication in general and our interaction with art becomes emphatic when a plurality of mediums is involved. This is the case with a contemporary artwork, an installation so contemporary that it is not yet finished, by Dutch artist Jacomina van Loon, titled *Mona Lisa Chanel* (Figures 2.7–2.9). Van Loon is a multimedia artist, primarily a painter but also a video maker, and a theatre actress. Her paintings often become series, with installation-like hangings that already waver between single paintings and series, albeit not really like comics. Although not definitive, for now this installation consists of two rows of three relatively small paintings, hung in a corner; some larger paintings; and a video on a small screen. The first thing that struck me when I entered the studio was the thick black lines that seem to frame the six paintings. That, I thought, is a mistake; you don't frame paintings on the canvas itself, and not in black, and if so, not so thick. The lines turned out to be the canvas surface, the colored pictures painted on it, with visibly rough edges. Another mistake, or an allusion to the materiality of paint? Hung vertically, they become frames of an obsolete celluloid film. Why would an artist in 2018 make her paintings look like film strips? Only then did I notice the image itself, with theatrical scenes, sometimes doubled, overlaid with colors in blocks, rectangular or square, that make harsh lines over faces; doublings, and elements that mean nothing; symptoms of abstraction.

Soon, my understanding of the installation's intermediality expanded. Film, but based on a video recording of a play, remade by the artist into an experimental video. The play, *Fashion Is a Tirant* (2016), written and directed by Yve Dubois, performed by Monalisa Toneel Amsterdam, stages Coco Chanel and her band of women friends. Theatre as an already intermedial and multimodal art form lets Chanel as a fashion designer contribute to her own medium—drawing, textile, fashion shows. Show, then, receives a crucial, central status. The artist plays herself in the play, and is visible in

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28 Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea*.

Figure 2.7 Jacomina van Loon, *Monalisa Chanel* (2018). Detail. Courtesy of the artist.

one of the frames—significantly, the doubled one, bottom right, where the symbolic rainbow is foregrounded.

The color effects speak to video and its postproduction tricks; experiment with form, when lines in primary colors, or whirling semicircles, come to disturb the figurative image. Tall vertical mirrors (in the middle frame on the right) add the distorting effect of mirrors on fairs, which deform not only the figures but also their scale. Van Loon made a video on the basis of the recording of the play by BubbleEyes, editing and adding color to a color video, or taking out color (as in the bottom left image) to suggest a photographic negative. The video is shown on a small screen. It is as if

Figure 2.8 Jacomina van Loon, *Monalisa Chanel* (2018). Detail of panel with the artist pouring champagne. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 2.9 Jacomina van Loon, *Monalisa Chanel* (2018). Detail. Courtesy of the artist.

the installation explores the history of media, seeking to confuse our assumptions about them. The play between the black box of film and the white cube invoked through its opposite and through the materiality of painting includes the space of exhibiting in the questioning of mediality. The idea of the photographic negative confuses us yet again: if this is reversed, the borders would be white, as in the white cube!

With the increasing, turbulent forms of intermediality, the possible mistakes multiply. But with things artistically "not done," social issues pop up. The distorting mirrors bring in the popular, non-elitist fun fair, in a serious artwork, at a time art is unsuccessfully attempting to interest working classes; the allusions to the rainbow flag introduce the issue of homosexuality, which makes us realize that all players are women, and that a lesbian tone predominates. And the text of the play itself addresses the divide between the wealthy (those who can afford designer clothes) and the poor who remain unseen. Meanwhile, the painter, critically probing all such divides along with the artistic ones, shows her complicit hand, literally, in the portion in the middle frame on the right, where a towering Karl Lagerfeld (played by Monique van Miltenburg) clutches, in a shiny leather-gloved hand, something painted with great ambitious precision. It is a toy dog, with the price tag still on it. That this is the frame where the distorting mirrors entice figures, artist and viewers into self-reflection is no coincidence.

This is the way mistakes undermine the autonomy of the artwork according to the formalist conception. But denying art a different kind of autonomy would jar with the use of mistakes outlined above. The impossibility of defining art ontologically, to say what it *is*, and the need to resort to considering it as an act, saying what it *does*, comes from the dual, paradoxical status of art. Both its relative autonomy, which resides in its agency, and its sociality are crucial aspects of its status in the world—where it must function. "Art cannot live, *qua* art, within the everyday *as* the everyday," writes British philosopher Peter Osborne, quoting from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. "Rather, it necessarily disrupts the everydayness of the everyday from within, since it is, constitutively, both 'autonomous' and a 'social fact.'" The disruption Osborne mentions is the mistake operating the paradox of autonomy. The "everydayness of the everyday" consists, in the case of art, of the routine assumptions from which we consider the respective media both as distinct and as tools, as instruments at our disposal. It is these assumptions that mistakes undermine. And in doing so, they enforce a different, more active attitude in which viewers and readers recognize their indispensable participation.[29]

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[29] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 255 and 140.

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The Vertical Inverted? Dirt Aesthetics in Russian Conceptualist and Protest Art

Yngvar Steinholt

Russian conceptualist art was born of the late Soviet era. Initially its performances were confined to small groups and could be shared with wider audiences only orally, as tall tales or myth. In the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, conceptualist art from Russia made its way into public spaces, galleries, museums, and the media. From around 2005, the spread of social media platforms enabled the low-budget recording and dissemination of conceptualist-inspired performances to ever-growing audiences independently of the editorial policies and priorities of traditional media outlets. Supported by a rising number of views, recorded and documented performances would occasionally alert traditional media and authorities, ensuring high-level public visibility if not always public acclaim. The format would make the art groups and activists Voiná, Pussy Riot, and Piotr Pavlensky known to an international audience.

   The fact that Russian conceptualism embraced amateurism, play, and self-irony added to its wide appeal. It replaced the artist-as-genius with the artist-as-jester, often willfully provoking the cultural establishment in the process. While creating art, the conceptualist jesters insist that they are not an artist and do not even aspire to be one. On the contrary, low-life, a fraud, a nobody, a caricature, an "onanist" in the case of author Igor Iarkevitch,[1] a dog in the case of performance artist Oleg Kulik,[2] are all suitable alternative identities for the conceptualist. This self-ironic, sometimes consciously self-depriving refusal to take on the identity, or conform to established expectations of the artist, forms part of a particular dirt aesthetic. If not always explicit, dirt aesthetics form a vein in late Soviet and post-Soviet conceptualist art. This is

[1] Tine Roesen, "Den nye Ruslands literatur," *Jyske historiker*, 117–18 (2008): 113–14.
[2] Andrei Erofeev, "Pussy Riot and the Cossacks: Russian Tradition of Art Resistance," in *Pussy Riot and the Cossacks 28 June–28 September 2014*, Exhibition catalogue, Havremagasinet Länskunsthall Boden, 2014, 23.

sometimes seen less directly, as when art collective Voiná painted a sixty-five-meter tall, naivistic outline of an erect penis on a St Petersburg drawbridge,[3] or when performance artist Aleksandr Brener spray-painted a dollar sign on a famous work by avant-garde icon Kazimir Malevich;[4] sometimes more directly, as when Brener defecated in the art museum or linguist-and-artist Aleksandr Plutser-Sarno staged mock demonstrations with slogans labeling contemporary art "vomit" and "fuckery."[5]

This chapter investigates the relationship between imperfection and dirt aesthetics as creative strategies, using Russian conceptualist art as case material. Its focus is not on analyzing individual works or performances. Rather, I ask why the dirty, the filthy, the unclean, vulgar, and profane have featured so prominently in Russian conceptualist and protest art and whether its goals and impacts align with or contrast those of imperfection. In the introduction to this volume, our notions of perfection and imperfection are interlinked with those of the complete and the incomplete, respectively. A key premise for the following argument is that striving for completeness and deliberately embracing the incomplete represent two different approaches to art. The former is often applied in the establishment of aesthetic ideals, which seek to engage the observer in (more or less) passive admiration of the cultural object. What I choose to call the *imperfectionist* approach seeks to involve the observer (consciously or unconsciously) in completing the incomplete. Because our thought patterns are designed to constantly strive for perfection, an imperfect object beckons us to finish it. The imperfectionist, by leaving something out, or by adding some annoying little grain that does not quite fit in, plays on our desire for completeness in order to make us engage with the cultural object. If this holds true, how does imperfection relate to dirt aesthetics? Is dirt aesthetics merely imperfection overload or something else altogether? This question invites a discussion of certain cognitive issues and their interrelationship with spatial perspectives. However, in order to motivate this connection, we first turn to the idea of "high art," to elitist conceptions of artwork and artist, and the establishment of cultural and aesthetic hierarchies.

[3]   Oliver Johnson, "War on the Ru-net: Voiná's *Dick Captured by the FSB* as a Networked Performance," *Third Text* 27, no. 5 (2013): 591–606.

[4]   Xandra Schutte, "Aleksandr Brener," *De Groene Amsterdammer* (May 6, 1998), https://www.groene.nl/artikel/aleksandr-brener.

[5]   Alexei Plutser-Sarno, " 'Sovremennoe iskusstvo—gnoi i blevotina!' Aktsiia A. Plutsera-Sarno na otkrytii Art- Moskvy v TsDkh," *Live Journal* (May 14, 2008), https://plucer.livejournal.com/tag/"Искусство-блевотина!

Hierarchies

The mutual relationship between art and secular and religious power is arguably as old as human creativity itself. "Canon" is a concept linked to contagious and time-consuming debates that go beyond the scope of this chapter.[6] Here, focus rests on a single aspect of canon formation, namely the establishment of aesthetic hierarchies. Aesthetic and cultural hierarchies were constructed by people in power centuries before we can speak of a European "art canon," and they are still being constructed with or without reference to "canon." In 2000, Vladimir Putin began his first presidential term by listing fourteen Russian heroes, coincidentally all men, and not all artists.[7] The list emphasized the Russian Federation's continued commitment to past cultural and aesthetic ideals. Confirming that cultural hierarchies are relevant not only to a former superpower heading for a "managed democracy," in 2004, Danish minister of culture Brian Mikkelsen created controversy by calling for the establishment of a Danish *Kulturkanon*. After raging debates, it came to include and "elevate" 108 Danish works of art.[8]

Aesthetic hierarchies are created by people in power for the purpose of nation building or, perhaps more commonly, by members of the social elite for the purpose of increasing their personal importance and influence. In the words of literary historian John Carey "high art is that which appeals to the minority whose social rank places them above the struggle for mere survival."[9] That art has no practical use simply heightens its appeal. The vertical organization of art objects in hierarchies based on notions of their aesthetic quality is influenced by enlightenment ideas about an unvarying standard of art, which "if it is truly great should *not* be of this time and place."[10] To this can be added Immanuel Kant's concept of good art as a balance between pleasure and morals, as opposed to bad art represented by a dubious pleasure for pleasure's sake.[11] Walter Benjamin's concept "aura,"[12,13] a social construct that increases the distance between the work

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[6] For a discussion of canon, see, for example, Lee Morrisey (ed.), *Debating the Canon: A Reader from Addison to Nafisi* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[7] Edwin Bacon, *Contemporary Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 25.

[8] For a full list, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danish_Culture_Canon.

[9] John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 32.

[10] David Byrne, *How Music Works* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012), 299. His emphasis.

[11] For a discussion of Kantian aesthetics and its contemporary critics, see: Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All* (London: Verso, 2013), 38–46.

[12] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 218–22.

[13] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

of art and its listener or observer, thereby imposing limitations on how the work is interpreted, can also be understood as an aspect of the high art superstructure. Aura potentially inhibits the work's impact on people's lives: you are invited to gaze in awe at a declared masterpiece, not interact or play around with it.

Benjamin hoped that aura would be eradicated by the technological advancement of film, handing the power of defining art back to the common people. Instead, Hollywood created the cult of the movie star and American modernism managed to diffuse the political energy of the early-twentieth-century avant-garde, redefine it as "critical art," and absorb it into the postwar canon.[14] Thus, in the West, conceptualism became critical art, an apolitical art that criticizes other art, rather than a revolutionary art that aspires to change society. The logic of critical art meant that a new artist (e.g., Cage, Warhol) could take on the role of the artist-as-genius directly and claim to represent "real" art, as opposed to existing ("false") art. In the West, this contributed to erasing the divide between artist and artisan, artwork and industrial design, art-as-object and art-as-experience. A prominent example of this is Joseph Beuys's introduction in the 1960s of organic, naturally decomposing materials in his installations, partially in order to prevent them from being preserved in museums.[15] In Russia, however, historical developments took a different direction. As we shall see, Russian conceptualists faced a contrasting situation with strictly limited opportunities and had to find other ways of challenging the art establishment.

The Case of Russia

Secular art began flourishing relatively late in Russia, but little more than a century after Peter the Great opened the country for European influences, Russian authors, playwrights, composers, painters, and sculptors were winning worldwide recognition and admiration. By the nineteenth century, the arts were already serving as the main arena for societal and social debate in the Russian empire. The Hegelian vision of critic Vissarion Belinsky (1811–48) of art as a vehicle to expose social ills, fight injustice, and improve and reform society was soon reflected in the works of Russian realist painters and authors.

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[14] See ibid.
[15] This did not deter curators from creating retrospective exhibitions of Beuys's work. At the 2005 "Joseph Beuys Actions, Vitrines, Environments" at London's Tate Modern, the smell of rancid fat was accepted as an integral part of key exhibits.

The ideals from the golden age of Russian realism had a profound impact on the Russian intelligentsia's concept of the national art canon. The social concerns of realism fitted well with the Marxist-Leninist historical narrative of the budding Soviet Union. In the late 1910s and early 1920s, modernist forms thrived, but unlike in the West, where the avant-garde was dedicated to the deconstruction of bourgeois aesthetics, Russian modernist revolutionaries were also engaged in a competition over cultural hegemony in the new Soviet state. The Soviet clampdown on independent artistic groupings began in 1928 and culminated in the socialist-realist doctrine, which made artists "engineers of the soul" under party supervision.[16] Where American modernism redefined revolutionary art of the 1910s and 1920s as "critical art" and incorporated it, the Bolsheviks discarded and excluded it wholesale in favor of a more monolithic socialist art under party control.

Importantly, however, the idea that great art engages constructively in improving society was not only hijacked by socialist realism but extended through various other trajectories. Critically minded artists within the Soviet Union employed old realist ideals in their attempt to continue discussion and debate in the rapidly closing cultural space of the 1930s and in the wake of the late 1950s thaw. For the Russian émigré intelligentsia, the same ideals were valued as a means to expose the ills of Soviet society. From the early 1960s onward, even socialist realism allowed a certain degree of old-school realist attitude, especially on less ideologically controversial topics such as environmentalism or feminism. Thus, in a Russian context, the ideals of realism hooked up with lingering Kantian moral imperatives and, quite possibly, Russian Orthodox sentiments about the distracting and immoral qualities of "art for its own sake."[17]

The romantic notion of the artist-as-genius has remained strong in the Russian discourse on culture, where the national poet Aleksandr S. Pushkin is still regularly—and without irony—referred to as "our sun." This also reflects the special status attributed to literary text in the Russian cultural canon. Of course, not everything comes part and package with "high-art Pushkin." It is no secret that Pushkin also wrote epic poems littered with pornographic imagery and swear words, but the mere mention of such a fact continues to create controversy.[18] After all, the protection of Russian literary language

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16 The Soviet obsession with text and image is reflected in literature and cinema being the first art forms affected by socialist realist doctrine.

17 For more on the relationship between church and secular art in Russia, see Mikhail Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church in Search of the Cultural Canon," *Transcultural Studies* 12 (2016): 39–65.

18 The Scotsman, "Russian literary giant Pushkin labelled as a peddler of porn," *The Scotsman*, January 30, 2005, https://www.scotsman.com/news/world/russian-literary-giant-pushkin-labelled-as-a-peddler-of-porn-1-1402249.

(including the suppression of swear words) is considered by some to be a question of national security.[19] Not everyone in Russia is, like the renowned linguist Oleg Trubachev, ready to accept that language, like the ocean, is an organic whole of forms, shapes, and levels of depth.[20]

In the Soviet era the artist-as-genius was modified and retained because of ideological necessity: the party was in control of aesthetic and moral education. Amateurism, however well-intended, had the potential to derail the masses from the ideals of communism; therefore, the decontextualized "greatness" of high-art[21] was merged with Marxist-Leninist historical determinism. The message was that, being ahead in the historical development, all Soviet people are not only educated but morally superior to the downtrodden masses of the capitalist West. Thus, they also know their masters of truly great art.

In the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and turmoil of the early Russian Federation, the arts enjoyed an unprecedented level of freedom from political and social control. However, along with the old ideological constraints the cultural infrastructure disappeared as well. Houses and palaces of culture and the education of cultural workers had been in the hands of the now defunct Soviet trade unions, few or no replacements were offered, and until a new infrastructure began to emerge, creative artists were left at the mercy of a poorly regulated consumer capitalism. New institutions began forming from below as artists shared workshops and facilities, formed art collectives, and staged shows and exhibitions. Simultaneously, the Russian Federation had to preserve its prestige and protect its cultural heritage, its art museums and collections, reinforcing a hierarchy-defined superstructure. Eventually, the grassroots initiatives and extended superstructure would meet, sometimes on common ground, sometimes in clashes between traditionalist values and new ideas. Such clashes were reflected in the cultural debate of the mid- to late 1990s. The limitless experimentation far beyond previous moral, political, and aesthetic standards provoked deep fears of cultural degeneration and the loss of tradition. A particularly heated debate raged over the fate of the Russian language, where traditionalists called for its protection from destructive neologisms, loans, dialect, slang, swear words and erratic grammar; whereas experimentalists utilized the same to

[19] Liudmila Verbitskaia, "Sokhranim russkii iazyk—sokhranim Rossiiu," *Gudok*, September 21, 2005, http://ruskline.ru/monitoring_smi/2005/09/21/sohranim_russkij_yazyk_-_sohranim_rossiyu/.

[20] Oleg Trubachev, "Puteshestvie za slovom, chast' 2," *Russkoe voskresenie*, September 6, 2000, http://www.voskres.ru/bratstvo/travel2.htm.

[21] Byrne, *How Music Works*, 299.

demonstrate the living, changing Russian language's versatility, adaptability, and linguistic power.[22]

In 1985 cultural historians Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskii described the historical development of Russia as a pendulum, swinging back and forth between a progressive and a reactionary mode. In the same year Slavic scholar Vladimir Papernyi,[23] writing from the point of departure of architecture in the Soviet 1920s and 1930s, first proposed a complementary view of a "revolutionary, cosmopolitan and experimental Culture One [which] is regularly transformed into an imperial, complacently solidified and stagnant, monumental and nationalistic Culture Two."[24] Papernyi's perspective is helpful in the current context on two levels. Following this perspective, we can conclude that, first, cultural and aesthetic hierarchies tend to share the values and objectives of Culture Two, whereas opposition or rebellion against them corresponds with key qualities of Culture One. Second, two decades of Culture One are framed by two eras dominated by Culture Two, namely the late Soviet era and the Russian cultural climate since 2010. These two decades coincided with Russian conceptualism, which grew forth from the mid-1970s, flourished in the 1990s and 2000s, and became suppressed by the mid-2010s.[25,]

In line with Papernyi's perspective, the seeds of Russian conceptualist art were sown during the hegemony of Culture Two by key figures such as Dmitri Prigov (1940–2007), Vitaly Komar (b. 1943) and Alexander Melamid (b. 1945) in the 1970s. Their ideas would inspire the provocative and controversial conceptualism of such influential artists as Aleksandr Brener (b. 1957), Oleg Kulik (b. 1961), Vladimir Sorokin (b. 1955), and Avdei Ter-Oganian (b. 1961) in the 1990s. Since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's presidencies—aided by laws, regulations, and legal

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[22] For more on the Russian language debate, see Michael Gorham, *After Newspeak: Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

[23] Vladimir Papernyi, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[24] Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Literature since 1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 7.

[25] The 2010s read as another shift from Culture One to Culture Two finds support in Timofeeva, Olga, "Vladimir Papernyi: Na dvore ocherednaia 'Kul'tura Dva' pravda s 'Feisbukom,'" *Novaia gazeta*, January 29, 2013, www.novayagazeta.ru/arts/56485.html. The successful suppression of Russian conceptualist protest art since 2010 is confirmed by the emigration of members of the Voiná group, Pussy Riot, and of Petr Pavlenskii; see Yngvar Steinholt, "Cats, Punk, Arson and New Media," in *The Routledge Companion of Media and Activism*, ed. Graham Meikle (London: Routledge, 2018), 153–61. Notably, pioneering Russian conceptualists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid emigrated to NYC in 1977, during the former hegemony of Culture Two.

initiatives—Culture Two sentiments gradually came to dominate the public discourse on the arts. As the pressure increased, a new generation of artists, boosted by the spread of the internet, took up the fight. They merged conceptualist ideas with activism and tapped into the energy of ongoing social protests. The ensuing protest art, while utilizing ideas and concepts inspired by the late Soviet conceptualists, combined their tongue-in-cheek irony with a more extrovert, radical, and militant activist stance. Their answers to the suppression of Culture One were retaliation and escalation. Tellingly, Voiná's first performance was based on throwing homeless cats over the counter at McDonald's. A few years later, its radical faction was overturning police cars and torching prison vans. However, as conceptualist protest art mercilessly attacked the cultural elite and their aesthetic ideals, the ever-growing controversies wore on the enthusiasm of their supporters. Among a wider public that felt annoyed rather than empowered from the outset, disinterest turned to hostility, a development helped by negative media coverage, smear campaigns, and court trials. In effect, the protest art rebellion against a dogmatic and patronizing official discourse on culture was beginning to reinforce the very same ideas it aimed to undermine. During the Pussy Riot trial in 2012, progressive-minded intellectuals were voicing concern about the long-term effects of protest art stunts in turning the public opinion away from what they saw as the legitimate political goals of social activists, toward hierarchical, antidemocratic, and outdated philosophical conceptions of art and morals. The pendulum gains momentum not only from the pull of Culture Two but from the push of Culture One, and vice versa: too much control facilitates release as much as too much release facilitates control.

Papernyi developed his perspective while studying the transition into Stalinist architecture. His perspective embeds the concepts of Culture One and Culture Two in a spatial approach and he partially describes the transition from the 1920s avant-garde to the neoimperial 1930s in spatial terms. Thus, Culture One is linked to a horizontal axis defined by lateral orientation, centrifugal forces, boundary-crossing, diffusion; whereas Culture Two is linked to the vertical axis typified by centralization, boundary-establishment, hierarchy. On a secondary level the horizontal is associated with experience (poetry, experiment, collaboration, mechanism, performance) and the vertical with object (epic, consolidation, heroism, work). This links Russian conceptualism, with its strategies of imperfection and/or dirt aesthetics, to the horizontal orientation of Culture One, traditionalism and the establishment and defense of aesthetic hierarchies to the vertical orientation of Culture Two. In itself, however, this tells us precious little about the roles played by the aesthetics of imperfection and dirt in the actual cultural shifts.

Perhaps a closer look at the cognitive and metaphorical structures behind the horizontal and vertical axes could provide us with a few more answers.

Spatial Aesthetics, Imperfection, and Dirt

That we experience the world around us through our bodies is hardly a controversial statement, yet it took a cognitive turn within the humanistic disciplines to appreciate how fundamental this fact is to human language and, by extension, creative arts. This cognitive turn has given rise to the widely used approach of metaphor theory,[26] as well as cognitive poetics.[27] The return of focus to the human body has also enabled the current spatial turn within the humanistic disciplines. The human creation of meaning begins with the basics of gravity and its impact on our motoric and biological functions. Next comes our basic knowledge of our surroundings: light comes from above, plants and trees stretch toward the light, overview is gained by climbing up on objects, rotten fruit falls down to the floor, organic matter (our own feces included) decomposes down on the ground (from which new herbal life grows), and so on.[28] The basic metaphor UP IS PURE not only contrasts its opposite DOWN IS DIRTY, it also organizes and informs our relationships with social, spiritual, and cultural phenomena. As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan puts it: "Culture may be deemed 'low' or 'high'. 'Low' is of the body and the earth, 'high' is of the mind and the sky; the one associated with the common people, the other with the elite, a distinction that the elite make to which the common people acquiesce."[29]

In the Soviet context the elite was represented by the party, which, according to the ruling ideology, was all-knowing. It considered good or high art that which guided and enlightened the people according to party doctrine, low art was mere entertainment, and bad art was art which (actually or potentially) confused or distracted the masses from communist goals and ideals. The taste of common people could not be trusted, constructive and enlightening art had to be provided by trained professionals. Examples of art forms that at various times caused concern in higher party ranks were musical

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[26] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[27] Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[28] For further discussion, see Åsne Høgetveit, *The Moral Vertical in Russian Cinema: Female Pilots, Flight Attendants, Cosmonauts and Aliens* (Ph.D thesis, Tromsø: UiT—The Arctic University of Norway, 2019), 22–6.

[29] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Romantic Geography: In Search of the Sublime Landscape* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press, 2013), 17.

styles such as jazz and rock, dances such as the Swing, nonfigurative graphic art or sculpture, and poetry or fiction concerned with individual emotions and experiences. Members of the Union of Soviet Composers described the evolution of music as a painstaking climb from the base barbary of rhythm (stone-age, ancient past, down) to the lofty heights of harmony (civilization, future, up).[30] In other words, Western-inspired rhythmic music represented evolution in reverse. As for non-figurative art, on September 15, 1974, Soviet authorities were put on the spot by a brave, unsanctioned art exhibition in the Moscow suburb of Beliaevo. The exhibition became known as The Bulldozer Exhibition, because it was attacked and destroyed using bulldozers and water cannons. Artists were beaten up and arrested like criminals, and works of art quite literally equated to dirt by being crushed into the mud. The event was disastrous for the artists involved, yet succeeded in exposing the extent of barbaric violence the authorities were prepared to sink to in order to defend their professed high-culture ideals.[31] The bad publicity created by the event internationally would force Soviet authorities to briefly ease the conditions for artists on the margins.

How can insistence on aesthetic ideals create such havoc? Possibly because the metaphors PURE IS UP and GOOD IS UP are fundamentally connected to VIRTUE IS UP.[32] We refer to people as being of "high" moral standing and comparably to others as having "fallen" into disrepute (DEPRAVITY IS DOWN). In her study of female characters in Soviet and Russian movies, Åsne Høgetveit introduces the concept of the moral vertical.[33] Significantly, she points to fundamental cognitive aspects of moral verticality that precede spiritual or religious concerns. Acting morally brings social well-being, it is uplifting, whereas morally failing in the eyes of your peers or society brings you down (makes your heart sink). Emotions have the ability to make us feel light or heavy. In his work on air and dreams, Gaston Bachelard goes as far as stating that moral values cannot be expressed without reference to a vertical axis.[34]

Høgetveit's concept of the moral vertical is of crucial importance to our discussion of aesthetics of imperfection and dirt. It is the moral vertical that gives the hierarchic construct of Culture Two its claim to hegemony. High art is virtuous. Popular art might well be neutral, but there is also bad—morally harmful or culturally alien—art. The cultural canon is sought

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[30] See, for example, Anatolii Doronin and Arkadii Lisenkov, "Chto proku ot roka," *Molodaia gvardiia*, no. 5 (1986): 214–31.

[31] Erofeev, "Pussy Riot and the Cossacks," 9.

[32] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 17.

[33] Høgetveit, *The Moral Vertical in Russian Cinema*, 27–30.

[34] Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement* (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1988), 10.

reinforced by reference to the many threats it faces. Defending established aesthetic and cultural hierarchies is defending virtue, and various moral panics are employed in its defense. Ironically, this reveals a certain lack of belief in the power of virtue on the part of the most dedicated defenders. Most importantly, however, the Culture Two discourse questions the morals of anyone who, for any number of reasons, challenges the status quo. This brings us to the question: what strategies are available to artists representing Culture One in the face of a dominant Culture Two? Clearly it would not be considered virtuous to simply demand the right to represent virtue on the terms of the establishment. Instead, the artist can abide by the rules, play into the hands of cultural hegemony, and expose its shortcomings through the work of art itself.

Celebrating Artistic Imperfection

The absence of "critical art" as a concept in Soviet Russia deprived Russian conceptualists of the role of artist-as-genius, leaving them with that of the artist-as-jester. This involved accepting and embracing—more or less tongue in cheek—the verdict of the cultural establishment: you are no artist (at the very least a failed or imperfect artist, or not an artist in the traditional sense, or even opposed to the ideals of art as such). This position could also prove an asset. Igor Iarkevitch may have presented himself as a failed Solzhenitsyn and an "onanist" (his writing is purely intended to satisfy himself), but his writings may still one day enter the literary canon. Andrei "Svin" Panov (1960–98) in the 1980s vehemently denied being a punk rocker and even playing music, describing himself and his band as just "stinking skunks."[35] Today he is commonly honored as a visionary musician and credited with bringing punk rock to the USSR. In the 1990s, conceptualists Oleg Kulik and Aleksandr Brener, exploring the contradictions between the purity of the artistic genius and the depravity of the common man, staged the artist-as-dog and the artist-as-vandal. Kulik toured art galleries, convincingly and consistently impersonating a wild, filthy, and most unruly dog.[36] Brener's performances included spray painting a green dollar sign on an iconic

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[35] A. Kushnir, *Zolotoe podpol'e: polnaia illiustrirovannaia entsikloperdiia roksamizdata 1967–1994* (Nizhnyi Novgorod: Dekom, 1994), 211.

[36] Roberta Smith, "On Becoming a Dog by Acting Like One," *New York Times*, April 18, 1997, http://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/18/arts/on-becoming-a-dog-by-acting-like-one.html. For more on the dog in Russian art and writing, see Henrietta Mondry, *Political Animal: Representing Dogs in Modern Russian Culture* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015).

painting by Malevich and describing it as a dialogue between two artists about the social elite's commodification and appropriation of the arts.[37]

Letting go of, or openly challenging, your status as an artist could also free the work from the constraints of an elitist art discourse, allowing it to be valued on its own terms. Works can be positioned below the reach of high-art conventions in a number of ways: subtly, by emphasizing its formal imperfection (e.g., amateurism, lack of refinement, lack of completion, or secondary importance) more directly by signaling that it is something other than art (e.g., a joke, pastiche, satire, comment, celebration, or play) or provocatively by describing it as the antithesis to art (e.g., suggesting it is garbage, dirt, filth, or abject matter). In all three instances the main emphasis is on the cultural object representing something else than (and potentially inferior to) "art" in the traditional sense. Immediately, enhanced by the creator's deliberate evasiveness about what exactly the creation represents, this approach raises the principal question: if indeed it is not art, what is it? In order to establish this, the audience must reconsider the fundamental question: What is art?

On this basis, a sympathetic audience might, like John Carey,[38] question certain limitations of the current definition of art. Art, the message is, is not reducible to sacred objects of worship in museums; art is practice, a living experience that should rightfully include and interact with all other art, including masterpieces of the past. If art is indeed a part of life, it follows that it is no more pure, elevated, or moral than life itself, but just as full of contradictions, chaos, and grittiness. Precisely these features tend to be underplayed, removed, or rearticulated in the formation of aesthetic hierarchies with firmly established borders. From the practicing artist's perspective, art should not require protection from other art or from life in all its forms and shades. Aesthetic hierarchies and their ulterior motives are at best superfluous, at worst damaging. Nevertheless, their very existence enables rebellion as much as rebellion necessitates the protection of the canon: each side depends upon the other for their raison d'être. This is the context in which quite literally, pardon my expression, the shit hits the fan in Russian conceptualist and protest art.

Dirt Aesthetics

Thus far we have compared two competing discourses on art in the Russian context: one horizontal, inclusive (Culture One) versus one vertical, exclusive

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[37] Schutte, "Aleksandr Brener."
[38] Carey, *What Good Are the Arts*.

(Culture Two). Strategies involving various notions of imperfection ("I am not really an artist," "what I do is not really art") aim to expand the definition of art and what it represents. Simultaneously, imperfectionists take (or pretend to take) the dismissive comments of elitist art discourse ("this is not proper art") at face value. Yet also outraged denouncements are regularly directed from the top of the aesthetic-moral vertical at someone below (or outside). An artist whose work is denounced as "filth" has the same option as the imperfectionist, to embrace the verdict of the elite. However, in this case, the consequences are different and more radical. By accepting to be the creator of filth, or to impersonate filth, the artist engages directly with the moral-aesthetic vertical and volunteers to represent the diametral opposite of high art's alleged beauty, virtue, and purity. Where the imperfectionist leaves the high end of the aesthetic-moral vertical aside and concentrates on laterally expanding the central part of the extended vertical axis, the impersonator of filth draws the vertical axis demonstratively to its logical conclusion at its lower extreme.

Of course, this artistic strategy is not limited to filth in the literal sense. When Avdei Ter-Oganian brought copies of orthodox icons into a church and proceeded to chop them up with an axe in a work entitled "Young Atheist,"[39] he identified with the iconoclast in response to attacks on the contemporary art scene from religious segments in the Russian elite and their allies in the Russian Orthodox Church. However, in order to properly explore the lower extreme of the aesthetic-moral vertical, it will be necessary to discuss the implications of its most extreme manifestations. It follows that the object at hand is normally excluded from cultured and polite conversation. Indeed, the taboos surrounding human excrement may answer for parts of its power, but what could this power entail?[40] One answer is suggested in one of many anecdotes about Soviet-era punk-rocker Andrei "Svin" Panov.[41]

In the early to mid-1980s, rock fans began gathering in the stairwell outside the flat of Boris Grebenshchikov, lead singer and songwriter of the most prominent rock band of the Leningrad musical underground at the time, Akvarium. The walls were soon covered in graffiti. At one point, Panov, in his own response to fans' worship, defecated on Grebenshchikov's doorstep. Disgusted, Grebenshchikov called the police. When the constables

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[39] Erofeev, "Pussy Riot and the Cossacks," 28.

[40] For a European cultural history of excrement, see Alison Moore, "Historicizing the Modern European Excremental World-View," *Advanced Research in Gastroenterology & Hepatology* 10, no. 1 (July 2018). DOI: 10.19080/ARGH.2018.09.555777.

[41] Much like anecdotes generated by the performances of early Russian conceptualists, this one from the Leningrad rock scene survived to this day. Its point on the power of human excrement remains valid even if the events themselves would prove to be pure myth.

arrive, Panov can simply pick up his stool in his hand and walk away, confident the police will never let him in the car with such evidence. Read as a conceptualist performance, Panov's stunt successfully incorporated the reaction of the authorities in a manner similar to Russian conceptualists before (e.g., the 1974 bulldozer exhibition) and conceptualist activist since (e.g., Petr Pavlenskii's "Fixation" [2016]).[42]

In 1994, Aleksandr Brener staged the performance "Plagiarism" at the A. S. Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. Standing in front of a painting by Vincent van Gogh, he fouled his pants while exclaiming "Vincent! Vincent!" The performance title might refer to one of the first performances by Brener, where he made a similar appearance, but restricted himself to imitating the excretion part.[43] Brener presented the performance as a "dialogue with the early modernists,"[44] and his act demonstrates the feeling of humiliation experienced by a (common) artist when facing the work of a Great Artist, whose genius he can never match. Significantly for the current context, Brener overidentifies with the elitist concept of "high" art. By locating himself as an artist at its extreme lower end, he performs a total inversion of the aesthetic-moral vertical. The act of defecation represents the most trivial of human actions and arguably the one furthest removed from human creativity. On the one hand, in the context of late modern art, the act could be considered a cliché, on the other hand the potential of excrement to disgust people is virtually inexhaustible. Thus, sarcastically presenting himself as artist and his performance as art, Brener symbolically locates himself and his feces-sullied pants at the opposite end of the axis from the celebrated master Van Gogh and his masterpiece. In other words, "Plagiarism" exposes the full logic of elitist concepts of art by demonstratively drawing the full aesthetic-moral vertical from top to bottom.

Brener's approach is fundamentally different from the horizontal outward push made by proponents of Culture One in the 1990s. Loosely connected to the Moscow conceptualists in the early 1990s, author Vladimir Sorokin, in

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42 Pavlenskii famously nailed his scrotum to Moscow's Red Square. For his removal, police were forced to act as carers, cover the naked man, and gently remove the nail pinning him to the cobblestone—an awkward task to handle for law enforcement officials. Petr Pavlenskii, "Fixation," *YouTube*, November 29, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giFkin-0hPI. Sylwia Hlebowicz, *Petr Pavlenskii as a Case Study of the Paradigm of Iurodstvo in Modern Russian Art* (MA thesis UiT—The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, 2015), 66–71.

43 Russian Gesture, "Alexander Brener. 1994 'Plagiarism' (with B. Mamonov and A. Litvin). A. S. Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts," *Russian Gesture: Online Russian Performance History*, December 30, 1994, https://ru-performance.livejournal.com/27989.html.

44 Maria Katkova, "Meretrix & Prostibulum," *Umeleč Magazine*, no. 2 (1998), http://divus.cc/praha/en/article/meretrix-prostibulum.

his early short stories, explored the extremes of literary language suddenly accessible after the Soviet collapse. His quest sometimes pushed the very limits of syntax and grammar toward breaking point and his scenarios from the absurdly funny into the unsettling or the outright sickening. In the short story "Sergei Andreevich,"[45] for example, a schoolboy has grown so utterly obsessed with admiration for his teacher that during a school trip he follows him into the woods where he eats the teacher's excrement. Like Brener, Sorokin disgusts and provokes his audience, but he does so within a larger context of exploring the lure of ideology and its, often brutal, consequences. In his 1994 novel *Norma* (The Norm), published as the debate about norms of the Russian language and morals raged, Sorokin portrays the act of conforming to ideology as coprophagy.[46] Ideology quite literally requires people to act as animals. Surely, Sorokin's transgressive push contributed to the return of forces aligned with Culture Two,[47] but unlike Brener in *Plagiarism* he did not demonstratively identify with them.

Oleg Kulik collaborated with Sorokin in the 1990s and his unruly dog takes the concept of human-turned-animal further.[48] In the 1990s Russian conceptualists explored what happens to an artist no longer obliged to contribute to the creation of model citizens (Soviet Man), when the artist becomes an ordinary person, a simple person, a bad or filthy person, or even a non-person. Kulik's artist-as-animal, stripped of all human faculties, engages with the aesthetic-moral vertical in a similar manner to Brener's "Plagiarism," if less directly. While the dog in one sense represents the non-artist Other of the elitist discourse on art, it remains more ambiguous, pointing at the bottom end of the aesthetic-moral vertical without explicitly aligning with it. The barking, growling, urinating, and defecating but also cuddly and playful dog occupies an ironic middle ground between Sorokin's alteration between a horizontal and a downward push, and Brener's identification with the vertical's lower extreme.

How did Russian authorities react to such artistic challenges? The first decade of the new millennium saw an increase in government control of the Russian cultural sphere and a corresponding reduction in the space available for experimental, critical, and provocative art. Whereas Russian authorities initially kept a low profile, extreme nationalist groups and religious zealots began, sometimes violently, to target contemporary art exhibitions they felt

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[45] Vladimir Sorokin, *Pervyi subbotnik: rasskazy* (Ad Marginem: Moscow, 2001).

[46] Vladimir Sorokin, *Norma* (Ad Marginem: Moscow, [1994] 2002).

[47] Sorokin's 1999 novel *Blue Lard* brought him charges for dissemination of pornography for, among other things, its portrayal of Stalin and Khrushchev as homosexual lovers. Vladimir Sorokin, *Goluboe salo* (Ad Marginem: Moscow, 1999).

[48] Smith, "On Becoming a Dog by Acting Like One."

offended common decency or religious feelings. When curators reported the vandalism, expecting the protection of Russian law, they were instead charged with "inciting religious hatred." The first major incident happened in January 2003 at the exhibition "Careful! Religion!" at the Moscow Sakharov Centre.[49] In March 2007 Andrei Erofeev and Yuri Samodurov were taken to trial for "Forbidden Art 2006," which exhibited twenty-three works of art previously banned by the authorities.[50] The response came in the form of a more militant and confrontational art activism: the Voiná group attended Erofeev and Samodurov's trial to perform a punk song, "All Cops Are Bastards," live in the courtroom. The subsequent "radicalization" of protest art is reflected in the performances of Petr Pavlenskii, who went from sowing his lips shut during the Pussy Riot court case to torching the doors of the FSB (formerly KGB) Liubianka headquarters.[51]

Editor of a five-volume dictionary of Russian swear words, linguist Alexei Plutser-Sarno (b. 1962) became involved in Voiná's performances during 2008 and began publishing a chronicle of their performances on his blog.[52] As the group's self-appointed ideologist, Plutser-Sarno co-organized a demonstration on May 14, 2008, at the opening of the "Art of Moscow" exhibition. Artists and guests were invited to play the role of "Demonstrators," equipped with slogan T-shirts and placards, while Plutser-Sarno shouted appeals through a megaphone. The slogans denounced contemporary art (e.g., as "rot and puke," "complete fuckery," "drugs and porn," "a shithouse"), called for the extermination of contemporary artists, or praised the Great Masters of the past.

Hijacking the language of the contemporary art scene's most militant enemies, the slogans mixed it with traditionalist praise of past masters. Artists and audiences performed the oppressive and defaming slogans of their opponents, thus celebrating the very same aesthetic "Other" embraced by Brener in *Plagiarism*. Seemingly, the demonstration built on the same principle of identifying with the strict boundaries of a Culture Two returning in (and by) force. If this was all there was to it, it could be argued that Plutser-Sarno's "demonstrators" were simply reclaiming control of their space, effectively consuming the energy base for hostile protests themselves.

[49] Mischa Gabowitsch, *Protest in Putin's Russia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 180.

[50] HRW, "Russia: Reverse Judgment against Human Rights Defender Investigate Misuse of Anti-Extremism Law to Stifle Artistic Expression," *Human Rights Watch*, July 12, 2010, https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/07/12/russia-reverse-judgment-against-human-rights-defender.

[51] For further details, see Steinholt, "Cats, Punk, Arson and New Media," 166–7.

[52] Alexei Plutser Sarno, *Blog of the Voiná Group Ideologist & Artist Alex Plutser-Sarno: Actions, Performances, Installations. LiveJournal* (2019), https://plucer.livejournal.com/.

However, in typical conceptualist ironic manner, the demonstrators' alleged self-empowerment through identification with abject matter becomes less clear-cut in the light of the declared motivation for the performance. Plutser-Sarno presents it also as an inside critique of the development of the contemporary art scene itself:

> The meeting and demonstration were held in protest against the hegemony of commercial art, the turning of gallery and exhibition life into pop, and also all sorts of art-shit, in particular 1) The shit that is poured on contemporary art; 2) The shit into which contemporary art is sinking as it becomes commodified and turned into garbage; 3) the shit that artists pour on each other as they split into clans around the cribs; 4) the shit that the Medvedev-circling artist bourgeoisie pour on the image of Russia.[53]

Now, who is exhibiting moral concerns and constructing a vertical here? By reinvoking and highlighting the dismissal or denouncement of contemporary art by the cultural elite, the art activist knowingly contributes to their reinforcement.

Inverting or Upholding the Vertical?

This probe into Russian conceptualist dirt aesthetics and its relationship with aesthetics and rhetorics of imperfection has, not surprisingly, revealed a complex discourse, characterized by dynamic positions. Approaching the discourse from a spatial perspective derived from Papernyi's cultural shifts, we are dealing with two main tendencies in the form of a horizontal axis (Culture One) and a vertical axis (Culture Two). The first tendency emphasizes creativity over morals and seeks to liberate itself from dominant aesthetic hierarchies through various strategies of imperfection applied to the work and/or its creator. By leaving aside the definitions of "art" or "artist," imperfectionist strategies contribute to a debate of what constitutes art. The latter emphasizes tradition and conformity, cultural and aesthetic hierarchies and tie-in to moral and educational concerns. By impersonating high art's diametral opposite, the ultimate low, dirt aesthetics actively engage with the vertical axis by deliberately targeting conceptions of art-as-virtue. This sets dirt aesthetics apart from imperfectionist strategies.

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[53] Plutser-Sarno, "Sovremennoe iskusstvo—gnoi i blevotina!"

Clearly, however, art can accommodate more than a single idea simultaneously. The force of Russian conceptualism is to play up to the expectations of making a horizontal push, while on another level aligning with the vertical. This enables the creation of an ironic space where multiple contradictions inhibit clear answers and simple solutions. It provokes, excites, or frustrates, and dirt aesthetics is a main means to achieve such an effect. The example of the 1974 Bulldozer Exhibition thus has two sides: the exhibited works of art themselves and the "performance" of destruction involving the Soviet authorities. Similarly, the lateral drive of Sorokin's language experiments coexists with the dirt aesthetics of his motifs and vocabulary; Kulik's unruly dog mocks the artist as well as the dominant aesthetic ideal; Plutser-Sarno's identification of contemporary art with abject matter not only mocks the language of its opponents but scalds the contemporary art scene itself.

Where imperfectionist strategies seek to erase a rigid aesthetic-moral vertical, expanding the discourse on art and making it more inclusive, dirt aesthetics thrives on remaining in a mutual death grip with elitist concepts of high art. The mutual interdependence of a canon and its challengers suggests the battle is eternal, but in the world of Russian art, who can say for sure?

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Promoting the Imperfect: Marketing Strategies to Reduce Product Waste

Ilona E. de Hooge

In science and in society, it is gradually becoming acknowledged that human natural resource usage exceeds planetary limits.[1] Climate change, biodiversity loss, and imbalances in the nitrogen and phosphorus cycle are all consequences of inefficient human resource usage. By implication, reducing our resource usage is essential to fulfil the needs of current and future generations.[2]

A central topic in discussions about human resource usage is the food supply chain. Food production currently ranks among the largest demands on natural resources such as water, land, and energy[3] and is assessed to cause approximately a third of all greenhouse gas emissions.[4] Surprisingly, one-third to one-half of all food produced is wasted.[5] Food waste, defined as "any food, and inedible parts of food, removed from the food supply chain to be recovered or disposed (including composted, crops ploughed in/

[1] J. Rockstrom, W. Steffen, K. Noone, A. Persson, F. S. Chapin III, E. Lambin, et al., "Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity," *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 2 (2009), http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol14/iss2/art32/; W. Steffen, K. Richardson, J. Rockström, S. E. Cornell, I. Fetzer, E. M. Bennett et al., "Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet," *Science* 347, no. 6223 (1259855) (2015).

[2] Ibid.; and UN, "Our Common Future. Report of the UN World Commission on Environment and Development. Annex to Document A/42/427" (1987).

[3] D. Cordell, J.-O. Drangert, and S. White, "The Story of Phosphorus: Global Food Security and Food for Thought," *Global Environmental Change* 19, no. 2 (2009): 292–305; Rockstrom et al., "Planetary Boundaries."

[4] T. Garnett, "Where Are the Best Opportunities for Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions in the Food System (Including the Food Chain)?" *Food Policy* 36 (2011): S23–S32. doi:10.1016/j.foodpol.2010.10.010.

[5] FAO, "Food Wastage Footprint: Impacts on Natural Resources," retrieved September 8, 2014, http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3347e/i3347e.pdf; J. Parfitt, M. Marthel, and S. MacNaughton., "Food Waste within Food Supply Chains: Quantification and Potential for Change to 2050," *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 365, no. 1554 (2010): 3065–81. doi:10.1098/rstb.2010.0126.

not harvested, anaerobic digestion, bio-energy production, co-generation, incineration, disposal to sewer, landfill or discarded to sea),"[6] is a very inefficient use of natural resources. Food wastage is also problematic from a food security perspective. In a world where the population is continuously growing and where the current challenge is to provide food and nutrition to almost 9 billion people, food wastage is in stark contrast with human efforts to provide food security to all.[7] In addition, food wastage is problematic from a moral perspective: it seems immoral to waste something valuable, in which others have invested effort, time, and energy.[8] For these reasons, reducing food waste is stated as one of the necessary worldwide actions for a more sustainable future.[9]

There are multiple causes of food waste and they vary in the degree to which they are avoidable. There are some situations where food waste is considered to be unavoidable. In the supply chain, such unavoidable food losses concern, for example, harvesting, storage, transportation, and processing losses that cannot be solved with the currently available technologies, as well as product contaminations.[10] In the consumer household, unavoidable food waste is, for example, the waste generated by foods or drinks that are not edible under normal circumstances, such as tea leaves and banana skins.[11] There are also types of food waste that can be considered potentially avoidable. For example, some elements of drinks and foods are consumed by some but not all consumers (e.g., apple peels), and some foods can be consumed when prepared in one way but not when prepared in another way (e.g.,

[6] FUSIONS, "FUSIONS Definitional Framework for Food Waste, Full Report" (2014): 6. Retrieved from https://www.eu-fusions.org/index.php/download?download=5:fusions-definitional-framework-for-food-waste.

[7] H. Godfray, C. J., Beddington, J. R., Crute, I. R., Haddad, L., Lawrence, D., Muir, J. F., . . . et al., "Food Security: The Challenge of Feeding 9 Billion People," *Science* 327 (2010): 812–18. doi:10.1126/science.1185383.

[8] Garnett, "Where Are the Best Opportunities."

[9] J. Foley, A., Ramankutty, N., Brauman, K. A., Cassidy, E. S., Gerber, J. S., Johnston, M., . . . P. C. West, "Solutions for a Cultivated Planet," *Nature* 478, no. 7369 (2011): 337–42; Godfray et al., "Food Security," 812–18.

[10] C. Beretta, F. Stoessel, U. Baier, and S. Hellweg, "Quantifying Food Losses and the Potential for Reduction in Switzerland," *Waste Management* 33 (2013): 764–73. doi:10.1016/j.wasman.2012.11.007; J. Gustavsson and J. Stage, "Retail Waste of Horticultural Products in Sweden," *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* 55 (2011): 554–6. doi:10.1016/j.resconrec.2011.01.007; T. E. Quested and H. Johnson, "Household Food and Drink Waste in the UK: A Report Containing Quantification of the Amount and Types of Household Food and Drink Waste in the UK," *Report Prepared by WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme), Banbury* (2009).

[11] Beretta et al., "Quantifying Food Losses," 764–73.

potato skins).[12] Finally, there are types of food waste that are categorized as being avoidable. These occurrences of food waste concern foods and drinks being thrown away because the products are no longer wanted. In the supply chain, this can, for example, concern foods not harvested because of low demands, overproduction, surplus stocks, deviations from prescribed shapes or sizes, and changes in the production line.[13] For both retailers and consumer households, examples of avoidable food waste are foods or drinks that are wasted because they have been stored for too long, because they have exceeded the expiry date, or because parts of the food or drink have perished.[14] In consumer households, avoidable food waste can also concern leftovers after cooking, preparing too much food, or plate waste.[15]

Interestingly, most avoidable food waste occurs due to supply chain actors and consumers experiencing difficulties with *imperfect foods*. "Imperfect" or "suboptimal" foods I define as products that diverge from perfect standards not on the basis of their main defining product aspects—their intrinsic quality and safety—but on peripheral product aspects, such as appearance standards, date labeling, or packaging deviations. Misshapen fruits and vegetables, dairy close to, on, or slightly past the best before date, and soups in dented cans are examples of food products that are not perceived as perfect or optimal in the eyes of supply chain actors and consumers.[16] These products all rank, in short, as flawed.

[12] Ibid.; T. E. Quested, A. D. Parry, S. Easteal, and R. Swannell, "Food and Drink Waste from Households in the UK," *Nutrition Bulletin* 36 (2011): 460–7. doi:10.1111/j.1467-3010.2011.01924.x.

[13] J. C. Buzby and J. Hyman, "Total and Per Capita Value of Food Loss in the United States," *Food Policy* 37 (2012): 561–70. doi:10.1016/j.foodpol.2012.06.002; C. Mena, B. Adenso-Diaz and O. Yurt, "The Causes of Food Waste in the Supplier-Retailer Interface: Evidences from the UK and Spain," *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* 55 (2011): 648–58. doi:10.1016/j.resconrec.2010.09.006.

[14] Beretta et al., "Quantifying Food Losses"; J. Buzby, J. Bentley, B. Padera, C. Ammon and J. Campuzano, "Estimated Fresh Produce Shrink and Food Loss in US Supermarkets," *Agriculture* 5, no. 3 (2015): 626–48.

[15] H.-K. Koivupuro, H. Hartikainen, K. Silvernoinen, J.-M. Katajajuuri, N. Heikintalo, A. Reinikainen, and Jalkanen, "Influence of Socio-Demographical, Behavioural, and Attitudinal Factors on the Amount of Avoidable Food Waste Generated in the Finnish Household," *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 36 (2012): 183–91. doi:10.1111/j.1470-6431.2011.01080.x; Quested, "Household Food."

[16] I. E. De Hooge, M. Oostindjer, J. Aschemann-Witzel, A. Normann, S. Mueller Loose, and V. L. Almli, "This Apple Is Too Ugly for Me! Consumer Preferences for Suboptimal Food Products in the Supermarket and at Home," *Food Quality and Preference* 56 (2017): 80–92. doi:10.1016/j.foodqual.2016.09.012; K. White, L. Lin, D. W. Dahl, and R. J. B. Ritchie, "When Do Consumers Avoid Imperfections? Superficial Packaging Damage as a Contamination Cue," *Journal of Marketing Research* 53, no. 2 (2016): 110–23. doi:10.1509/jmr.12.0388.

Multiple researchers have quantified food waste at various stages of the food supply chain and demonstrated that a prominent cause of (avoidable) food waste is the tendency of supply chain actors to develop and to adhere to rules that strictly separate imperfect from perfect foods.[17] Such cosmetic specifications categorize foods into perfect and imperfect products on the basis of solely extrinsic cues.[18] Imperfect products are subsequently deleted from the production line, even though these products are similar to the perfect products on the basis of intrinsic quality and safety.[19] In this chapter, I discuss different labels, definitions, and categories of imperfect and perfect foods.

Multiple scholars have argued that one of the essential causes of food waste in supply chains and in households is consumers' unwillingness to purchase and consume imperfect foods.[20] Consumers have, for example, been found to avoid buying or consuming fruits with small spots on their skin,[21] canned food with ripped labels,[22] bananas with browned skin,[23] or vegetables with

[17] Beretta et al., "Quantifying Food Losses," 764–73; J. C. Buzby, J. Hyman, H. Stewart, and H. F. Wells, "The Value of Retail- and Consumer-Level Fruit and Vegetable Losses in the United States," *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 45, no. 3 (2011): 492–515; C. Gobel, N. Langen, A. Blumenthal, P. Teitscheid, and G. Ritter, "Cutting Food Waste through Cooperation along the Food Supply Chain," *Sustainability* 7 (2015): 1429–45. doi:10.3390/su7021429; Gustavsson and Stage, "Retail Waste of Horticultural Products in Sweden"; S. Lebersorger and F. Schneider, "Food Loss Rates at the Food Retail, Influencing Factors and Reasons as a Basis for Waste Prevention Measures," *Waste Management* 34, no. 11 (2014): 1911–19. doi:10.1016/j.wasman.2014.06.013.

[18] I. E. De Hooge, E. Van Dulm, and H. C. M. Van Trijp, "Cosmetic Specifications in the Food Waste Issue: Addressing Food Waste by Developing Insights into Supply Chain Decisions concerning Suboptimal Food Products," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 183 (2018): 698–709. doi:10.1016/j.clepro.2018.02.132; A. Halloran, J. Clement, N. Kornum, C. Bucatariu, and J. Magid, "Addressing Food Waste Reduction in Denmark," *Food Policy* 49 (2014): 294–301. doi:10.1016/j.foodpol.2014.09.005.

[19] De Hooge, Van Dulm, and Van Trijp, "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709; Gobel, Langen, Blumenthal, Teitscheid, and Ritter, "Cutting Food Waste," 1429–45.

[20] J. Aschemann-Witzel, I. E. De Hooge, P. Amani, T. Bech-Larsen, and M. Oostindjer, "Consumer-Related Food Waste: Causes and Potential for Action," *Sustainability* 7 (2015): 6457–77. doi:10.3390/su7066457; Buzby, Hyman, Stewart, and Wells, "The Value," 492–515; De Hooge, Van Dulm, and Van Trijp, "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709; Lebersorger and Schneider, "Food Loss Rates"; R. Newsome, C. G. Balestrini, M. D. Baum, J. Corby, W. Fisher, K. Goodburn, . . . F. Yiannas, "Applications and Perceptions of Date Labeling of Food," *Comprehensive Reviews in Food Science and Food Safety* 13 (2014): 745–69. doi:10.1111/1541-4337.12086; Quested, Parry, Easteal, and Swannell, "Food and Drink Waste," 460–7; WRAP, *Household Food and Drink Waste: A People Focus* (2014a). Retrieved from Oxon; WRAP, *Household Food and Drink Waste: A Product Focus* (2014b). Retrieved from Oxon.

[21] De Hooge, "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709.

[22] White et al., "When Do Consumers," 110–23.

[23] C. Symmank, S. Zahn, and H. Rohm, "Visually Suboptimal Bananas: How Ripeness Affects Consumer Expectation and Perception," *Appetite* 120 (2018): 472–81.

strongly deviating shapes.[24] Retailers have also observed these consumer tendencies to avoid imperfect foods, and provide the consumers' avoidance behavior as one of the main reasons why they would not put imperfect foods on the shelves.[25] Being able to motivate consumers to buy and consume food that ranks as imperfect would therefore reduce food waste at both the household level and the supply chain level.

In sum, as the wastage of suboptimal products is an extensive part of food waste in general and falls under the category of avoidable food waste, there is potential in trying to reduce the food waste of imperfect products. The current chapter examines supply chain actors' and consumers' perceptions of and decisions concerning imperfect food products, and explores whether it is possible to make imperfect foods attractive for supply chain actors and consumers. It studies whether marketing strategies that focus on imperfection in products as an advantage can hold promising avenues for the future. These insights can make an essential contribution to existing imperfection literature—of which I offer some samples below—and to our understanding of the positive sides of imperfection. Moreover, the present insights can hopefully provide some valuable steps toward a more sustainable future.

Defining Imperfect Food Products

Aesthetic, moral, and other imperfections can be found in many different objects and situations. For example, decision-makers can use imperfect information or imperfect algorithms when making decisions,[26] people can perceive themselves or others as being imperfect,[27] music and art can contain

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24 N. Loebnitz, G. Schuitema, and K. Grunert, "Who Buys Oddly Shaped Food and Why? Impacts of Food Shape, Abnormality, and Organic Labeling on Purchase Intentions," *Psychology & Marketing* 32, no. 4 (2015): 408–21. doi:10.1002/mar.20788.

25 De Hooge, Van Dulm, and Van Trijp, "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709.

26 B. J. Dietvorst, J. P. Simmons, and C. Massey, "Overcoming Algorithm Aversion: People Will Use Imperfect Algorithms If They Can (Even Slightly) Modify Them," *Management Science* 64, no. 3 (2016): 1155–70; J. E. Stiglitz and A. Weiss, "Credit Rationing in Markets with Imperfect Information," *American Economic Review* 71, no. 3 (1981): 393–410.

27 D. Dunning, K. Johnson, J. Ehrlinger, and J. Kruger, "Why People Fail to Recognize Their Own Incompetence," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 12, no. 3 (2003): 83–7; L. H. Janda, *How to Live with an Imperfect Person* (Gretna, LA: Wellness Institute, 2000); D. Sweet and M. McCue-Enser, "Constituting 'the People' as Rhetorical Interruption: Barack Obama and the Unfinished Hopes of an Imperfect People," *Communication Studies* 61, no. 5 (2010): 602–22.

imperfect elements,[28] and supply chain actors and consumers can consider products to be imperfect or suboptimal.[29]

One type of product that can be considered imperfect or suboptimal is food. "Imperfect" foods, as said, are products that depart from perfect or optimal products:

1. on the basis of appearance standards (in terms of, e.g., color, shape, or size),[30]

2. on the basis of their date labeling (e.g., close to the best before date),[31] or

3. on the basis of their packaging (e.g., a dented carton).[32]

One may think, for example, of a bent cucumber, a carrot with two legs, a dented can of soda, or dairy on the best before date. For all products, quality cues can be separated into intrinsic and extrinsic cues.[33] Whereas intrinsic cues concern cues that, if changed, would result in a substantial change of the product itself (e.g., taste), extrinsic cues concern cues that can be alternated without substantially changing the product itself (e.g., price). Essentially, in all cases of imperfect or suboptimal foods, the imperfect foods solely diverge from perfect foods on the basis of their extrinsic cues.[34]

In the case of imperfection on the basis of appearance standards, the imperfection mostly concerns a type of imperfection that is described by Saito as atemporal.[35] *Atemporal imperfection* can, in Saito's view, be understood as a type of imperfection based on "the norm that describes a perfection

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[28] K. Cascone, "The Aesthetics of Failure: 'Post-Digital' Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music," *Computer Music Journal* 24, no. 2 (2000): 12–18; Y. Saito, "The Role of Imperfection in Everyday Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 15, no. 1 (2017): 1–15.

[29] D. Bunn, G. W. Feenstra, L. Lynch, and R. Sommer, "Consumer Acceptance of Cosmetically Imperfect Produce," *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 24, no. 2 (1990): 268–79. doi:0022-0078/0002-268; S. S. Sana, "A Production-Inventory Model of Imperfect Quality Products in a Three-Layer Supply Chain," *Decision Support Systems* 50, no. 2 (2011): 539–47. doi:10.1016/j.dss.2010.11.012.

[30] Bunn et al., "Consumer Acceptance," 268–79; De Hooge et al., "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709.

[31] De Hooge et al., "This Apple," 80–92.

[32] White et al., "When Do Consumers," 110–23.

[33] G. J. Szybillo and J. Jacoby, "Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Cues as Determinants of Perceived Product Quality," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 59 (1974): 74–8; V. A. Zeithaml, "Consumer Perceptions of Price, Quality, and Value: A Means-End Model and Synthesis of Evidence," *Journal of Marketing* 52, no. 3 (1988): 2–22. doi:http://www.jstor.org/stable/1251446.

[34] Aschemann-Witzel et al., "Consumer-Related Food Waste: Causes," 6457–77; Gobel et al., "Cutting Food Waste," 1429–45; Halloran et al., "Addressing Food Waste Reduction," 294–301.

[35] Saito, "The Role of Imperfection," 1–15.

of [a] kind"; this form of imperfection has been perceived as imperfect from birth and remains imperfect over time. Imperfection on the basis of appearance standards is one of the largest causes of fruit and vegetable waste and generates food waste along the whole supply chain.[36] As this type of imperfection depends on what supply chain actors and consumers perceive as perfect or imperfect, it may be malleable depending on, for example, local contexts or marketing strategies.[37]

The current chapter mostly focuses on this atemporal type of imperfection. The contrary type—imperfections on the basis of date labeling and packaging—concerns a *temporal* form of imperfection: the food has once been perfect, but is now considered imperfect due to a deterioration (aging, destruction). Interestingly, the date labeling imperfection is already a topic of scientific and societal debate: supply chain actors currently have to adhere to date legislation that does not always match with reality, and consumers have been found to frequently confuse the "best before" and "use by" labels.[38] Consequently, more food than necessary is wasted out of misplaced safety concerns, and both scholars and policymakers are examining whether this issue can be resolved. Multiple consumer initiatives also address food waste based on this type of imperfection. An example is the "Over Datum" ("passed the best before date") dinners, organized by the Dutch cultural foundation Mediamatic: participants jointly prepare and consume dinners consisting of foods that have passed the best before date.[39]

An essential question is who defines the food product as perfect or imperfect. In all three cases of imperfection, every actor along the supply chain (e.g., producers, producer organizations, wholesalers, retailers) checks the product on its appearance, date (if applicable), and packaging (if applicable), and removes the product from the production line when the product deviates from the product specifications.[40] Many of these product specifications have been formalized in national legislations. The European Union has, for instance, specified the minimally required levels of quality,

[36] Aschemann-Witzel et al., "Consumer-Related Food Waste: Causes" 6457–77; Beretta et al., "Quantifying Food Losses," 764–73; H. Blatt, *America's Food: What You Don't Know about What You Eat* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

[37] De Hooge et al., "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709; Symmank, Zahn, and Rohm, "Visually Suboptimal Bananas," 472–81.

[38] Newsome et al., "Applications and Perceptions," 745–69; T. E. Quested, E. Marsh, D. Stunell, and A. D. Parry, "Spaghetti Soup: The Complex World of Food Waste Behaviours," *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* 79 (2013): 43–51. doi:10.1016/j.resconrec.2013.04.011.

[39] For details about Mediamatic's "Over datum" dinners (2011–), see https://www.mediamatic.net/nl/page/73291/over-datum-eetclub, accessed March 30, 2020.

[40] Buzby et al., "The Value," 492–515; Gobel et al., "Cutting Food Waste," 1429–45; Lebersorger and Schneider, "Food Loss Rates."

maturity (ripeness), safety, smell, taste, origin of produce, packaging, uniformity across products within one package, shape, skin, size, and weight of multiple fruits and vegetables.[41] Based on these specifications, nations and supply chains have developed quality-grade classifications such as Extra, A-class, or B-class products.[42] Similar requirements have been formalized for the United States.[43]

In addition, supply chain actors frequently set their own product specifications.[44] Producers, producer organizations, and retailers have been found to set product specifications, for example, for the shape, size, weight, or color of fruits and vegetables to signal being a high-quality player delivering high-quality products to customers and consumers.[45] Product specifications about the size and shape of products can increase the efficiency of packaging and transport logistics.[46] Finally, supply chain actors have been found to develop and apply product specifications because they perceive consumers to demand solely perfect-looking products.[47] Thus, the definition of foods as perfect or imperfect is dependent on governments, supply chain actors, and, at least partially, consumers.

It is interesting to see that, in the field of food, perfection seems to be the standard. In most social domains, perfection is something exceptional or unique, something that is desired but that does not occur frequently— as can be read in more detail in the contributions to this volume by Mieke Bal, Yuriko Saito, and Ellen Rutten. On the contrary, in the field of food, perfection is set as the norm, and all foods should adhere to this norm of perfection. Moreover, it appears that debates about food production build on hard dichotomies: food is ranked either as perfect or imperfect. There is no gradation. This is markedly different from other fields, where imperfection is often more a matter of scale.[48]

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[41] European Union, *Council Regulation (EC)*. No 1234/2007, 2007. European Union. *Commission Implementing Regulation (EU)*, no. 543/2011. Official Journal of the European Union, 2011.

[42] De Hooge et al., "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709.

[43] USDA, "U.S. Grade Standards for Fruits, Vegetables, Nuts, and Other Specialty Products," 2016. https://www.ams.usda.gov/grades-standards/fruits.

[44] Ibid.; T. Stuart, *Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal* (London: W. W. Norton, 2009).

[45] De Hooge et al., "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709.

[46] Ibid.; N. Raak, C. Symmank, S. Zahn, J. Aschemann-Witzel, and H. Rohm, "Processing- and Product-Related Causes for Food Waste and Implications for the Food Supply Chain," *Waste Management* 61 (2017): 461–72.

[47] Aschemann-Witzel et al., "Consumer-Related Food Waste: Causes," 6457–77; De Hooge et al., "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709.

[48] See on less "dichotomous" readings of perfection and imperfection also Rutten's introduction to this book.

Supply Chain Actors' Perceptions and Decisions

Few retailers currently offer imperfect foods as standard assortment in their stores, and imperfect foods are mostly removed from the standard production line.[49] Until recently, most imperfect foods were ploughed back into the ground, developed into cattle feed, fertilizer, or biogas, offered to alternative markets (e.g., daily markets or export markets), or simply wasted.[50] A notable exception is recent marketing activities of some supply chain actors that position imperfect foods as irregular assortment. Some supply chain actors have, for instance, offered a limited supply of imperfect foods—limited in terms of days of the campaign, supply, or ways to buy the imperfect products—by positioning them as "Inglorious fruits and vegetables" (French retailer Intermarché), "Buitenbeentjes" ("Misfits," Dutch Albert Heijn), "Wonky Veggies" (Asda, Britain), "Fruta Feia" ("Ugly fruit," Lisbon), or "Perfectly imperfect" (Tesco, Britain).[51] Some retailers today also offer imperfect foods (either on the basis of appearance standards or close to the best before date) in a special discount section.[52] These campaigns appear successful in selling imperfect foods to consumers, making one wonder why imperfect foods are not part of the standard assortment.

To answer this question, together with my colleagues from various European universities I have examined both supply chain actors' and consumers' perceptions of and decisions concerning imperfect foods. We conducted an interview study with Dutch and German producers, producer organizations, and retailers to examine supply chain actors' perceptions and decisions.[53] The findings revealed that supply chain actors strongly vary in their perceptions of and willingness to market imperfect foods, and that there are more or less two groups of supply chain actors. One consists of supply chain actors (producers, producer organizations, and retailers) who

49 J. Aschemann-Witzel, I. E. De Hooge, H. Rohm, A. Normann, M. B. Bossle, A. Grønhøj, and M. Oostindjer, "Key Characteristics and Success Factors of Supply Chain Initiatives Tackling Consumer-Related Food Waste–A Multiple Case Study," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 155 (2017): 33–45; De Hooge et al., "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709; Gobel et al., "Cutting Food Waste," 1429–45.

50 Beretta et al., "Quantifying Food Losses," 764–73; De Hooge et al., "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709.

51 J. Aschemann-Witzel, I. E. De Hooge, and A. Normann, "Consumer-Related Food Waste: Role of Food Marketing and Retailers and Potential for Action," *Journal of International Food & Agribusiness Marketing* (2016): 2–15. doi:10.1080/08974438.2015 .1110549.

52 Ibid.; J. Aschemann-Witzel, "Consumer Perception and Preference for Suboptimal Food under the Emerging Practice of Expiration Date Based Pricing in Supermarkets," *Food Quality and Preference* 63 (2018): 119–28. doi:10.1016/j.foodqual.2017.08.007.

53 De Hooge, Van Dulm, and Van Trijp, "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709.

set cosmetic specifications to appear as a high-quality player. These actors perceive imperfect foods as being of lower quality compared to perfect foods, and appear unmotivated to include imperfect foods in their assortment. These actors fear that such marketing actions would threaten the desired high-quality positioning of their company and of their supply chain.

The other group consists of supply chain actors who perceive imperfect foods as boasting the same quality as perfect foods but with a small deviation.[54] These actors are willing to include imperfect foods in their assortment, but they currently encounter three issues in doing so. First, many of these actors suggest that their imperfect products do not move through the regular distribution channels, because consumers only buy perfect-looking foods. After all, imperfect foods can only be successfully included in the standard assortment when consumers purchase and consume these products.

Second, presuming that the total demand for food does not change, the introduction and marketing of imperfect foods would directly compete with perfect foods, and would harm the market and prices of both types of food.[55] That is, if imperfect foods would be introduced as a similar product as perfect foods with the same price, then the total food supply would increase and prices for both types of food would decrease. If imperfect foods would be introduced as a lower-quality class product with a lower price, this would come at the expense of the market for perfect foods, and thereby reduce prices and demands for perfect foods. Thus, supply chain actors would only market imperfect foods when the marketing strategy presents the imperfect food as a distinctive category that does not interfere with the existing market for perfect foods.

A third issue is that imperfect foods are more difficult or challenging marketing objects than perfect products.[56] In terms of distribution, distributing oddly shaped cucumbers and zucchinis, for example, is more challenging and thereby more expensive compared to perfectly straight cucumbers and zucchinis. Also, retailers offer limited amounts of shelf space for every product, and offering imperfect foods would take up more shelf space compared to perfect foods.

To overcome these challenges, it is relevant for supply chain actors that imperfect foods are attractive to consumers, do not compete with perfect products, and can be sold for a higher price compared to perfect foods to overcome the distribution issues. Indeed, "if supply chain actors could find

[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

channels that would financially reward them sufficiently for the production and marketing of suboptimal products, many would do it."[57]

Consumers' Perceptions and Decisions

Of all the supply chain actors, retailers are perceived to be the actor with the most frequent interaction with consumers and the most potential influence on consumers.[58] Retailers usually assess consumers' preferences and translate these preferences into orders and order specifications.[59] The case of imperfect foods is no exception. Multiple studies have shown that retailers generally believe that consumers have a strong preference for homogeneous and perfect-looking products, leading to the situation that retailers and other supply chain actors set tight cosmetic specifications for foods.[60]

There are some studies that support retailers' beliefs about consumers' unwillingness to purchase imperfect foods. One study demonstrated that consumers were willing to purchase imperfect foods only when they were appalled by the alternative, namely perfect foods sprayed with pesticides.[61] Two studies showed consumers to be willing to purchase imperfect foods only when these products moderately deviated from perfect foods, but not when their deviation was more extreme.[62] In another study consumers under high cognitive load—consumers who were mentally preoccupied with other tasks, that is—perceived superficial packaging damages (e.g., a torn wrapper, a dented can) as a source of potential contamination and of health and safety risks.[63] Consequently, consumers under high cognitive load

[57] Ibid., 706.
[58] Aschemann-Witzel et al., "Consumer-Related Food Waste: Role," 2–15; D. Fuchs, A. Kalfagianni, and T. Havinga, "Actors in Private Food Governance: The Legitimacy of Retail Standards and Multistakeholder Initiatives with Civil Society Participation," *Agriculture and Human Values* 28, no. 3 (2011): 353–67; Halloran et al., "Addressing Food Waste Reduction," 294–301.
[59] Aschemann-Witzel et al., "Consumer-Related Food Waste: Role," 2–15; N. Loebnitz and K. Grunert, "The Effect of Food Shape Abnormality on Purchase Intentions in China," *Food Quality and Preference* 40 (2015): 24–30. doi:10.1016/j.foodqual.2014.08.005; N. Loebnitz, G. Schuitema, and K. Grunert, "Who Buys Oddly Shaped Food and Why? Impacts of Food Shape, Abnormality, and Organic Labeling on Purchase Intentions," *Psychology & Marketing* 32, no. 4 (2015): 408–21. doi:10.1002/mar.20788.
[60] De Hooge et al., "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709; Halloran et al., "Addressing Food Waste Reduction," 294–301; Loebnitz et al., "The Effect of Food Shape Abnormality"; Loebnitz et al., "Who Buys Oddly Shaped Food"; Stuart, *Waste.*
[61] Bunn et al., "Consumer Acceptance," 268–79.
[62] Loebnitz et al., "The Effect of Food Shape Abnormality," 24–30; Loebnitz et al., "Who Buys," 408–21.
[63] White et al., "When Do Consumers," 110–23.

perceived imperfect foods less positively and were less inclined to purchase imperfect foods. In yet another study, the majority of consumers (62 percent) purchased foods with the longest remaining shelf lives,[64] suggesting that they avoided imperfect foods that were close to the best before date.

At the same time, there are some indications from daily life that retailers may be overrating consumers' demands for perfect foods. For example, after a recent bad harvest of potatoes and apples in Denmark and Sweden due to weather issues, retailers could only offer potatoes and apples that normally would be qualified as imperfect. Consumers, however, simply bought the imperfect potatoes and apples.[65] Also, the previously mentioned marketing activities of some retailers to present imperfect foods as irregular assortment or at a discount have all been successful.[66]

To develop a better understanding of consumers' perceptions of and decisions toward imperfect food products, we conducted an experiment with more than four thousand consumers from five different Northern European countries.[67] Consumers were presented with imperfect foods and their perfect counterparts, and asked to indicate for every choice set whether they would purchase (in a supermarket) or consume (in their home) the imperfect or the perfect food. As we thought that consumers might respond differently to the three different types of imperfection, we measured consumer preferences for products that were imperfect in terms of appearance (an apple with a spot, a bent cucumber), date labeling (milk and yoghurt close to the best before date), and damaged packaging (dented carton of juice, broken biscuits).

Overall, we found that consumers were willing to choose on average two out of the six imperfect products. Consumers appear to vary in their willingness to choose the imperfect product dependent on the situation that they are in and on the type of imperfection that they are confronted with. When consumers found themselves in a supermarket, 25 percent of the consumers were willing to purchase a bent cucumber, but hardly any consumer would purchase an apple with a spot or broken biscuits (both about 3 percent). When consumers were at home, more than 40 percent of the target group were fine with consuming milk (42 percent) or yoghurt (47 percent) past the best before date, but only 21 percent would consume the apple with a spot.

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[64] Newsome et al., "Applications and Perceptions," 745–69.
[65] Aschemann-Witzel et al., "Consumer-Related Food Waste: Causes," 6457–77.
[66] Aschemann-Witzel, "Consumer Perception," 119–28; Aschemann-Witzel et al., "Consumer-Related Food Waste: Role," 2–15.
[67] De Hooge et al., "This Apple," 80–92.

Importantly, for any type of imperfect product, fewer than 25 percent of the consumers were willing to purchase it. Thus, it seems that the majority of consumers are not in favor of purchasing imperfect products.

We also wanted to develop some insights into the perceptions underlying consumers' unwillingness to purchase imperfect products. Therefore, we presented consumers with the imperfect products and asked them to indicate on a list which associations they thought applied to the imperfect product.[68] It appeared that for all products consumers focused on whether the product appeared attractive or tempting to consume, and on whether the product was safe to consume. Almost 41 percent of the consumers found the apple with a spot unattractive to consume, and between 10 and 20 percent of the consumers found the other products unattractive to consume. Although the percentages varied across products, at most 69 percent of the consumers found the imperfect products safe to consume. This indicates that the marketing of imperfect foods should be joined with a message conveying that imperfect products are safe and attractive to consume.

In terms of appearance, consumers also focused on the taste of the product, using the appearance as an indication for the intrinsic quality of taste of the product. Only 25 percent of the consumers perceived the apple with a spot to have a good taste, whereas 60 percent of the consumers perceived the bent cucumber to have a good taste. For the other products the percentages varied between 33 and 45 percent. These findings converge with the idea that consumers are uncertain about the intrinsic quality of imperfect products.[69] When consumers are unsure about the intrinsic quality of a product, they tend to search for some extrinsic quality cues to make their purchase decision.[70] In the case of imperfect products, the extrinsic cues (e.g., the shape of the product, the packaging, the date labeling) are lower compared to the perfect products, resulting in a choice for the more attractive perfect product.[71] To increase the attractiveness of imperfect products, marketing strategies should thus include signals that make the high intrinsic quality evident. In this way, consumers' uncertainties about the intrinsic quality of

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[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.; Loebnitz et al., "The Effect of Food Shape Abnormality," 24–30; Loebnitz et al., "Who Buys," 408–21.

[70] B. L. Connelly, S. T. Certo, R. D. Ireland, and C. R. Reutzel, "Signaling Theory: A Review and Assessment," *Journal of Management* 37, no. 1 (2011): 39–67. doi:10.1177/0149206310388419; M. R. Darby and E. Karni, "Free Competition and the Optimal Amount of Fraud," *Journal of Law and Economics* 16 (1973): 67–88; M. Spence. "Job Market Signaling," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 87, no. 3 (1973): 355–74.

[71] Aschemann-Witzel et al., "Consumer-Related Food Waste: Causes," 6457–77; White et al., "When Do Consumers," 110–23.

the imperfect products can be removed and the purchase and consumption of imperfect products can be increased.

In sum, retailers underestimate consumers' willingness to purchase and consume imperfect products—and consumer uncertainties about their attractiveness, safety, and quality appear to be malleable. This malleability offers perspectives for the topic to which we turn now: marketing strategies of imperfect foods.

Marketing Strategies for and Benefits of Imperfection

Few studies have examined how imperfect products could be made attractive for both supply chain actors and consumers. Multiple scholars have argued that price reductions for imperfect products should increase consumers' willingness to purchase imperfect products.[72] However, lower product prices signal lower intrinsic product quality.[73] A price reduction strategy for imperfect products would therefore decrease rather than increase consumers' perceptions of imperfect products.[74] Moreover, due to the competition with perfect products and the distribution costs for imperfect products, supply chain actors would not be able to offer imperfect products for reduced prices.[75]

Multiple retailers have adopted a sustainability marketing strategy for imperfect products, regularly combined with a price reduction.[76] A sustainability marketing strategy presents imperfect products in a way

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[72] Aschemann-Witzel et al., "Consumer-Related Food Waste: Causes," 6457–77; J. Aschemann-Witzel, J. H. Jensen, M. H. Jensen, and V. Kulikovskaja, "Consumer Behaviour towards Price-Reduced Suboptimal Foods in the Supermarket and the Relation to Food Waste in Households," *Appetite* 116 (2017): 246–58. doi:10.1016/j.appet.2017.05.013; Lebersorger and Schneider, "Food Loss Rates"; K. Verghese, H. Lewis, S. Lockrey, and H. Williams, *The Role of Packaging in Minimising Food Waste in the Supply Chain of the Future* (2013). Prepared for: CHEP Australia.

[73] J. J. Olson, "Price as an Informational Cue: Effects in Product Evaluation," in *Consumer and Industrial Buying Behavior*, ed. A. G. Woodside, J. N. Sheth, and P. B. Bennett (New York: North Holland, 1977), 267–86; Zeithaml, "Consumer Perceptions of Price," 2–22.

[74] Aschemann-Witzel et al., "Consumer-Related Food Waste: Causes," 6457–77; A. Theotokis, K. Pramatari, and M. Tsiros, "Effects of Expiration Date-Based Pricing on Brand Image Perceptions," *Journal of Retailing* 88, no. 1 (2012): 72–87. doi:101.1016/j.jretai.2011.06.003; R. I. Van Giesen and I. E. De Hooge, "Too Ugly, but I Love Its Shape: Reducing Food Waste of Suboptimal Products with Authenticity (and Sustainability) Positioning," *Food Quality and Preference* 75 (2019): 249–59.

[75] De Hooge et al., "Cosmetic Specifications," 698–709.

[76] Aschemann-Witzel et al., "Consumer-Related Food Waste," 6457–77.

that highlights their environmental sustainability.[77] The general idea is that increasing consumers' awareness about sustainability motivates consumers to behave more sustainably.[78] For example, providing information on the carbon footprint of bread production has been found to increase consumers' willingness to pay for lower-carbon-footprint bread.[79] Also, raising consumer awareness of food waste (e.g., through public awareness campaigns, or with diary studies where consumers keep track of their daily food waste) has been shown to increase consumers' intentions to reduce their household food waste.[80]

In a series of studies with more than 1,800 consumers in total, we have examined whether a sustainability marketing campaign would affect consumer perceptions of and decisions toward imperfect foods.[81] Consumers were presented with imperfect and perfect apples and carrots, and were asked to make a choice between the imperfect and the perfect apples and carrots. They were also asked to indicate for the imperfect products how likely they were to purchase these product and to indicate their product perceptions. The imperfect apples and carrots only deviated from the perfect products in terms of shape and had the same price as the perfect products. We presented one group of consumers with imperfect products accompanied by a sustainability slogan, such as "Embrace imperfection: Join the fight against food waste!" or "Apples (carrots) with special shapes: Don't let them be wasted!" The findings showed that the sustainability strategy hardly increased consumers' preferences for imperfect products compared to a situation without any marketing strategy, and only slightly increased consumers' purchase intentions for the imperfect products. Only when the sustainability strategy was combined with a price discount of 15 percent did the strategy have a positive effect on consumers' choices for the imperfect products.

Based on our studies, I argue that a sustainability marketing strategy does not have a strong effect on consumers' perceptions of and decisions toward imperfect products, because the marketing strategy does not focus on the safety, intrinsic quality, or attractiveness of the imperfect products. A sustainability marketing strategy provides an external reason for

[77] Van Giesen and De Hooge, "Too Ugly," 249–59.
[78] W. Abrahamse, L. Steg, C. Vlek, and T. Rothengatter, "A Review of Intervention Studies Aimed at Household Energy Conservation," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 5, no. 3 (2005): 273–91; FAO, "Food Wastage Footprint."
[79] T. Del Giudice, F. La Barbera, R. Vecchio, and F. Verneau, "Anti-Waste Labeling and Consumer Willingness to Pay," *Journal of International Food & Agribusiness Marketing* 28, no. 2 (2016): 149–63.
[80] Quested et al., "Food and Drink Waste," 460–7.
[81] Van Giesen and De Hooge, "Too Ugly," 249–59.

purchasing imperfect products, namely to behave more sustainably, but does not address consumers' uncertainties about the safety and intrinsic quality of the imperfect products.

Indeed, in our studies the sustainability marketing strategy did not affect consumers' perceptions of the imperfect products.[82]

In existing theorizing on imperfection, multiple scholars have suggested that imperfections should not be considered as defects, but that it is more productive to see them as having their own benefits. In (audio-)visual arts, for example—so Mieke Bal demonstrates in her contribution to this volume—such imperfections as compositional mistakes can bring the art to life, make it more realistic, and provide a more layered meaning to the artwork. In design and fashion, imperfections can enrich aesthetic knowledge and imagination, and be perceived as a way to overcome, for example, discrimination (see also Saito's chapter in this book).[83] In cinema, as Bal argues, imperfect features such as wobbly camera images can signify a claim of authenticity; and in this book's introduction, Rutten outlines how, in various social domains, imperfections are seen as hallmark for authenticity, humanness, or mental well-being.

When we apply the same reasoning to marketing strategies for imperfect products, this would suggest that highlighting the benefits of imperfect products could motivate consumers to perceive imperfect products in a more positive light and to purchase imperfect products. As in other discourses of imperfection, imperfect products can be perceived as having positive aspects. With only perfect products in the assortment, all with equal shapes, sizes, and colors, the assortment can be considered repetitive and uniform. Imperfect products increase the variety in the assortment, turning the assortment into something heterogeneous, diverse, and perhaps even exciting. In addition, consumers are known to purchase products that diverge from what other consumers purchase to signal their unique identity.[84] By increasing the variety of an assortment, imperfect products can increase the likelihood that every consumer will find something of their liking. Imperfect products may even be perceived to have their own identity and to be unique in their own way. For example, Intermarché's "Inglorious fruits" three-day marketing campaign, in which imperfect products were marketed as each having a unique personality,[85] managed to sell the complete supply of imperfect products that were offered.

[82] Ibid.
[83] Saito, "The Role of Imperfection," 1–15.
[84] J. Berger and C. Heath, "Where Consumers Diverge from Others: Identity Signaling and Product Domains," *Journal of Consumer Research* 34, no. 2 (2007): 121–34.
[85] Aschemann-Witzel et al., "Consumer-Related Food Waste"; Saito, "The Role of Imperfection," 1–15.

Another bonus of products that are imperfect in terms of appearance standards may be their authentic, natural aspect. Everybody who has ever grown fruits or vegetables in their own garden knows that nature does not produce only perfect-looking fruits and vegetables.

Instead, fruits and vegetables grow in all sizes, shapes, and colors. Therefore, one could argue that imperfect products are more genuine, natural, or authentic compared to the perfect products that are currently offered on the supermarket shelves. Authenticity can be understood as a reference to what is genuine, real, and/or true.[86] Presenting products as authentic by emphasizing their purportedly genuine, true, or real elements has previously been found to increase quality perceptions,[87] purchase intentions, and willingness to pay for perfect products.[88] In the series of studies presented earlier on sustainability marketing strategies for imperfect products, my coauthor and I also examined whether a marketing strategy focusing on the authenticity of imperfect products would have any effect on consumers' perceptions of and purchase decisions.[89] To one group of consumers, the imperfect apples and carrots were presented with slogans focusing on the authenticity of the products, such as "Naturally imperfect: Apples the way they actually look!" or "Directly from the tree: apples with natural shapes! (Directly from the field: carrots with natural shapes!)." The findings revealed that the authenticity strategy increased consumers' preferences for imperfect products compared to a situation without any marketing strategy and compared to the sustainability marketing strategy. Moreover, the authenticity strategy increased consumers' purchase intentions for the imperfect products and their quality perceptions of the imperfect products.

Thus, an authenticity marketing strategy for imperfect products can increase consumers' perceptions of and decisions toward imperfect products. Such a campaign, or any other campaign focusing on the positive sides of

[86] R. Bendix., "Diverging Paths in the Scientific Search for Authenticity," *Journal of Folklore Research* (1992): 103–32; P. L. Berger, "Sincerity and Authenticity in Modern Society," *Public Interest* 31 (1973): 81; M. B. Beverland and F. J. Farrelly, "The Quest for Authenticity in Consumption: Consumers' Purposive Choice of Authentic Cues to Shape Experienced Outcomes," *Journal of Consumer Research* 36, no. 5 (2010): 838–56; C. J. Thompson, A. Rindfleisch, and Z. Arsel, "Emotional Branding and the Strategic Value of the Doppelgänger Brand Image," *Journal of Marketing* 70, no. 1 (2006): 50–64.

[87] A. C. C. Lu, D. Gursoy, and C. Y. Lu, "Authenticity Perceptions, Brand Equity and Brand Choice Intention: The Case of Ethnic Restaurants," *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 50 (2015): 36–45; J. G. Moulard, R. D. Raggio, and J. A. G. Folse, "Brand Authenticity: Testing the Antecedents and Outcomes of Brand Management's Passion for Its Products," *Psychology & Marketing* 33, no. 6 (2016): 421–36.

[88] K. O'Connor, G. R. Carroll, and B. Kovács, "Disambiguating Authenticity: Interpretations of Value and Appeal," *PloS one* 12, no. 6 (2017): e0179187.

[89] Van Giesen and De Hooge, "Too Ugly," 249–59.

imperfect products, is likely to provide cues for the imperfect products' safety and intrinsic quality, thereby reducing consumers' uncertainties about these elements. Moreover, marketing campaigns focusing on the positive sides of imperfect products, such as their uniqueness or authenticity, can make imperfect products more attractive to consume.

Highlighting the positive sides of imperfect products would also address supply chain actors' needs related to the marketing of these products. Marketing strategies that highlight the positive sides of imperfection would enable supply chain actors to position imperfect foods as unique products, avoiding direct competition with perfect products. Moreover, such strategies make it possible for supply chain actors to develop new prices for imperfect products and potentially sell them for a higher price compared to perfect products. It thus seems that a focus on the benefits of imperfections can have positive effects on both supply chain actors' and consumers' perceptions of and decisions toward imperfect products.

Actively marketing the positive sides of imperfection may, in sum, be an interesting avenue for imperfection research, and it holds promising avenues for a more sustainable future.

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Part II

Imperfect Sounds and Systems

Electronic Contingencies: Goeyvaerts's Sine Wave Music and the Ideal of Perfect Sound

Melle Jan Kromhout

We were taught that the world could be described and even explained, by means of simple answers to intelligent questions. That in its essence the world was inert and dead, governed by fairly simple laws that needed to be explained and made public—if possible with the aid of diagrams.

Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights*[1]

Looking at two electronic compositions, written by Belgian composer Karel Goeyvaerts in the early 1950s, this chapter explores the way in which sound technology in general—and electronic music in particular—simultaneously inspired ideas of sonic purity, total perfection, and absolute transparency, while also confronting composers and musicians with the inevitable limitations of technological mediation. By striving in vain for ideal electronic sounds produced without the interfering influence of a medium, Goeyvaerts was confronted with these limits of mediation. Despite or maybe even because of this failure of his idealist aspirations, I argue however, Goeyvaerts's compositions pointed the way toward the musical potential of electronic sound media.

At first sight, sound media seem to have allowed ever greater control over acoustic phenomena. Goeyvaerts's compositions show, however, that the physical processes that take place *inside* the black box—whether analog or digital—always maintain a level of contingency that escapes such control. Despite their promise of greater control, this fundamental contingency inherent to all media technological operations highlights the agency of the medium *itself* in shaping the sounds it (re)produces. Rather than the "imperfection" of these processes and sounds, this mediatic contingency emphasizes that perfection, purity, and transparency are ideals that we strive for—long for even—but that will never be attained. It thereby shows that

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[1] Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights*, trans. Jennifer Croft (New York: Penguin, 2018).

precisely this supposed "imperfection" (or their fundamental inability to achieve ideal purity) made media technologies into endless reservoirs of sonic and musical creativity.

Striving for the Perfect Tone

At the 1951 instalment of the famous Summer Course for New Music in Darmstadt, led by Theodor Adorno, Karel Goeyvaerts first met his German colleague Karlheinz Stockhausen. The latter was so impressed by Goeyvaerts's work that he quickly went on to declare that "from now on," he would "accept only Karel Goeyvaerts as my teacher in composition."[2] Throughout the first half of the 1950s, the two composers kept a busy correspondence in which they discussed, among other things, the musical foundations, aesthetic implications, and formal requirements of the emerging compositional principle called "total serialism."[3] This principle extended upon Arnold Schoenberg's prewar twelve-tone system, which had abandoned the classical principles of tonal harmony by introducing "rows" or "series" of pitches that made each of the twelve tones in the Western diatonic scale equally important. Postwar *total* serialism strived for the serialization and rationalization of *all* musical parameters: not just pitch but duration, volume, meter, and, significantly, the complex inner structure of sound that is usually called "timbre" or "sound color" as well.

   Over the course of their correspondence, Stockhausen and Goeyvaerts came to the conclusion that the realization of this desired control over every musical parameter required, as Stockhausen explained two decades later, the creation of "pure, controllable sounds without the subjective emotional influence of 'interpreters.'"[4] In other words, to gain absolute control over the basic sound material, the composer had to create this material using electronic devices. Electronic musical instruments had been around since at least the late nineteenth century, and the earliest report of electronically produced tones, or "galvanic music," even dates back to the 1830s.[5] Furthermore, already in

2   Mark Delaere, "Karel Goeyvaerts: A Belgian Pioneer of Serial, Electronic and Minimal Music," *Tempo* 195 (1996): 2.
3   Stockhausen's letters are reproduced in Herman Sabbe, *Karlheinz Stockhausen: … Wie die Zeit verging …* (Munich: Texte + Kritik, 1981). Goeyvaerts's side of the correspondence is reproduced in Karel Goeyvaerts, *Selbstlose Musik. Texte, Briefe, Gespräche*, ed. Mark Delaere (Cologne: Musik Texte, 2010).
4   Karlheinz Stockhausen, "The Origins of Electronic Music," *Musical Times* 112, no. 1541 (1971): 649.
5   Tara Rodgers, "Synthesis," in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 208–21. Rodgers refers to "The Production of Galvanic Music" by C. G. Page, which was published in 1837. Some well-known early electronic instruments

1936, composer Edgar Varèse predicted that the possibilities of sound media could ultimately allow for the creation of "an entirely new magic of sound" that would usher in what he called the "liberation of sound."[6] Only after the Second World War, however, fully controllable electronic sound production became possible.

Especially the new and more advanced magnetic tape recorder that had been developed in Germany during the war and was confiscated and brought back to the UK and United States by the Allied forces in 1945 allowed for a big leap in sonic possibilities. Along with other recently developed sound and communication technologies, these possibilities were explored in the first proper music studios, which were established in Paris in the late 1940s and in Cologne in the early 1950s. In the Paris studio, composers Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry and their team developed a type of music called "musique concrète," which uses prerecorded and subsequently manipulated sounds (effectively "sound samples" avant-la-lettre) for the creation of abstract, electroacoustic compositions. Stockhausen worked in the Paris studio for a few months in 1952, and his letters to Goeyvaerts reported back on the extremely time-consuming and often tedious procedures that went into the production of musically useful sounds.

Stockhausen and Goeyvaerts, however, were not particularly interested in the aesthetic paradigms of musique concrète (using tape machines to record and manipulate preexisting sounds), which they found too imprecise and musically uncompelling. Stockhausen disdainfully called it "a capitulation before the undefined, a terribly dilettantish gamble, uncontrollable improvisation."[7] Instead, as Goeyvaerts describes, because "the possibilities that had been established thus far" with regard to electronic sound production collided with the musical ideas of total serialism that they were developing around that same time, they were more interested in producing entirely new sounds altogether.[8] Among the most radical outcomes of this collision between electronic sound media and total serialism are two compositions by Goeyvaerts from 1952 and 1953: *Nr. 4 met dode tonen* ("N°. 4 with dead tones") and *Nr. 5 met zuivere tonen* ("N°. 5 with pure tones"). The scores for these pieces, which consist of instructions for the technological production

include the "telharmonium," invented in 1897, the "sphaerophon," introduced in 1921, the "theremin" and "ondes martenot," both invented in 1928, and the "trautonium," invented in 1929.

[6] Edgar Varèse and Chou Wen-Chung, "The Liberation of Sound," *Perspectives of New Music* 5, no. 1 (1966): 12, 14.

[7] Stockhausen in Richard Toop, "Stockhausen and the Sine-Wave: The Story of an Ambiguous Relationship," *Musical Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (1979): 388.

[8] Goeyvaerts, *Selbstlose Musik*, 166. All translations of otherwise untranslated sources are my own.

of specific sounds and a schematic visualization of their compositional organization, count as one of the earliest examples of precomposed electronic music.

For the first piece, *N°. 4 with dead tones*, which would not actually be realized until several decades later, Goeyvaerts prescribes the production of the most static sounds imaginable. Although, in terms of their frequency composition, these sounds were allowed to be spectrally complex (which means they can be quite dense), the, often minute, changes that shape all natural sounds as they unfold in time should be minimalized as much as possible.[9] In light of this, Goeyvaerts even asked Stockhausen whether it would be possible to record sound on a tape recorder "in the 'pause position,' i.e. onto an infinitesimally small area of tape."[10] This technically somewhat naive question reveals that Goeyvaerts strived for sounds with no temporal development whatsoever—entirely static, periodic, indeed "dead" tones that do not change over the course of their temporal unfolding. As they are supposed to have "absolutely no unpredictable 'inner life,'" Richard Toop concludes, the dead tones of *N°. 4* are intended to be "identical at any moment in time, and therefore detached from time itself."[11]

While working on *N°. 4*, Goeyvaerts still referred to the sonic elements that could be used as basic material for these essentially timeless sounds as "sound atoms."[12] However, a few months later, during a visit to a radio station in Brussels in March 1953, he discovered that it was actually possible to electronically generate a type of sound that the director of the studio in Cologne, Herbert Eimert, would later call a "pure element."[13] This is a "sine wave"—it consists of one single frequency, without any overtones, and thus without any distinguishable sound color of itself. Although true (absolutely pure) sine waves, as I will come to explain, are physically impossible, they can be electronically approximated. As such, they seemingly constituted a logical endpoint of the serialist search for entirely isolated tones that allow full control over all musical parameters.[14] Not long after learning of their

9   As Goeyvaerts describes in his letter to Stockhausen of November 12, 1952: "I only use homogenous tones with a constant spectrum, which have no relation to each other, like corpses lying next to one another. … All I ask is that they are homogeneous and very different from each other, to make sure one can never even have the illusion of a relation or mixture." Goeyvaerts, *Selbstlose Musik*, 333.

10   Goeyvaerts in Toop, "Stockhausen," 387.

11   Toop, "Stockhausen," 386.

12   Sabbe, *Karlheinz Stockhausen*, 14.

13   Herbert Eimert, "Der Sinus-Ton," *Melos* 21 (1954): 168.

14   M. Josephine Grant, *Serial Music, Serial Aesthetics: Compositional Theory in Post-War Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 58–60.

existence, Goeyvaerts therefore began contemplating a new composition: *N°. 5 with pure tones.*

For *N°. 5*, which, unlike *N°. 4*, was sonically realized by the composer himself at the time of its composition, Goeyvaerts used sine waves to extend the serialist order to the composition of the sound spectra themselves. It was no longer enough to suppress the temporal development of the sounds as much as possible. To realize the desired "ultimate fixation and standing quality of sound," the sounds of *N°. 5* would have to be built from the ground up, using electronically produced sine waves.[15] The composer thereby expands a rigid numerical order over every aspect of the compositional material: serializing pitch, duration, rhythm, volume, *and* sound color (or spectral identity)—separately *and* in relation to each other.[16] Furthermore, as had been the case with *N°. 4*, the piece is structurally symmetrical or palindromic: it turns around at its halfway point and closes in on itself at the end. On paper, *N°. 5* thereby becomes an entirely closed, almost algorithmic procedure that is supposed to be sonically identical to itself at all times and with each play.[17]

Based on the latest insights and advances in physical acoustics and media technology, *N°. 4 with dead tones* and *N°. 5 with pure tones* thereby constitute a radical attempt to wield total compositional control over the material basis of sound.[18] Despite this striving for absolute sonic purity, however, Goeyvaerts was disappointed with the sounding results:

> To begin with there was a lot of crackle on the tape as a result of the repeated playovers. Then one could clearly hear the different component tones, while I had hoped that by adding and subtracting component tones the tones themselves would sound more bright or more muffled. That a composition with sinus tones, at that time the only ones I would

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[15] Herman Sabbe, "A Paradigm of 'Absolute Music': Goeyvaerts's N°.4 as 'Numerus Sonorus,'" *Revue Belge de Musicologie/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap* 59 (2005): 243.

[16] Regarding this relation between sonic parameters, Decroupet and Ungeheuer, for example, write that "in the first section of Goeyvaerts' score, the ratio between pitches (measured in hertz) and durations (in cm) is characterized by a ratio of 10:1 between the highest frequency and the longest duration." Pascal Decroupet and Elena Ungeheuer, "Karel Goeyvaerts und die Serielle Tonbandmusik," *Revue Belge de Musicologie/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap* 48 (1994): 113.

[17] Sabbe, "Paradigm," 243.

[18] Sabbe describes *N°.4* and *N°.5* as "the most radical pretension of totality and positivity ever." Sabbe, "Paradigm," 244. Delaere writes of "the most relentless and authentic embodiment of artistic purity in European art music of the 1950s." Delaere, "Karel Goeyvaerts," 3.

contemplate using, was so disappointing was something I found hard to accept. As yet absolute certainty lay outside my grasp.[19]

Although the latest technical advances had seemingly promised "absolute certainty" and the fulfilment of Goeyvaerts's idealistic strivings, the physical limitations of the technological operations that were necessary to produce these electronic sounds ensured that the sonic end result remained far removed from the certainty and purity he envisioned. Instead of the only logical, or even necessary way forward for Western music, total serialism in its strictest form, and Goeyvaerts's electronic version of it in particular, proved untenable. M. Josephine Grant therefore tellingly describes *N°. 5* as a "perfect example of the imperfection of perfection."[20]

And yet, instead of an example of *failed* perfection or the *failed* attempt to achieve absolute control, I want to argue that it is exactly this supposed "imperfection" that makes these pieces interesting. Ideals of purity and harmony have defined the theory and philosophy of Western music for centuries. In contrast to these ideals, which Caleb Kelly, in his contribution to this volume, describes as the "explicit goal of music, both in the physical form of its instruments and in the exactitude of its performance," the technological "imperfections" that mark Goeyvaerts's compositions focus our attention on the fact that transience, chaos, noise, and distortion are ontologically fundamental.

Imperfection, in this case, is not (or no longer) understood as a failure, a break, a glitch, or an error, in comparison to which the constructedness of realism or the shortcomings of representational transparency are revealed, as Mieke Bal theorizes the notion elsewhere in this collection. Rather does it act as a reminder that realism, transparency, and purity are always impossible to begin with. To get away from the normative perfect/imperfect dichotomy, it might therefore be more productive to define this absence of ideal *perfection* (or purity, control, transparency) not as *imperfection* but as inherent and fundamental *contingency*.

The acknowledgment of this contingency constitutes a step toward a different attitude toward the musical potential of electronic sound media: away from positivist ideals of perfect fidelity and pure sound, and toward a more complex and nuanced relationship with the unruly nature of both sound and media. Because the operations of sound media always escape our authorial

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[19] Karel Goeyvaerts, "Paris-Darmstadt 1947–1956: Excerpt from the Autobiographical Portrait," *Revue Belge de Musicologie/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap* 48 (1994): 51.

[20] Grant, *Serial Music*, 65.

grasp, they forge a sense of autonomous agency that is not closed, finished, or "perfect" but open, unpredictable, and contingent. The significance of this observation becomes all the more apparent when one looks beyond the specific context of postwar avant-garde music to consider Goeyvaerts's sine wave music as part of the interwoven history of music, acoustics, and media from the mid-nineteenth century onward. More specifically, such a closer look at the history of acoustics not only helps to understand why Goeyvaerts and Stockhausen became interested in sine waves in the first place but also why they quickly abandoned it.

A Short History of Sine Waves

The equivalence between the geometric sine function and the vibrations of a musical string was first suggested by Dutch physicist, mathematician, and astronomer Christiaan Huygens in 1673, and further developed by (independently from each other) English mathematician Brook Taylor and French acoustician Joseph Sauveur in 1713.[21] The debate about the mathematical validity and physical significance of this representation continued throughout the eighteenth-century dispute on the problem of the vibrating string, most significantly among mathematicians d'Alembert, Euler, Lagrange, and Daniel Bernoulli, who all made important contributions to mathematical and physical theory. In the 1740s, Bernoulli was the first to suggest the possibility that the vibrations of a string can be represented by *series* of superpositioned sine waves. This hypothesis would only gain more general acceptance after Joseph Fourier in 1822 published the analytical method that would later carry his name.

Fourier, however, did not introduce his theorem in the context of acoustics, but as part of his analytical theory of heat. In simple terms, Fourier Analysis mathematically represents a complex function (like the propagation of heat through a solid,[22] a sound event, an electrical impulse, the course of planetary objects, or tidal movements) as a series of superpositioned "simple states." With the use of Fourier's method, one can therefore transform a compound signal as it develops *over time* into a timeless representation of its organization *in space*. In the case of heat propagation, for instance, it represents the temperature of an object at points closer or further removed

21 Olivier Darrigol, "The Acoustic Origins of Harmonic Analysis," *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 61, no. 4 (2007): 351–2.
22 Jean Baptiste Joseph Fourier, *The Analytical Theory of Heat*, trans. Alexander Freeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), doi:https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511693205.

from the heat source; and in the case of sound, it representants a frequency spectrum as a series of individual sinusoids, or sine waves.

Crucially, however, this nineteenth-century representation of sound as a series of sine waves (or partial tones) only applies to entirely periodic sounds with no temporal development, that is, to idealized sound events of infinite duration and unchanging spectral composition. More advanced forms of Fourier's theorem, which have subsequently been developed, can also be applied to nonperiodic phenomena. Even in these cases, however, all information about the temporal development of the signal (or its change over time) is effectively lost. Fourier Analysis, in short, produces an entirely static, unchangeable, a-temporal representation of sound waves.[23]

After the publication of Fourier's treatise, it took two more decades before Georg Simon Ohm applied his theorem to the analysis of sound. After publishing the article with the catchy title "On the Definition of a Tone with the Associated Theory of the Siren and Similar Sound Producing Devices" (1843), however, Ohm received heavy criticism by acoustician August Seebeck, whose experiments with a mechanical siren had inspired Ohm's analysis in the first place.[24] Because of this controversy, it took more than a decade until Hermann von Helmholtz corroborated and further developed Ohm's findings in his highly influential work on sound and hearing, which he began in the mid-1850s and concluded with the seminal book *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music* (1863).[25] By "hearing out" what he called "simple tones" with the help of so-called acoustic resonators, and construing artificial sound spectra with his tuning fork synthesizer (the first of its kind), Helmholtz provided empirical proof for Ohm's mathematical analysis. Bridging the gap between theory and observation, he turned the mathematical sine function into an acoustical object of sorts.

From the late seventeenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, then, the concept of the sine wave developed from a mathematical function, via its graphical representation in the context of the analysis of the representation

[23] Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, many strategies to overcome this a-temporality of Fourier analysis have been developed. On the most basic level, one can, for instance, analyze the frequency spectrum of many consecutive bits of time and plot these on a temporal axis. All time–frequency analysis, however, requires a compromise between spectral detail and temporal accuracy.

[24] Georg Simon Ohm, "On the Definition of a Tone with the Associated Theory of the Siren and Similar Sound Producing Devices," in *Acoustics: Historical and Philosophical Development*, ed. R. B. Lindsay, 242–7 (Stroudsberg: Dowden, Hutchinson & Ross, 1972).

[25] Hermann von Helmholtz, *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music*, trans. Alexander Ellis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), doi:https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511701801.

of a vibrating string, into a semi-acoustical object in the work of Ohm and ultimately Helmholtz. This epistemological status in-between concept and object already becomes apparent from the introduction to Fourier's treatise, in which he writes that the universal language of mathematical analysis—to which he himself made an important, but at the time still controversial, contribution—could "supplement the shortness of life and the imperfection of the senses."[26] It thereby shows, he continues, "the unity and simplicity of the plan of the universe" and the "unchangeable order which presides over all natural causes."[27] For Fourier, the representation of physical phenomena through mathematical analysis reveals an order and simplicity that our senses can never perceive. It allows phenomena that appear to be nonperiodic, transient, complex, and fundamentally entangled, to be broken up, disentangled, and thus understood and explained—not with our imperfect sensory apparatus but with the help of the perfect, timeless operations of mathematical analysis.

Ohm, writing two decades later, voices a similar belief in the simplicity and order of nature, and the power of mathematical analysis to unravel its intricacies. To defend his use of Fourier analysis and its emphasis on the sinusoidal shape of elementary tones, he writes that "in the explanation of a natural phenomenon no other causes should be assumed than are both necessary and sufficient."[28] Ohm was originally trained as a mathematician, and highly influenced by Fourier's innovative style of mathematical physics, which he already emulated in his famous work on electricity in the 1820s. However, unlike most other early and mid-nineteenth-century physicists dealing with sound, Ohm was rather unconcerned with musical questions, and not even all that interested in acoustics as such. Instead, he approached the problem of the definition of a tone primarily from a mathematical viewpoint.[29]

What unites Fourier and Ohm, then, is their role as transitionary figures in the nineteenth-century development of mathematical physics. Their work marks a shift in scientific methodology: from a type of research that primarily developed physical theories on the basis of qualitative experimental results and direct sensory observation, toward a form of theoretical physics in which hypotheses are developed on the basis of increasingly complex mathematics. These hypotheses can subsequently be verified or falsified by assessing quantitative experimental results that not seldom surpass the capabilities of

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[26] Fourier, *Analytical Theory*, 8.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ohm, "Definition," 245.
[29] Melle Jan Kromhout, "The Unmusical Ear: Georg Simon Ohm and the Mathematical Analysis of Sound," *Isis* 111, no. 3 (2020): 471-492.

human sensory observation.[30] This novel use of mathematical modeling as a primary epistemological tool, however, requires a fundamental belief in the correspondence between the symbolic representations produced by the analysis and the physical phenomena under investigation.

In the case of Ohm's application of Fourier analysis to study sound waves, this belief in the representational power of the mathematical model is based on three conceptual assertions. First, that sounds are indeed composed of a series of elemental frequencies. Second, that these frequencies can be represented by the mathematical concept of simple sinusoidal motion. Third, that each of these elemental frequencies constitutes a real and physically present "partial" sound in and of itself. As such, only after Bernoulli's hypothesis in the mid-eighteenth century, Fourier's analytical method of 1822, Ohm's acoustic law of 1843, and Helmholtz's experimental verification of it in 1863, could the sine wave be considered an "elemental sound," or what Helmholtz calls a "simple tone."

Still, as Alexandra Hui writes, "idealization and ideal types were central to [Helmholtz's] scientific work" as well.[31] Not unlike Fourier and Ohm, Helmholtz also "maintained a larger classicist goal of revealing universal truths."[32] Hence, the natural order and universal truth suggested by Fourier's analytical method perfectly suited his search for ideal forms and belief in the inherent order of the natural world.[33] As for his musical preferences, Helmholtz was strongly committed to nineteenth-century German aesthetic ideals that valued the expression of a musical "idea" expressed through abstract sounding forms above all else. In this context as well, the mathematical emphasis on strictly periodic sounds with mostly harmonic overtone structures (sounds that Helmholtz tellingly calls *musical* tones) fits the long-standing Western music theoretical separation between (periodic, harmonious, ordered) music and (nonperiodic, cacophonous, chaotic) noise. Helmholtz's acoustic analysis thereby supports an understanding of periodic, harmonic, *musical* sound as an expression of a well-ordered world.

Hence, with Helmholtz's groundbreaking and influential model of sound and hearing, the fundamental concept of the sine wave (as part of his spectral model of sound, based on the mathematical operations of Fourier analysis)

[30] Kenneth Caneva, "From Galvanism to Electrodynamics: The Transformation of German Physics and Its Social Context," *Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences* 9 (1978): 66.

[31] Alexandra Hui, *The Psychophysical Ear: Musical Experiments, Experimental Sounds, 1840–1910,* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 61.

[32] Hui, *Psychophysical Ear*, 61.

[33] M. Norton Wise, "What's in a Line?," in *Cultures and Politics of Research from the Early Modern Period to the Age of Extreme. Vol. 1: Science as Cultural Practice*, ed. Moritz Epple and Claus Zittel (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010), 98.

became a peculiar, double-sided figure. It emerged at the crossroad of two scientific paradigms, which Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison call "truth-to-nature" and "objectivity."[34] Around the mid-nineteenth century, the older paradigm, striving for "true" but idealized representations of nature, gave way to an "objective" paradigm that took the detailed, contingent, and not seldom chaotic complexity of physical processes into account.

Whereas Helmholtz's experimental practice very much fitted this newer approach, and the operations of Fourier analysis traded ideals of absolute representation for the embrace of infinite mathematical approximation, the figure of the sine waves also very much stands as a more universal representational ideal. On the one hand, the sine wave is the pinnacle of an idealist drive toward clarity: a purely periodic, entirely symbolic representation of a fundamentally a-temporal sound. On the other hand, it constitutes one of the pillars of a materialist concept of sound: the basic element of physical sound waves that became crucially important for media technological sound processing.

The Agency of Sound Media

Musically, the consequences of this nineteenth-century scientific approach to sound really became apparent from the early twentieth century onward. In the case of Schoenberg, Julia Kursell for instance shows that, although he did probably not read Helmholtz's work directly, his compositional principle of *Klangfarbenmelodie* ("sound color melody") was conceptually indebted to the latter's analysis of overtone series.[35] This "timbral" principle of organizing sound material, according to which "notes overlap, creating a smooth transition from one stable sound to the next," in turn constituted an important step toward Schoenberg's complete abandonment of tonal harmony and his development of twelve-tone composition.[36] With postwar total serialism, this idea of the controllable and analyzable musical parameter became all-encompassing. In fact, the notion of the "parameter" *as such* can be said to originate in the nineteenth-century mathematization of physical sound.[37] As the serialist ideal of complete compositional control over every

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[34] Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Book, 2007), 42–5.

[35] Julia Kursell, "Experiments on Tone Color in Music and Acoustics: Helmholtz, Schoenberg, and Klangfarbenmelodie," *Osiris* 28, no. 1 (2013): 210.

[36] Ibid.; Alfred Cramer, "Schoenberg's Klangfarbenmelodie: A Principle of Early Atonal Harmony," *Music Theory Spectrum* 24, no. 1 (2002): 1–34.

[37] Grant writes that the musical application of the mathematical concept of the "parameter" in the first half of the twentieth century was "probably influenced by Meyer-Eppler" (the future director of the studio in Cologne), but "he was not the first to use it in an acoustic

dimension of sound (pitch, duration, volume, timbre) presupposes the complete quantification of its physical properties into a clearly defined set of fully analyzable acoustical parameters, it relies on exactly the kind of analytical approach that nineteenth-century acoustics provided.

The elementary or "simple" tone generally called "sine wave" is arguably one of the quintessential figures of this development. Indeed, the crucial importance that Stockhausen and, especially, Goeyvaerts contributed to this "almighty basic material governing every sound phenomenon" showcases a duality that is reminiscent of the one between scientific materialism and philosophical idealism that marks Helmholtz's spectral theory of sound.[38] On the one hand, electronic music in general and the use of sine waves in particular seemingly promise the complete objectivation of music based on the unambiguous analysis of the physical properties of sound itself. It thereby promises, as Herman Sabbe writes, "authorial control—total, objectified, and arbitrary—extending over and including the 'persona' of the author himself, a control aimed at the exclusion of emotional expression, the elimination of subjective intervention."[39] On the other hand, this same approach also upholds the nineteenth-century formalist aesthetic of absolute music, which strives for some transcendental "truth," which is neither material nor physical, but inherent to the musical *idea* that is expressed in the work of art itself.

Goeyvaerts's idealist aesthetic therefore is, as Mark Delaere puts it, "both a rejection and an amplification of the aesthetics of Romanticism."[40] The supposed acoustic purity of sine waves simultaneously does away with Romantic ideas of authorship and emotional expression, while simultaneously propagating the equally Romantic phantasma of the everlasting truth expressed by the musical work of art. To be fair, Goeyvaerts very much acknowledged this double-sidedness when, in his preparatory notes, he described the "dead tones" of *N°. 4* as idealized "sounds without corporeality," but also added the words: "etiam peccata [and sins]. Our knowledge is conditioned by our sinful being."[41] The composer thereby implicitly acknowledges that pure spirituality and infinite perfection are fundamentally unattainable in our earthly domain. Furthermore, his remark underscores the fact that, for both Goeyvaerts and

context. This honour goes to [composer and music theorist, MK] Joseph Schillinger." Grant, *Serial Music*, 62.

[38] Goeyvaerts, *Selbstlose Musik*, 166.

[39] Herman Sabbe, "Karel Goeyvaerts: More Than a Footnote in the Book of Music," in *Rewriting Recent Music History: The Development of Early Serialism 1947–1957*, ed. Mark Delaere (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 71.

[40] Delaere in Goeyvaerts, *Selbstlose Musik*, 12. This translation is from Martin Iddon, "Selbstlose Musik: Texte, Briefe, Gespräche by Karel Goeyvaerts," *Notes* 69, no. 3 (2013): 532.

[41] Sabbe, "Paradigm," 244.

Stockhausen, the interest in sine waves was as much motivated by formalism as by religious dogma. It shows that the idea of sine wave music was not just a product of zealous formalism and the avant-gardism of the postwar "zero hour," but just as much an expression of a profound belief in divine order, and the ancient idea of music as, in Toop's words, an "image of the *harmonia mundi* and, indeed, the harmony of the universe."[42]

Seen from this perspective, the organizational principle behind total serialism, its complete abandonment of tonal harmony notwithstanding, still constitutes a continuation of the Western musical drive toward order, structure, harmony, and purity. Indeed, it is exactly this compositorial aesthetics of control, perfection, and harmonic order, which defined much of Western art music, that Ted Gioia positions against the improvisational "aesthetics of imperfection" as embodied by jazz.[43] In a similar move away from the aesthetics of perfection, I would argue that, in the case of Goeyvaerts's sine wave music, the collision between total serialism and electronic sound media also offers a different perspective: it is not in the musical ideals that Goeyvaerts wanted to achieve, nor in the way in which these pieces live up to these ideals, but in the way in which they do not live up, *could never have lived up* to these ideals that they mark a significant moment in the history of music. Precisely because an electronically produced sine wave does *not* attain mathematical symbolic purity, and is always shaped by contingent mediatic processes, Goeyvaerts's compositions highlight the way in which sounds produced by the channels of sound media inspired entirely new modes of musical production.

After spending many weeks of intensive studio labor on *N°. 5*, Goeyvaerts was highly disappointed by the way his first proper sine wave composition sounded. As he recalls in the early 1990s, he considered the result "not very musical after all."[44] Although the use of sine waves was supposed to produce the kind of heavenly clarity and perfect order suggested by Fourier's analysis, the process of layering electronically produced simple tones on top of each other to produce new compound sounds meant that the materiality of the tape itself inevitably detracted from the desired purity, thereby redirecting the listener's attention away from immaterial sound and absolute music toward the technological production and reproduction process itself.

In a way, it thereby reaffirms the criticism of the spectral representation of sound that was voiced from Ohm's article in 1843 onward. At the time,

[42] Toop, "Stockhausen," 383.
[43] Ted Gioia, *The Imperfect Art: Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Alumni Association, 1988), 57.
[44] Goevaerts, *Selbstlose Musik*, 476.

Seebeck accused Ohm of ignoring audible evidence against his hypothesis and argued that an exclusive focus on sinusoids could not fully explain the perception of pitch.[45] Despite these concerns, Helmholtz sided unequivocally with Ohm and even argued that the ear *itself* performs some kind of Fourier analysis when processing complex waveforms. Partly because of his focus on periodic, "musical" sounds, Helmholtz thereby chose to ignore psychoacoustic evidence that would complicate his analytical model. This caused him to overemphasize the importance of Fourier's theorem and the role of sine waves at the expense of other physical and psychoacoustic factors.[46]

However, what Seebeck already suggested in 1843 would largely be confirmed over the course of the twentieth century. Nowadays, as Alain de Cheveigné writes, "the weight of evidence against [Helmholtz's] theory as the sole explanation for pitch perception is … overwhelming."[47] As it turns out, the ear does not, or at least not only, function as a Fourier analyzer, because there is more to physical sound and the faculty of hearing than spectral composition. Within the context of the current argument, the most important limitation of a spectral model based on Fourier analysis is its disregard of temporal change. This led Helmholtz to overemphasize periodicity and regularity at the expense of a more nuanced reflection on the inherently transient nature of sound and, more specifically, on the short, transient, nonperiodic, and complex elements that shape affect sonic identity as well. As a result, Goeyvaerts, Stockhausen, and others discovered during their experiments with electronic music in the 1950s, what looks like a well-structured, closed, and elegant model turns out to be much more complex, stubborn, and difficult to control in physical reality.

"Though the sine tone is," Grant writes, "physically, 'pure', our hearing of it is not," because "even apparently stationary sine tones are furnished with transients by the ear."[48] Even without taking such psychoacoustic effects that prevent us from hearing stationary tones as such into account, however, an electronically generated sine wave is not even *physically* "pure" either. This purity only exists in the idealized realm of mathematical analysis, where

[45] For a concise overview of the debate between Ohm and Seebeck, see R. Steven Turner, "The Ohm-Seebeck Dispute, Hermann von Helmholtz, and the Origins of Physiological Acoustics," *British Journal for the History of Science* 10, no. 1 (1977): 1–24.

[46] See for instance Eric J. Heller, *Why You Hear What You Hear: An Experiential Approach to Sound, Music, and Psychoacoustics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 444–5; Alain de Cheveigné, "Pitch Perception Models," in *Pitch, Neural Coding and Perception*, ed. Christopher J. Plack, Andrew. J. Oxenham, Richard R. Fay, and Arthur N. Popper (New York: Springer, 2005), 180–2.

[47] Cheveigné, "Pitch," 181.

[48] Grant, *Serial Music*, 60.

it is contingent on the complete neglect of the temporal domain. Because, mathematically, a perfect sine wave is infinite by definition, an electronically generated and inherently finite sine wave cannot be absolutely pure. In technological reality, in which sounds do not only have a spatial (or spectral) dimension but take place in and change over time as well, sine waves only ever approximate but never attain the promised purity of their mathematical ideal. Instead, their technological production as sound always leaves behind material traces in the form of sonic artefacts.[49]

This is why Goeyvaerts's idea to record on tape "in the pause position" is so telling: in his desire to capture absolute, infinitely static sounds that would remain unaffected by the medium used to produce and transmit them, he completely denies the necessity for both recorded sound and recording tape to *run* and thus extend over time. He denies, in short, the fundamental processual nature of both sound and the media technological operation.

Following what Yuriko Saito, in her chapter for this volume, calls "Francis Bacon's … blueprint for technological advancement," by trying to exert complete control over the material properties of sound and media, Goeyvaerts's perfectionist aesthetics remains fixated on an idealist goal of "overcoming limitation nature places on us, such as inevitable vicissitude of material objects." However, exactly this "limitation nature places on us" (as human beings) limits the operations of the medium as well.

Whereas Goeyvaerts still vehemently defended the primacy of the sine tone in June 1953—even against accusations that it "physically hurts and makes one nervous"—Stockhausen already began to acknowledge these limitations of electronic sound production.[50] "Instead of allowing greater control and more transparency," he writes to Goeyvaerts

> each loudspeaker is less transparent than an interpreter; each machine, with each generator even, each impulse: the uniqueness of each event, the unobjectifiable, unrepeatable, subjective "coincidence" remains. And I am content with that nowadays. The unexpected, the unresolved rest, the indefinable may always be around me and above me.[51]

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49 The fact that Fourier analysis only represents the spectral but not the temporal domain was addressed by physicist Dennis Gábor in Dennis Gábor, "Acoustical Quanta and the Theory of Hearing," *Nature* 159, no. 4044 (1947): 591–4. The musical consequences of this observation were extensively explored in the theoretical and musical work of composer Iannis Xenakis. Iannis Xenakis, *Formalized Music: Thought and Mathematics in Composition*, 2nd ed., trans. Christopher Butchers, G. H. Hopkins, John Challifour, and Sharon Kanach (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1992).

50 Goeyvaerts, *Selbstlose Musik*, 350.

51 Stockhausen in Sabbe, *Karlheinz Stockhausen*, 49.

By acknowledging the contingencies that are inherent to media technological operations, Stockhausen thereby marks the transition from the idealistic striving for absolute sonic perfection toward the embrace of the incidental and unpredictable nature of media technological operations. Due to their processual nature, media always affect the signals they process in unexpected and never entirely predictable ways. What happens inside the black box leaves a trace that is imprinted on the signals. Hence, what seems perfectly unambiguous on the idealist plane of Fourier analysis (endlessly oscillating, entirely pure sine waves) is less so in the physical realm of technological signals. In this realm, "the unexpected, the unresolved rest, the indefinable," as Stockhausen calls it, can never be fully expelled, and "the unobjectifiable, unrepeatable, subjective 'coincidence'" always remains.

Ultimately, Goeyvaerts also came to terms with the fact that what frustrated him with N^o. *5* (the crackle on the tape and not fully integrated component tones) was the result of what Stockhausen acknowledges in the above quote: the process of mediation *itself* inevitably affects the sounds that are produced, causing unexpected, transient alterations either on the level of the physical signal itself or in our perception. These changes fundamentally negate the ideal, representational purity that Goeyvaerts initially sought. They thereby emphasize that, outside of the controlled setting of an acoustic laboratory, when the representational model of Fourier analysis is turned into physical sound it does not reveal a hidden natural order or divine harmony, but the inherent limitations of the model itself. After all, "on the microlevel of sounds, as on the microlevel of matter," Grant writes, the absolutist, unchangeable perfection of the analytical model has never been there to begin with, and "approximation is the best we can achieve."[52] This "approximation," however, should not be understood as a lack or a failure. Instead, it serves as a consistent reminder that, not unlike "the subjective emotional influence of 'interpreters'" that Goeyvaerts and Stockhausen sought to overcome, the material agency of the medium *itself* (or what Saito, in her chapter for this volume, calls the "vicissitude of the material world") can never be fully erased or completely controlled.

Hence, by 1955, four years after the Summer Course in Darmstad where he and Stockhausen first met, Goeyvaerts also acknowledged that his quest for sonic purity had been doomed from the outset: "in the beginning," he wrote, "I sought after a greater musical purity; today, I am confronted by an other sound material."[53] This *other* sound material, he explains two years

[52] Grant, *Serial Music*, 66.
[53] Karel Goeyvaerts, "The Sound Material of Electronic Music," in *Die Reihe 1. Electronic Music*, ed. Herbert Eimert and Karlheinz Stockhausen (Bryn Mawr: Theodore Presser, 1958), 37.

later, turned out to "have equal rights, opposite the single frequency."[54] Its name is "noise" (*het geruis*): undetermined, unpredictable, chaotic, ever-changing, and endlessly varied sound.

The overconfident attempt to rid music of all external human influences, and thus of the very physicality and corporeality of sound itself, thereby turned out to be a crucial step toward the further emancipation of this "other," more unruly sound material, defined by what Stockhausen calls "the uniqueness of each event." In other words, precisely the fundamental inaccessibility and unattainability of sonic purity and the realm of mathematical ideals opened up a road toward a different musical sensibility. This sensibility is not based on idealized transparency but on the sonic exploration of the material agency of media technological processes themselves. Leaving behind the narrow path set out by the complete mathematization and rationalization of sound (which followed the "blueprint for technological advancement"), these electronic contingencies of sound media opened up new musical horizons.

They emphasize that sound media are not just sound *re*producing machines, but sound *producing* instruments; not transparent or passive channels that can be fully controlled by composers or musicians to transmit unimpeded signals, but active agents of sonic production and manipulation, the intricacies of which escape our absolute control and add complexity, contingency, and singularity to the sounds they (re)produce.[55] As the distinctive sound of media technology itself turned from unwanted side effect to desired sonic material over the course of the one and a half-century since their invention, and especially since the Second World War, these idiosyncratic effects of the material agency of sound media have become an important part of musical production. They came to shape the sound of music as we hear it all around us in the twenty-first century.

This development might be most apparent in musical genres that use the contingencies of technical mediation as a conscious artistic strategy, by exploiting, as Caleb Kelly writes in this section's next chapter, "the crack [as] a point of rupture or a place of chance occurrence, where unique events take place." However, even beyond such approaches that deliberately instrumentalize the limitations of technical mediation by focusing on glitches, breakdowns, noises, failure, and errors, the electronic contingencies inherent to media technological processes profoundly changed the sound of music. Every involvement with technological media forces composers and musicians

[54] Goeyvaerts, *Selbstlose Musik*, 166.
[55] On sound media as (musical) instruments, see Jonathan Sterne, "Media or Instruments? Yes," *OFF|SCREEN* 11, nos. 8–9 (2007). Retrieved from https://offscreen.com/view/sterne_instruments.

to yield some of their authorial control to the unrepresentable processes that occur inside the black boxes that transduce sound into electricity and store it in the form of grooves, magnetized particles, or binary code. Because these processes inevitably leave their mark on the sonic identity of the sounds they (re)produce, these sounds are never closed, stable, predictable, or pure. Instead, they always retain a level of transience, of unpredictable change, of electronic contingency. Ultimately, as Goeyvaerts found out as well, it is precisely *because* and not *despite* of this inherent contingency of media technological processes that they possess the ability to produce the infinitely meaningful sounds of something we continue to call music.

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Imperfection in Experimental Instruments and Their Performances

Caleb Kelly

Australian musician and media artist Peter Blamey is standing very still in front of an upright unshaded electric lamp (Figure 6.1). He holds two solar panels alongside the bright light. Blamey is almost completely motionless, but on close inspection he is moving the panels ever so slightly, and as he does, the sounds being emitted from a speaker change in unison. It is hard to see what he is doing, as the light is very bright and his movements are slight. The audio itself is a slowly oscillating drone being produced by an electric guitar that has been modified from the regular performance style expected from a guitar. Two eBows have been placed on its strings. These devices use electromagnetism to excite the metal guitar string, causing a tone to be emitted without the signature guitar sounds associated with the attack and decay of the pluck of a string. The twist, as it were, is that the two eBows are being powered by the solar panels that are held in Blamey's hands. The proximity of the panels to the light causes varying amplitudes of power to be sent to run the eBow and thus causes the shifts in volume heard from the speaker connected to the guitar.

Double Partial Eclipse (2014), as described above, is a critique of the narratives of good and bad energy, as the eBows are solar powered by an electric light that is itself powered by mains electricity—and in Australia, that is electricity is likely produced by coal power. The performance of the instrument does not conform to expectations of performativity. The instrument itself is constructed from an amalgamation of technologies (a constant in the media art practices of Blamey) and, as his performance, cannot be judged along traditional parameters of perfection in instrument construction. The performance raises numerous questions, not least of which is: "what is this performance and why is the artist employing this array of discrepant technologies towards a performance?" Some might even question its validity as a musical performance.

Figure 6.1 Peter Blamey, live performance of *Double Partial Eclipse* (2014), performed during the opening of Material Sound, MAMA Albury, 2018. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Jules Boag.

This chapter investigates experimental instruments in art and music. The instruments that form the basis of my enquiry are quite unlike the carefully constructed and highly perfected instruments that are typically expected. The traditional violin, for example, is an instrument that is built by craftspeople to exacting standards, and the violinist is a highly practiced musician who spends vast periods of time rehearsing a composition until they can play a piece precisely as the composer desired, without error and without deviating from the directions of the score. Instead of these and analogous traditions of perfection, the experimental instrument builder and performer is not interested in faultlessness; instead, they seek out imperfection in the accident and chance. Their instruments are built to allow for improbable and unexpected sound outcomes, and these instruments might look handmade, cracked, and as if they are structurally verging on falling apart. This chapter aims to unravel the rationale behind such practices, by addressing the question, "how can imperfection be understood as a desired outcome in experimental art and music?" In answering this question, I will look into

ecological considerations, engagement with the nonhuman and strategies that foreground indeterminacy.

Perfection is usually understood as an explicit goal of music, both in the physical form of its instruments and in the exactitude of its performance.[1] In the case of the former, perfection of the musical instrument can be understood as the correct method for production of the instrument itself. Guidelines as to the appropriate materials that should be used, and the sizes and dimensions of the instrument are all expected to follow strict rules and schematics. Following these rules, the musician can seek out the best and most perfect instrument. This type of perfection is based in the strict and exact way that an instrument is made and in the final product itself—in how close it comes to these measures and how flawless it is. The latter understanding of perfection is based in the performance of music. Here perfection is understood to be found in the meticulous manner in which the score is followed and in the flawless rendition of the performance itself. The musician aiming to perform in the concert hall, for example, trains for thousands of hours from when they were very young so that they might be able to perform the music perfectly. This is measured against the score, the needs of the conductor, other great performances of the work, and, in some instances, the historic record.

In this chapter, I undermine these two approaches to perfection by scrutinizing artists who seek to break the rules of instrument construction and of musical performance. In discussing their works, I use the term "imperfection" to capture practices that deviate from musical perfection—that is, from those musical norms and standards that, in the given times and places, rank as perfect.

Studying Sound

From the outset of this analysis it is crucial to understand that instruments are not always well-crafted or time-honored forms. Boston-based composer Jennie Gottschalk attests to the open possibilities for the instrument, stating, "just about anything can be an instrument. It doesn't have to have a musical history."[2] Developing on this position, I wish to take Gottschalk's stance literally and argue that *anything* really can be an instrument. Thus, any object

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[1] See Melle Kromhout, "Electronic Contingencies," in this volume; for further reading about (im)perfection and music performance, see Ted Gioia, *The Imperfect Art*: *Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[2] Jennie Gottschalk, *Experimental Music since 1970* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 89.

that is sounded as an instrument is understood to be an instrument—and in these cases, the objects are very often imperfect in their build and the sound they produce. To their makers, a found plate of glass is just as valid an instrument as a cello (as in the case of Sydney-based noise musician Lucas Abela), and the sound of a vinyl record being snapped is as musical as the sounds produced by a well-trained orchestra (this is true for the Peruvian abstract turntablist Maria Chavez).

The practices discussed in this chapter can be read through many different theoretical lenses. They might, in a very general sense, be relatable to theories of noise, yet this is not necessarily a productive approach to understanding these practices. Key to the critique of noise in this instance is the understanding that the approaches under investigation need not be seen as transgressive, excessive, or even chaotic, which runs contrary to much of the theoretical discourse around noise.[3] Although at times noise is an outcome of the performances and its utilization is certainly excessive and at times very loud, it is just as often quiet, gentle, and almost inaudible. Noise need not be seen as disturbance; it need not be excess or transgression. Noise is the backdrop to all communication, but in those instances when the backdrop is brought to the fore it is simply not disturbing or blotting out any information; it is not a break in communication, but instead becomes the content of communication itself.[4] The artists discussed below, rather than court noise itself, produce instruments and performance practices that are generative. In their work imperfection allows for unknown sonic outputs to be generated that employ methods of chance and indeterminacy.

To begin, this study is rooted in a number of closely related fields of research that have turned their attention to sound. In 2012, two voluminous readers were dedicated to sound studies, both with vastly different views of the field.[5] Sound studies can be understood as a field that takes its methodology, for the most part, from cultural studies; within sound studies, sounds are not the sole focus of enquiry as equal importance is given to the cultures that surround them. As leading sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne contends: "By analysing both sonic practices and the discourses and institutions that describe them, it redescribes what sound does in the

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[3] See, for example, Paul Hegarty, "Full with Noise: Theory and Japanese Noise Music," *Ctheory*, 2001. http://ctheory.net/ctheory_wp/full-with-noise-theory-and-japanese-noise-music/, accessed May 22, 2019.

[4] Caleb Kelly, *Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 82.

[5] Jonathan Sterne (ed.), *The Sound Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2012); and Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

human world, and what humans do in the sonic world."[6] Sound studies scholars Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld have much broader aspirations for their understanding of sound studies, arguing that the field approaches sound from multiple disciplines, including "acoustic ecology, sound and soundscape design, anthropology of the senses, history of everyday life, environmental history, cultural geography, urban studies, auditory culture, art studies, musicology, ethnomusicology, literary studies, and STS [Science and Technology Studies]."[7] It could be argued that sound is an element of all disciplines, in as much as vision can be both employed as a tool of research and can also be the object of investigation. What sound studies researchers do is to turn their ears to culture and listen rather than look at it.

While an element of sound studies can be found within my research approach, I more directly draw on media art theory, media art histories, and art theory, investigating often singular practices within the arts as the key points of departure. A single artwork is often the focus of scholarship rather than whole cultures or trends within popular culture. Furthermore, rather than seek to reiterate disciplinary boundaries of visual art and music, I will employ the term "sound arts," which encompasses all forms that explicitly embrace sound as a creative medium.[8]

The Ecology of Media

Media is often thought of as transparent and immaterial. As Jennifer Gabrys describes, "electronics often appear only as 'media' or as interfaces, apparently lacking in material substance."[9] A case in point is "the cloud," where many media users store their digital data. The cloud is, of course, not located in the sky and is not built on the white fluffy masses we see from the ground. Instead, vast warehouses filled with hard drives form the hardware of the cloud. They are networked together by kilometers of cables and wires.

The popular image of the cloud as immaterial and therefore sustainable is, in short, far from the truth of the matter. Media theorists Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler produced an "anatomical case study of the Amazon

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6   Jonathan Sterne, "Sonic Imaginations," in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.

7   Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, "New Keys to the World of Sound," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, ed. Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

8   For more detailed reading on sound arts, see Caleb Kelly (ed.), *Sound* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

9   Jennifer Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 2.

Echo as an artificial intelligence system made of human labor," in which they aimed to unravel some of the usually hidden costs associated with supporting the networks and systems behind the Amazon Echo device.[10] Their case study modeled the labor involved in producing and running the device, a product that allows for voice-activated commands and answers to questions. Behind the seemingly simple tasks that "Alexa"—Amazon's virtual assistant—can achieve is a "vast planetary network, fuelled by the extraction of non-renewable materials, labor, and data."[11] This network ranges from the geological, such as mining of minerals including copper and coal, to the massive network of container ships that are at the core of the global logistics of supply chains, from the energy consumed by the systems (both the device itself and the massive networks of hardware that run the cloud storage) to the systems of payment for staff that run the call centers through to the CEO himself. Crawford and Joler paint a deeply disturbing picture of the costs of producing and running this seemingly singular device, and as such, their work constitutes a necessary stage in our understanding of the global nature of energies and material and their use and consumption.

Scholarship in the area of "eco-sonic media" furthers the concept of tangible media by thinking through sonic media (records, cassette tapes, cloud-based streaming) as physical objects that have a direct relationship to both the past (fossil fuels that make vinyl) and the future (vinyl's nonrecyclable nature). Media theorist Jacob Smith understands the early shellac records as "green discs," as they are based on the secretions of the lac insect.[12] Furthering this understanding, media theorist and musicologist Kyle Devine employs a similar approach, but looks beyond the biological basis of shellac to explore the less natural requirement of "fillers" that are bound together by shellac to make the record discs. These fillers were crushed limestone and slate, and the practices of mining the limestone was far from an eco-friendly practice.[13] By rethinking, as they do, the imagined intangibility of recording media to understand it as a physical product with geological, biological, and chemical histories, we begin to hear a material sound—one that is sound as more than simply sound waves and cultural products.

Within the multinational networks of distribution, media artists in particular have come to rely on digital hardware and the associated ecologies

[10] Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler, "Anatomy of an AI System: The Amazon Echo as an Anatomical Map of Human Labor, Data and Planetary Resources," https://anatomyof.ai (2018).
[11] Ibid.
[12] Jacob Smith, *Eco-Sonic Media* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 13.
[13] Kyle Devine, *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 63.

that support them. The contemporary art practices under investigation here are intimately associated with the political ecology of media. They have emerged from a type of digital fatigue and a longing, from the artists, for a physical connection with the materials of their work.[14] In the first decade of the twenty-first century the prevalence of digital production technologies, especially within the digital studio, led to a schism between artists and their materials, one that was further widened by developments in the complexity of digital processes in the period. Few artists have a thorough understanding of how the algorithms behind their postproduction software work, and the hardware itself, made from micro-scaled components, is locked away within the physical casing of contemporary computing architecture. As such, makers within the digital studio have become estranged from the means of their production.

Key for the desire to make their own instruments is the belief that digital computing takes electronic music makers and performers away from the tools they use to create their work. Electronics composer Nicolas Collins begins his hugely influential book *Handmade Electronic Music* by pointing to computer interfaces, keyboards, and mice as being inadequate: the "usual interface … is awkward, and makes the act of performing a pretty indirect activity, like trying to hug a baby in an incubator."[15] By producing their own instruments, these artists are returning control and access to their tools.

The loss of access to the media in the digital studio, a loss caused by all of the making happening deep in the untouchable algorithms within the black box of computer-based media, has been strongly felt with media art and has led to a return to "making."[16] For example, an artist can today easily create sound with a virtual software synthesizer within numerous sound-making applications. These synthesizers are modeled on the original hardware synthesizers such as those produced by Moog, Arp, Yamaha, and Roland. And yet, in the face of this ease of access to creative tools artists are turning back to physical modular synthesizers. A culture of collection has grown around pulling together a unique series of modular synths from companies that handmake the modules such as Make Noise, Mutable Instruments and Sputnik. There are also synthesizer libraries, such as MESS in Melbourne, where musicians can gain access to rare synthesizers and join collector meet-ups, which are sometimes called "petting zoos," for aficionados to come together to display and demonstrate their instruments.

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[14] See Caleb Kelly, "Materials of Sound: Sound as (More Than) Sound," *Journal of Sonic Studies* no. 16 (2018), https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/456784/456785.

[15] Nicolas Collins, *Handmade Electronic Music* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xiii.

[16] For details, see Victoria Bradbury and Suzy O'Hara (eds.), *Art Hack Practice: Critical Intersections of Art, Innovation and the Maker Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

Another response to the premade and prepackaged digital studio tools is to build one's instrument from scratch, literally. Sydney-based artist Pia van Gelder's performance work *PVG sans PCB* (2014–) is not so much an instrument as it is a potential instrument (Figure 6.2). Van Gelder creates her synthesizers from the ground up, employing the most basic of electronic circuits, the breadboard. A breadboard is a solderless device into which are pushed electronic components. The device is usually used for temporary prototypes and to test circuit designs. In performance van Gelder starts without any instruments. The performance begins with a table and a sectioned box full of electronic components, an empty breadboard or two, plus a mixing desk. Van Gelder starts by making an oscillator from scratch to which she adds components, capacitors, pots, and diodes. Sounds start being produced and gradually become more interactive as layers of sounds are built up. For example, a light-dependent resistor is added, and a strobing LED is brought into the system to rhythmically activate synthesized sounds. Van Gelder also combines various conductive objects—a piece of fruit and a cream bun, for example—as variable resistors that can be squeezed and mushed-up.
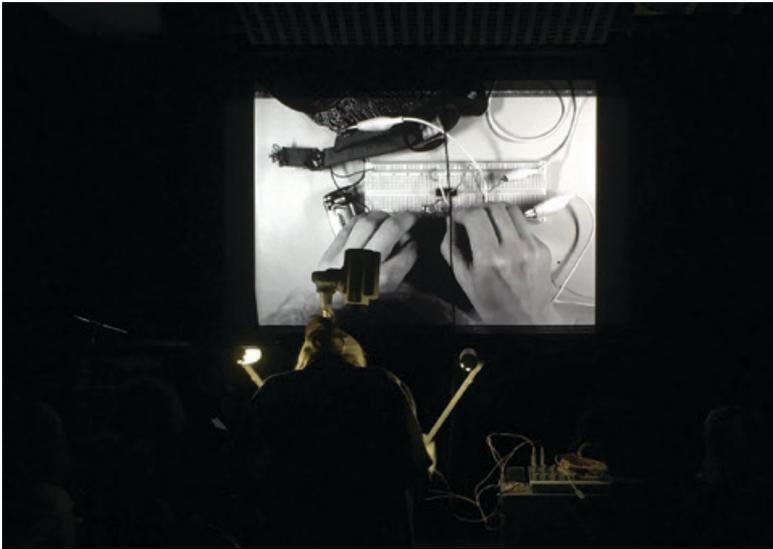
Figure 6.2 Pia van Gelder, live performance of *PvG sans PCB*, performed during the NOW now festival, 2019. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Dale Gorfinkel.

The temporary nature of the breadboard circuit allows for experimentation, and at the end, Van Gelder's work is simply dismantled and returned to the components box. The performance is incredibly risky, as breadboard circuits are notoriously unstable. Thus, she performs instability and indeterminacy over the course of twenty minutes. I will return to this interest in chance and the accident later in the chapter, but for now it is important to point to the interest in the tangibility of van Gelder's self-built instrument. In building it from the ground up, she has reclaimed access to both the handmade, and to sounds and visuals that rank as imperfect, as they work in imprecise ways, if they work at all. She has not turned to the digital studio and the dream of pure transparent audio, but rather has produced a very noisy tool that only barely works.

It is certainly not the case that this approach to media production is new, but rather that the causes and influences upon this approach have changed. Historically, "cracked media" are the tools of media playback that have been expanded beyond their original function as a simple playback device for prerecorded sound or image.[17] "The crack" is a point of rupture or a place of chance occurrence, where unique events take place that are ripe for exploitation toward new creative possibilities. The practice utilizes cracks inherent in the media themselves—we cannot play a vinyl record without causing some damage to the surface of the disc—and leads to a creative practice that drives playback tools into territory where undesired elements of the media become the focus of the practice.

At the heart of cracked media is the concept that art or music can be produced using malfunctioning recording equipment. In the work of artists such as Nam June Paik, Yasunao Tone, Christian Marclay, and Otomo Yoshihide, the sounds that are elicited from these cracked or broken devices are at once noisy and indeterminate. At the most extreme the instruments cannot be played with any certainty of the sound that will be produced, or even that a sound will be produced at all. Vinyl records are scratched, hacked into and broken and, while diligently trying to play the record, the turntable's needle skips and jumps over the shards of plastic.

A contemporary example of this approach is the performance of abstract turntablist Maria Chavez. Her DJ performances involve both the misuse and abuse of vinyl records paired with prepared turntables. Her performances court the accident in the unpredictability of her performance setup. In a

[17] Caleb Kelly, *Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

typical performance, Chavez plays a single turntable with a mixing desk to the side. She often snaps vinyl records and stacks them on top of each other on the turntable platter. When the platter revolves, the needle picks up and plays fractions of records as it is dragged over multiple fragments of recordings. As the records are played a mix is formed that is inexact, which is the polar opposite of a digital mix with sounds that are locked together. Every performance, even with the same shards of vinyl, will be dramatically different as the tone-arm is dropped at inexact points on the record grooves and the shards themselves are positioned differently.

Chavez describes her approach as follows:

> I developed the term "the beauty of destruction" in order to make sense of why I was allowing my practice to ruin expensive styli and records for the sake of performance … But I saw the destruction happening to my equipment as opportunities for more sound development.[18]

Chavez hears the unwanted or unexpected sounds as expanding the range of possible sounds available to her; no longer is she controlled by the intended music locked into the record grooves or the verisimilitude required in the playback of recordings.

In addition to performing, Chavez also runs workshops in which she guides participants on how to perform damaged records and turntables. The students are shown numerous methods to prepare their records, from placing foreign objects onto the surface to Chavez's technique of snapping the vinyl into shards and stacking the discrepant pieces onto the platter of the turntable. Her workshops illustrate that there is not only a desire for the innovative practices of musicians such as Chavez but also an interest in learning to make performances in this style.[19]

In the example above, Chavez courts chance in both the preparation of the records and in their performance. Indeterminacy and chance are key approaches for both the production of her instruments and their performance, and the aesthetic of chance is predicated on a desire for unknown outcomes produced from systems that are unstable and unrepeatable.

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[18] Maria Chavez, *Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable* (New York: Rolling Press, 2012), 15.
[19] See Abstract Turntablism-Maria Chavez—LUFF 2015—Workshops, https://youtu.be/KctMvriuViY.

Nonhuman Agents in Musical Sound

In experimental music practices, indeterminacy has been a driving factor since the time of John Cage's early experiments. Indeterminacy is derived from systems that, while themselves somewhat determined (such as a graphic score), produce outcomes that cannot be known in advance. Here the composer creates a system which is set in motion and allowed to produce what it will. These systems might be a score but could equally be an instrument that is prepared with foreign objects or played in a fashion that was not intended. An example of the latter is French artist Céleste Boursier-Mougenot's installation *From Here to Ear* (1999–). The work is highly successful and at the time of writing has been installed twenty-two times in cities including Brisbane, Paris, London, New York, and Montreal. The installation for the piece is particularly difficult in that it requires the transformation of the art gallery into an aviary to hold up to seventy zebra finches that, over the course of the day, "play" electric guitars. They do this, unbeknown to them, by landing on the strings of horizontally installed electric guitars that are placed throughout the gallery. The sounds that are created within the installation are sporadic, as the birds are so light that often landing on the strings does not generate enough movement of the strings to produce any sound at all. Overall, the sound is not dissimilar to a sparse indeterminate composition, with the sounds from lightly plucked guitar playing at random through guitar amplifiers placed around the perimeter of the gallery.

Boursier-Mougenot has installed traditional instruments within the art museum but has created chance in their performance by allowing the instruments to be played by finches. The finches, who have no conception of their musical performance, go about their everyday actions and by doing so perform extended guitar techniques. This work develops the conception of the desire for imperfection by engaging in nonhuman intervention in musical performance—and with that approach, Boursier-Mougenot has produced a highly successful and desirable exhibition.[20] This nonhuman performance cannot be understood within traditional notions of performance and perfection. The finches do not understand that by perching on the instrument they cause the guitar to sound and they do not themselves attempt to perform anything. Rather, they are going about their movements in an everyday manner that is natural to finches. It is the audience who hears these chance occurrences and the juxtaposition of multiple sounds being

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[20] For further discussion of this approach to music in galleries, see Caleb Kelly, *Gallery Sound* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 129–45.

produced from many individual birds landing on the guitars placed around the gallery, as music.

Boursier-Mougenot's traditional instruments placed in the art museum can be seen in contrast to nontraditional instrument building—another practice that foregrounds sounds that are traditionally labeled as imperfect. In 2014 Germano Celant curated the exhibition Art or Sound for the Fondazione Prada in Venice. Celant's exhibition was a mammoth expression of what he calls the "sound artifact."[21] These artifacts demonstrate a critical and elongated investigation into the sounds of things and artists' employment of sounding objects. The early practices, from around the second decade of the twentieth century, that are situated within an approach to making objects sound are most widely known through the instruments of the Italian futurist Luigi Russolo whose intonarumori were initially created for the performance of the noise music that he espoused in his seminal manifesto *The Art of Noises*.[22] These instruments have come to be regularly displayed in art museums including in Art or Sound and the Sydney Biennale (2008). The box-like instruments are constructed out of wood, and each box has attached to it a cylindrical cone; most have leavers and hand cranks attached. The sounds created by the instruments are based on glissandi that produce rolling pitches and complex microtonal scales. The instruments, for Russolo, were transformed by mechanical means, "raw matter (in the form of pure noise)" into enharmonic pitches and an infusion of energy.[23] Contemporary performances of the instruments, such as the one presented for *Performa 09* by Luciano Chessa, are noisy affairs and are by definition an inexact art, yet these historical contraptions have had a lasting influence beyond their time that continues to this day.

Noise Performance and Cracked Glass

Courting chance and indeterminacy, experimental instrument building also allows the artist access to the destructive potential of material media. That is, in imperfectly building an instrument, one that is not crafted to the highest design standards from the most sought-after materials, the artist is free to crack, break, and destroy their creation. One of the most extreme contemporary instrument builders is noise musician Lucas Abela. Abela's

[21] Germano Celant, *Art or Sound* (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2014), 24.
[22] See Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises*, trans. Barclay Brown (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986).
[23] Luciano Chessa, *Luigi Russolo, Futurist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 138.

early work was based on the extension of the turntable's cartridge head and the reinvention of the turntable platter. He has built instruments that make use of different types of needles, objects that are engaged on records, various types of discs, and sometimes body parts. One instrument known as "the Humming Bar" is simply a skewer attached to a turntable cartridge that is played through an array of effects boxes strapped to Abela's waist. The bar is placed in his mouth and he produces sound by running the bar across his teeth and grinding it against his tongue.

Abela also made an instrument from a Volkswagen Kombi. After he transferred the motor and the stereo system into another Kombi body, the vehicle began to display unexpected audio responses from the car stereo. In fact, the van had become a contact microphone causing all its vibrations to be amplified and played through the Kombi's speakers when the radio was on. Thus, closing the door, turning on the blinkers or the windscreen wipers: all these acts produced distinct noises. Abela employed his dysfunctional van to produce an album under the moniker A Kombi entitled *Music to Drive-by* (1996).[24]

The instrument that has gained Abela the most notoriety, not to mention the most esteem, is the plate of glass with which he performs, often under the guise of Justice Yeldham and the Dynamic Ribbon Device. Attached to the glass plate is a contact microphone that is fed through effects pedals before being amplified at high volume. The glass is played after lubricating it. Abela presses his face against it, blows onto it, and bites it.

The sounds generated by these actions, as caught by the contact microphone, are amplified at extreme volume. Abela risks injury during the performance as there are no safety precautions taken with the sheet of glass. He often nicks, cuts, slices, and gashes his face during performances of the work. Blood often covers the glass and the instrument itself snaps, breaks, and fractures, and to end the performance he often shatters it over his head.

As with the other practices under investigation, Abela's performances are highly desirable and he has performed the glass plate on hundreds of occasions. In interviews Abela talks about the audience members' reaction to these sometimes bloody performances, pointing to a bloodlust in his audience.[25] This lust is driven by a combination of a highly charged performance practice that employs noise at extreme volume, alongside a physical performance with the risk of injury.

[24] Lucas Abela, "A Kombi," *Dual Plover*, accessed June 23, 2019, http://dualplover.com/kombi/.

[25] See, for an exemplary interview, Julian Morgans, "Meet the Experimental Musician Who Plays Cut Glass with His Mouth," *The Feed*, July 10, 2018, https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/meet-the-experimental-musician-who-plays-cut-glass-with-his-mouth, accessed February 27, 2020.

Conclusion

This chapter ends with an instrument made from a scavenged plate of glass, already broken the glass shard has been discarded on the street. The idea that such an object could be an instrument could not be further from the initial concept of the perfect historically correct artisanal musical instrument. Abela's piece of glass is not only rubbish but it is actually dangerous: a simple internet search will display many images of the blood-covered instruments and of Abela himself covered in blood. Demonstrating that the pursuit of musical perfection is not a necessary condition of musical performance, the artists discussed use their makeshift instruments as generative tools for music creation. The noisy and at times dangerous edges of these tools allow for unexpected outcomes, outcomes that cannot be formed by the practiced rehearsal of musical perfectionism.

Binding the diverse array of artists discussed, some of whom produce loud and violent spectacles and some of whom produce oftentimes barely audible sounds, is the motif of imperfection. While there is a differentiation of strategies within the works, which include unpolished and impermanent practices, nonhuman agents, and danger and destruction, we also witness an *imperfection strategy* that allows the artists to engage experimental and unknown outcomes. Rather than follow the tight and prescriptive rules of traditional instrument building and performance, these artists allow for undetermined and unresolved musical eventualities. The cracked media of Chavez produces audio that, while holding structure in the material support of the practices, is always different each time she performs. Zebra finches produce sounds that cannot be predetermined, and Boursier-Mougenot sets the birds free in the space with the knowledge that they will land on the guitars and this will produce a sound. Making instruments that do not conform to musical norms allows these and other artists to explore possibilities outside of traditional expectation of the musical canon and performance, and thus, new musical structures and sonic possibilities are produced.

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Silicon Ashes to Silicon Ashes, Digital Dust to Digital Dust: Chronolibido and Technological Fragility in *GlitchHiker*

Jakko Kemper

"Beauty in the Imperfection of Man-Made Machinery"

In 2012, the notable music website *A Closer Listen* published an article tellingly titled *A Landscape of Decay*.[1] In this chapter, writer/musician Zachary Corsa presents the rich tradition of experimental music as one in which a positive value is ascribed to a technological aesthetic of imperfection and failure:

> No other visceral aesthetic is as aggressive in the message it broadcasts, that this technology is imperfect, as we're imperfect, that these mediums and these sound-waves are being pushed to their absolute limits and failing there, and there's beauty in that failure, beauty in the imperfection and flaws of man-made machinery, in a way that almost humanizes those flaws, makes them a character of the song as much as any melody, any run of notes.[2]

Corsa clearly implies that the technological imperfections he identifies harbor some affective link to humankind's own flawed state ("this technology is imperfect, as we are imperfect"). His account suggests that a technology's aesthetic appeal rests in part on how its imperfections—which I will understand here as notable flaws or failures in a technology's operations—resonate with our own metaphysical constitution.

There is, however, also something problematic about Corsa's text. The impassioned rallying cry that he delivers juxtaposes its valuation of

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[1] Zachary Corsa, "A Landscape of Decay," A Closer Listen, last modified April 25, 2012, https://acloserlisten.com/2012/04/25/a-landscape-of-decay/.

[2] Ibid.

imperfection with a rather unrefined image of digital technology. Corsa envisions a monolithic shift from analog to digital that has inaugurated an "era of looking sadly backwards, of revisionist history, when the dead obsolete technologies of our childhoods become crucial to sanely surviving in an Apple world that feels colder with every new sweatshop-fashioned model of iPhone."[3] The technological perimeters that Corsa scours for the sweet scent of imperfection invariably turn out to be analog in nature; he advocates an "admiration for imperfection in a plastic surface world [that calls] us back not just to cassette, but to scratchy Super 8 film, to blurry Polaroid and Holga photography, to tracking-damaged, pitch-warbling VHS."[4] Corsa's critique pivots, in other words, on a stark opposition between analog passions and digital anemia. In Corsa's text, digital technology comes clad in a frigid and sterile shroud, and its adverse effects can only be mitigated by turning to the warm sanctuaries of a technological yesteryear.

Corsa's plea against the digital evokes multiple critical questions. Have people not, to paraphrase curator and writer Omar Kholeif, invested their smartphones and computers with their innermost desires—for sociality, for intimacy, for mobility?[5] Moreover, is digital technology itself not markedly prone to failure? Who has not experienced dismay at the hands of a malfunctioning phone or an uncooperative Wi-Fi connection? It is the contention of this chapter that these minor tragedies of digital culture are in fact not so minor at all, but rather have a leading role to play in the drama of a digitalized world. This approach travels beyond the contrived dichotomy of a "sterile," "perfect" digital realm and an "emotionally vibrant," "imperfect" analog world, and assesses how perfection and imperfection are *both* enmeshed in digital culture. This does not mean that Corsa's account is entirely invalid: digital technologies have, for example, been shown to thrive on spectral residues of dispossession and ecological destruction[6] and to inform tendencies of standardization, alienation, and disempowerment.[7] Yet following the philosophical tradition, carved out by

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[3] Corsa, "A Landscape of Decay."

[4] Ibid.

[5] Omar Kholeif, "Preamble," in *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*, ed. Omar Kholeif (Manchester: Cornerhouse and SPACE), 10–13.

[6] Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex* (London: Pluto Press, 2015); Sean Cubitt, *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); and Lowenhaupt Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis, MN: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, 2017).

[7] Bernard Stiegler, *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism: Disbelief and Discredit*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014); Geert Lovink, *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism*

Plato and expanded by Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, of thinking of technology as pharmacological in nature—as holding both curative and poisonous potentials[8]—we may say that a technology is never simply one monolithic construct and that digital technologies thus harbor pathways and potentialities for more sustainable and meaningful modes of engagement. In accordance with this observation, this chapter conceptualizes digital instantiations of imperfection as elements of friction capable of challenging the digital's problematically frictionless veneer.[9]

In what follows, I trace in the discourse on imperfection a tendency to envision imperfection as a token of friction, fragility, and finitude in digital contexts. I do so by scrutinizing the associations of imperfection that are often attached to the figure of the glitch, a concept that literally denotes a technological flaw and that I will shortly introduce in more detail. I will then analyze *GlitchHiker* (2011), a video game whose glitches exhibit a unique relation to malfunction and finitude: the game was programmed to expire and is now no longer playable. In my reading of this digital object, I engage theorizations in the field of philosophy and media studies, paying particular heed to Martin Hägglund's concept of chronolibido (which charts the coimplication of loss and desire), Steven Jackson's discussion of the undervaluation of repair and maintenance, and Anna Munster's notion of an ethos of death that has materialized in digital aesthetics. Reading *GlitchHiker*, as a digital object that lionizes finitude and decay, in relation to these authors will open up a new perspective on glitch and its signification of imperfection as well as contribute to new modes of thinking about human–technology interaction. Before properly introducing *GlitchHiker* and delving deeper into the relevant concepts, I will, however, first provide an overview of the concept of glitch and its relation to the notion of imperfection.

Glitch

I define a glitch as a perceptible moment of faulty interference in the routine operation of a (usually digital) technology. It is, in other words, a producer of friction and attrition, complicating perfection- and efficiency-oriented

(London: Pluto Press, 2019); and Berardi Franco, "Bifo," in *And: Phenomenology of the End* (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2015).

[8] On the concept of the pharmakon, see also Patricia Pisters's contribution to this volume.

[9] This research has been conducted within the context of the NWO-funded research project *Sublime Imperfections*, a project based at the University of Amsterdam that examines contemporary cultural preoccupations with imperfection. For more information, see http://www.sublimeimperfections.org.

images of technology. The glitch forms an apparition whose possibility the user always intuits—that is to say, when engaging digital technology, one is always haunted by the "silent awareness [that one is] never safe from accidents, more common with the computer than with the typewriter or pen."[10] Glitches are generally short-lived, creating a hyphenated user experience, a composition of error and correction.

The aesthetic effects associated with glitch—often appearing to the user as a "tumorous blob of digital distortion"[11]—have been repurposed in art, frequently to critical purpose. The artistic history of glitch accommodates a visual and an aural component. Glitch music, while embedded in a long tradition of soliciting the sounds of breakdown and malfunction, came into fruition as an actual genre in the 1990s. As media theoretician Caleb Kelly describes, "glitch music combined the 'clean' world of the digital with a 'dirty,' detritus-driven sound that switched the ratios of signal to noise in the realm of digital production."[12] Critical theorist Michael Betancourt traces the birth of visual glitch aesthetics back to *Digital TV Dinner* (1979), a video presented under the rubric of visual music that exploited the glitchy effects produced by manually switching the game cartridge in the *Bally Astrocade* game console while the console was turned on.[13] It would be many years until the notion of visual glitch art would become part of art theory's vernacular, however— glitch theorist Rosa Menkman dates this moment back to around 2005.[14] In both its aural and visual manifestations, glitch art highlights the failures, contingencies, and materiality of technology.

Unsurprisingly, the concept of the glitch and the technological fragilities it uncovers are often labeled in terms of imperfection. Consider, for example, the following description of glitch's revelatory potential, offered by media critic Ed Halter:

> The very moments that indicate the specificity of the medium occur when that medium starts to break down, to suffer and reveal *imperfections*. The technology becomes visible through its failures. Glitches and

[10] Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 23.

[11] Hugh S. Manon and Daniel Temkin. "Notes on Glitch," *World Picture 6*, last modified Winter, 2011, http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP_6/Manon.html.

[12] Caleb Kelly, *Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 8.

[13] Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice: Critical Failures and Post-digital Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 29–31.

[14] Rosa Menkman, *The Glitch Moment(um)* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011), 7.

errors constitute evidence of its origins; we see the material through disruption.[15] (emphasis mine)

Or observe the first point of Menkman's *Glitch Studies Manifesto* (2011), which warns us that the quest for noiseless transmission and perfect representation is a dogmatic fantasy that is doomed to remain precisely that: a fantasy.[16] Every medium, she writes, carries with it its own "inherent fingerprints of *imperfection*."[17] Perhaps the most straightforward example of the discursive interweaving of glitch and imperfection is the title of a 2009 compendium that displays the work of numerous glitch artists: *Glitch: Designing Imperfection*.[18] The relation between glitch, technology, and imperfection is thus twofold: glitch signifies a particular aesthetic style often described as imperfect, and this aesthetic in turn reveals the purported imperfections of the underlying technology. On the whole, one could say that glitch and its connotations of imperfection introduce a sense of friction into technological imaginaries of a frictionless perfection. Within such influential imaginaries, technology is conceived of as a means that should ideally be integrated seamlessly and subconsciously into the navigation of everyday life. Before further exploring this claim, it is necessary to first present my primary object of analysis: Vlambeer's *GlitchHiker* (2011).

GlitchHiker

Vlambeer is a Dutch independent game studio, based in the city of Utrecht, which has garnered international acclaim with a number of well-received titles (the most well-known of these being the 2014 shooter game *LUFTRAUSERS*). They are embedded in a national culture that is globally renowned for its contributions to the gaming industry and that boasts a remarkably strong scene of independent developers facilitated by a supportive government climate.[19] In 2011, Vlambeer took part in the Dutch edition of game jam event Global Game Jam. Game jams are events that gather people from a variety of video game development-related backgrounds and that are

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[15] Ed Halter, "The Matter of Electronics," in *Playlist: Playing Games, Music, Art*, ed. Domenico Quaranta (Gijon: LABoral Centro de Arte y Creación Industrial, 2009), 70–7.

[16] On the history of this quest for perfect mediation and sonic purity (and its misguided nature) see also Melle Kromhout's contribution to this volume.

[17] Menkman, *The Glitch Moment(um)*, 11; emphasis mine.

[18] Iman Moradi, Ant Scott, Joe Gilmore, and Christopher Murphy, *Glitch: Designing Imperfection* (New York: Mark Batty, 2009).

[19] Monique Roso, ed., *The Dutch Games Industry: Facts and Figures* (Utrecht: Taskforce Innovation Utrecht Region, 2013).

Figure 7.1 *GlitchHiker*'s glitch-based aesthetic.

organized with a spirit of creativity and a willingness to experiment in mind. Generally, the goal is to assemble a team of programmers, designers, and artists and to develop a game within a strictly limited amount of time. During the 2011 event, Vlambeer coordinated a team of developers and designers with the task of creating, within a forty-eight-hour time slot, a game from scratch that conformed to the event's theme of "extinction."[20] The result of this challenge was *GlitchHiker*. The game relied heavily on glitch-based visuals—it would often freeze, polychromatic schemes would occasionally irrupt into the screen, and the game's already pixelated aesthetic was regularly distorted—and on an adaptive score (composed by Rutger Muller) that was itself accentuated by audible glitches and flaws (Figure 7.1).

What is most remarkable about *GlitchHiker*'s aesthetic is the fact that its glitches signified the game's approaching demise. *GlitchHiker*'s key gameplay element revolved around its life reserve. As is not uncommon in video games, the player was allotted a finite number of lives, but what is so strikingly unique about *GlitchHiker* is that the game's code was programmed to erase

[20] In addition to Vlambeer's own Rami Ismail and Jan Willem Nijman, the team consisted of Laurens de Gier, Jonathan Barbosa Dijkstra, Rutger Muller, and Paul Veer.

itself after a player drained the last life from the reservoir. After this final life was expended, nothing more could be done; the game was terminated, never to be played again. Its creators had hidden all its code behind a randomly generated password, meaning that not even they can ever conceivably retrieve it.[21] The game went on to receive the first place award in the Game Jam's competition from both jury and audience—a testament that the game and its idiosyncratic concept managed to strike a sonorous chord.

GlitchHiker, it must be noted, is certainly not the first of its kind, neither in its conjuration of glitch-based destruction, nor in its glitchy reconfiguration of the medium of video games. A pioneering example of the former logic of glitch-induced ruination is found in the live performances of art group 5VOLTCORE, in which they rely on power interruptions and short-circuiting to undermine their computer's regular output: "This process tortures the machine and makes it scream out shreds of powerfully colored images, until the computer eventually dies, which ends the performance."[22] An example of a canonical glitch-based video game is art collective JODI's *Untitled Game* (1996–2001), a collection of modifications of the influential video game *Quake* (1996) that challenge the hegemonic and implicit norms behind video game design by erecting glitchy reimaginations of the game world. *GlitchHiker* similarly sheds light on the norms of game design, strapping the medium's fixation on death to the underlying code, with the process of disintegration here being performed through the player and not through the artist.

Before further zooming in on *GlitchHiker*'s specificity, the game's finite functionality warrants a methodological consideration. *GlitchHiker* is a digital object that was programmed to expire and this is precisely how things played out—soon after the Global Game Jam ended, a player wasted the last remaining live and thus no playable version of the game exists today.[23] As such, in my analysis of the game's visuals and gameplay I am relying mostly on textual documentation and on the sparse number of available videos that depict gameplay footage.[24] Problematic as this could be if I were to pursue an exhaustive textual analysis, this is not an impediment in the case of the present inquiry, as I am predominantly interested in *GlitchHiker*'s constitutive

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[21] Roberto Flores, "GlitchHiker: The death of a newborn indie game," Bitmob, last modified December 16, 2011, https://bitmob.com/articles/newborn-baby-game-dies.

[22] Menkman, *The Glitch Moment(um)*, 37.

[23] John Polson, "Harder to Judge Than IGF Pirate Kart? Vlambeer's Unplayable Game [Interview]," DIYGamer, last modified October 11, 2011, http://www.diygamer.com/2011/10/vlambeers-unplayable-playable-igf-entry-glitchhiker-interview/.

[24] Gameplay footage of *GlitchHiker* can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lXtoiWRX9EA.

logic of finitude. I am, to put this more concretely, mainly concerned with the game's *concept* and the way in which this concept was communicated to the player through a glitch-based aesthetic of imperfection. As this concept and its aesthetic visualization are clear from the existing documentation, no playable object is required (and it is precisely the fact that no playable version exists that is of prime importance).

The game's life system also deserves some more elaboration. *GlitchHiker* functioned according to a points-based system where, for every 100 scored points, a life would be added to the life reserve, whereas anything below that threshold would result in the detraction of a life. While, in theory, it was entirely within the realm of possibility that the game would have remained preserved (provided enough players amassed sufficient points), its open-ended availability to an uninitiated crowd—cognizant of the stakes of play but unversed and inexperienced when it came to the gameplay mechanics—practically ensured that the game would at some point meet its demise.

GlitchHiker's extinction-inspired concept thereby offers an experience wholly unique to video game culture. While we are used to video games that abound in death on the level of gameplay, video games tend to keep this morbid infatuation away from the game's performance; dying in the game has no impact on the technology's capacity to operate. In the case of *GlitchHiker*, however, players are given a sense of responsibility over the well-being of the technological object itself; missteps do not merely affect the fate of the game's virtual protagonist, but carry very real consequences for the existence of the game itself. Contrary to the familiar rationale of simply reloading and restarting when one's digital lives are lost, in *GlitchHiker* one slip-up too many would cause the assemblage of code that comprised the game to be lost entirely.

At face value *GlitchHiker* comes across as an ordinary indie game, opting for a mode of gameplay and a top-down viewpoint that recall an iconic series like *Bomberman*—a strategic game where players would have to use bombs to find their way through mazes. *GlitchHiker*'s gameplay dynamics were of a similarly straightforward and an arcade-inspired variety, having players navigate a "single screen arena" where they would have to collect coins while avoiding obstacles.[25] Its simplicity seems partly designed to lend an optimal degree of poignancy to the game's macabre concept. This concept was fortified by an aesthetic that reveled in the use of both visual and aural glitches, with

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25 Peter Kirn, "GlitchHiker: A Game that Dies, Slowly, If You Play Badly," CDM, last modified July 5, 2011, https://cdm.link/2011/07/glitchhiker-a-game-that- dies-slowly-if-you-play-badly/.

the music gradually disintegrating and the game visibly struggling to stay operative as the life pool slowly drained.

In this sense, the game conveyed a very clear relation between glitches and proximity to death. As journalist Jeremy Peel describes:

> As the number of lives in the pool inevitably began to drop, the game's health visibly and audibly deteriorated. Its sickness became increasingly evident in the glitches that obscured parts of the screen, and at those times in which the action froze entirely; the game would hang for seconds, before lurching horribly back into life.[26]

Essentially, the glitch effects dramatically enacted a worsening condition, a figuration of an ailing patient increasingly struggling with tasks once carried out with ease. This phenomenon of a fragile technology floodlighting its own finitude prompted players to experience feelings of remorse or even to flat out refuse to play the game for fear of potentially contributing to its conspicuous agony and ultimate expiration.[27] Reflecting on what stood out most about the *GlitchHiker* experience in the months following its passing, cocreator Rami Ismail indicates that it is *empathy*:

> The story of GlitchHiker wasn't so much in the game, as it was a thing happening to the players. That breeds the circumstances in which responsibility can exist—in which guilt can exist—and in which such emotional attachment can happen.[28]

For this reason, video games journalist Matthijs Dierckx remarks that the best way to understand *GlitchHiker* is to think of it not simply as a product designed for fun and play but rather as a work of art, a digital object that created the conditions for emotional connections to arise.[29] *GlitchHiker* turned out, in sum, to probe new conditions of possibility—facilitating feelings of care and empathy—that can emerge from the recalibration of familiar vectors of human–technology interaction.

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[26] Jeremy Peel, "GlitchHiker: The Game That Was Programmed to Die," PCGamesN, last modified August 31, 2012, https://www.pcgamesn.com/indie/glitchhiker-game-was-programmed-die.

[27] Matthijs Dierckx, "[Nieuws] De Derde Nominatie voor de Control Industry Award Is … GlitchHiker van Aardbever," Control, last modified November 9, 2011, https://control-online.nl/gamesindustrie/2011/11/09/nieuws-de-derde-nominatie-voor-de-control-industry-award-isE2%80%A6-glitchhiker-van-aardbever/.

[28] Rami Ismail cited in Peel, "GlitchHiker."

[29] Dierckx, "GlitchHiker."

To better grasp how *GlitchHiker* achieved this effect, it is instructive to take a closer look at *GlitchHiker*'s glitches and at how they relate to more general theorizations of the glitch. As illustrated, in *GlitchHiker* glitches serve as active prefigurations of the game's death. This explicit link between the occurrence of glitches and the state of the game itself marks a highly specific use of glitches that sits in contrast with the more unspecified way in which glitches are often theorized. Glitch theorists Hugh S. Manon and Daniel Temkin, for example, describe the effect of glitch as a general category as follows: "whether its cause is intentional or accidental, a glitch flamboyantly undoes the communications platforms that we, as subjects of digital culture, both rely on and take for granted."[30] Their words are symptomatic of a wider trend among glitch theorists to ascribe to glitches a pedagogical, sometimes almost gnostic power.[31] This power stems from the glitch's foregrounding of failure, which marks a departure from a technology's "normative modalities," and as such is often theorized to guide its audience to new and emancipatory insights about their reliance on technology.[32] Such arguments place glitch theory firmly in the tradition of a Heideggerian phenomenology of technology; Heidegger advanced the now canonical notion that to encounter a tool in a damaged or broken state is also to regard it in a different and potentially more reflective light.[33] As literary critic N. Katherine Hayles succinctly puts it, it is not until "something goes wrong"[34] that one begins to realize the full extent of one's enmeshment with technology.[35]

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[30] Manon and Temkin, "Notes on Glitch."

[31] This pedagogical quality is best exemplified by Peter Krapp's argument that glitch-based aesthetics help to see that "what one needs to learn from mistakes is not to avoid them but something else altogether: to allow for them; to allow room for error." Peter Krapp, *Noise Channels: Glitch and Error in Digital Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 92.

[32] Christiane Paul and Malcolm Levy, "Genealogies of the New Aesthetic," in *Post-Digital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*, ed. David M. Berry and Michael Dieter (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 31.

[33] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 102–4.

[34] N. Katherine Hayles cited in Louise Amoore and Volha Piotukh, "Interview with N. Katherine Hayles," *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 2 (2019): 148.

[35] While such general accounts of the glitch, based around its purported capacity to bring to light what would otherwise remain unnoticed, are certainly valuable for thinking through the relation between humankind and technology, the tendency to unilaterally portray glitch as a causeway to enlightened experience has rightfully been on the receiving end of criticism. Michael Betancourt argues that "the problem for critical media is not the creation of stoppages, but the adaptability of the audience to the stoppage itself" (Betancourt, *Glitch Art*, 127). Digital technology, so Betancourt suggests, trains its users to disregard any aberration as an inconsequentiality with no direct bearing on the image of the digital itself. Moreover, glitch aesthetics have been mainstreamed to such an extent—think, for example, of Kanye West's video to *Welcome to Heartbreak* (2008) or

In the contemporary techno-sphere, the capacity of glitch to bring to light one's entwinement with technology most significantly takes shape against the reigning Silicon Valley design philosophy of what I term frictionlessness. The notion of frictionlessness, I argue, is built around a conception of perfection that idealizes technology as a smooth and transparent conduit for interactions and transactions.[36] A coagulation of discourses of user-friendliness, connectivity, and optimization, it aims to fasten technology seamlessly to the navigation of everyday life. In doing so, it conceals the underlying value systems and material extractions that facilitate the purportedly frictionless networks of information production and commercial purchase. The paradigm of frictionlessness goes beyond merely obfuscating the material dimension of technology. By envisioning technology as the nexus through which smooth, convenient interactions and communications are established it also propagates ideas about how society should be run. Glitches, as hindrances in a technology's operation, generate brief moments of friction in user experience, challenging the ideal of technology as something perfectly integrated into a society that thereby smoothly progresses. Because this nexus can and must always be optimized, there is a constant requirement for users to update or replace their devices, which induces a consumption-driven and pragmatic relation to technology: sluggish, faltering, or obsolete technologies are quickly replaced with newer ones. A closer look at *GlitchHiker*'s specific usage of glitches is instrumental in better understanding how glitches and their aesthetics of failure and imperfection can run counter to such philosophies of frictionlessness. This also invites the question of against what conception of perfection glitch's association with imperfection is in this context construed.

In the case of *GlitchHiker*, a first way in which glitches manifest themselves is as brief freezes during which all action is suspended. As the game edged closer to its demise, it would often halt momentarily "before lurching

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Norway's integration of glitch aesthetics into the design of its national bank notes—that the shock of the new and unexpected that they once supposedly summoned has waned. This implies that the capacity for subversion is no innate quality of the glitch: "There is no Formalist mode that can present an inherently critical meaning—the emergence of a *specifically* critical meaning depends on active choices made by the audience encountering the work, not the formal design of that work in itself: even the most 'critical' glitch may be considered as a simple technical error" (Betancourt, *Glitch Art*, 100). As such, it is crucial to scrutinize the specific context in which a glitch is encountered before any critical powers are ascribed to it. I argue that *GlitchHiker*'s contextual entrenching is one element that makes its glitches so remarkable—by connecting glitches directly to the health of the system, the game significantly decreased the extent to which any of its glitches could be deemed insignificant.

[36] Elsewhere, I chart this philosophy in more detail: see Jakko Kemper, *Technological Aesthetics of Imperfection in Times of Frictionlessness* (Ph.D. diss., University of Amsterdam: 2021).

horribly back into life,"[37] enacting a technology that visibly labors to carry out its tasks. This corresponds to the wider definition of glitch as an error that gets corrected—the output of information is briefly arrested after which the machine falls back into its regular rhythm. When the term imperfection is raised in such a context, it takes shape against a conception of a *frictionless flow of information transmission*, an image that fits into the wider design philosophy of frictionlessness. *GlitchHiker* reverts this frictionless logic, injecting moments of deceleration into the flow of the game, consciously affecting gameplay experience and highlighting the game's proximity to death. In contradistinction to most video games (and technology in general), *GlitchHiker* persistently points back to its own status as a technology—and a fragile one at that—by drawing on glitchy imperfections to hamper the frictionless transmission of information.

Another way in which *GlitchHiker*'s glitches appear is through a negation of clarity. The game's pixelated aesthetic is in itself already a counterweight to industry standards of crystal-clear representation, but its glitches reinforce the game's unvarnished graphics. As Manon and Temkin maintain, visual glitches generally appear to the user as a "tumorous blob of digital distortion,"[38] as is certainly the case for *GlitchHiker*. The obstacles that comprise the game-world and that the player has to navigate are often visibly lacerated and corrupted, and the screen is regularly invaded by checkered color schemes. In its visual capacity, the glitch is often theorized to stand as a corrective measure to the audiovisual industries' gospel of "higher resolutions, better color palette [and] screen refresh rate,"[39] and their tendency to proselytize to their audiences about the technological capacity to render the world in ever more detail. Behind this trend toward higher fidelity looms the philosophy of frictionlessness, premised on the belief that a better, clearer representation is inherently desirable, and that such representation can be achieved through technology. The glitch and its fractured and pixelated aesthetic negate the transparency of the image and provide an alternative to the fetishization of higher resolution by highlighting the medium's materiality.

Against a conception of perfection that commits to the possibility of a frictionless representation of the world by technology, the imperfection of glitch aesthetics consists precisely in a negation of such clarity and transparency.

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[37] Peel, "GlitchHiker."
[38] Manon and Temkin, "Notes on Glitch."
[39] Scott Contreras-Koterbay and Łukasz Mirocha, *The New Aesthetic and Art: Constellations of the Post-digital* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2016), 41.

GlitchHiker tied this twofold glitch-based aesthetic of imperfection[40] to the prospect of technological death in order to dramatize technological fragility and finitude. It is this phenomenon I will further analyze here, remaining especially receptive to the emotional investments the game enkindled, as this will pave the way for a new theorization of glitch and its relation to human–technology interaction.

GlitchHiker, Care, and Chronolibido

As a work of glitch art, *GlitchHiker* provides a profound case to support technology journalist Chris Baraniuk's suggestion that "glitch art is just the beginning of our culture leaning towards a world in which the permanence of the digital is no longer assumed."[41] More specifically, I argue it is indicative of a different way of looking at technological impermanence: of seeing digital objects not as ephemeral entities that are to be constantly updated, optimized, and replaced but instead of allowing their finitude to enliven and make more committed one's investment in them. Because *GlitchHiker* had the prospect of death stitched into its very constitution, it strongly adheres to what Anna Munster describes as an emergent aesthetic "preoccupation with digital death"[42] that counters fantasies that envision the digital as a realm of frictionless and unbridled expansion. She contends that this infatuation serves as a correction to paradigms that exclusively equate the digital with life and stability. I would argue that it thereby reveals a sensitivity to how those technologies most regularly invested with chimeras of acceleration and expansion are nonetheless haunted by breakdown and entropy—something that glitch art and its characteristic aesthetic of imperfection help bring to light. Both glitch and Munster's ethos of death challenge, in sum, the "dreams of permanence"[43] so often unjustifiably attached to the digital.

GlitchHiker conforms to the spirit of death that Munster delineates, especially by virtue of its status as a video game that, instead of abiding by the medium's usual logic of presenting "the digital as merely an opportunity to

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[40] While I have focused primarily on *GlitchHiker*'s visual instantiations of glitch, a similar argument could be made about the game's score: as the game edged towards death, the music was increasingly characterized by brief pauses and distorted transmission.

[41] Chris Baraniuk, "Glitchland: In the Future, the Digital Will Know How to Decay," http://www.themachinestarts.com/read/2013-09-glitchland-future-digital-will-know-how-to-decay, accessed May 25, 2019.

[42] Anna Munster, "From a Biopolitical 'Will to Life' to a Noopolitical Ethos of Death in the Aesthetics of Digital Code," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 6 (2011): 68.

[43] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 128.

inconsequentially 'reload' and refire,"[44] causes the actions of players to carry material consequences. What I have argued to be most remarkable about *GlitchHiker*, as a prime example of the rise of digital objects that prove to be "cognizant of finitude, consequence and even death,"[45] is that it elicited a sense of care and compassion from its audience—not only through its concept but also through the way in which its glitch-based aesthetic of imperfection further illumined its mortality. It is fruitful to analyze this phenomenon through the lenses of Martin Hägglund's concept of chronolibido and Steven Jackson's repair and maintenance paradigm, as this will help in inferring the full implications of *GlitchHiker*'s digital instantiation of imperfection.

Swedish philosopher Martin Hägglund's concept of chronolibido illustrates how temporality is an inherent part of the very structure of desire and investment.[46] Hägglund demonstrates that an object's temporality and the possibility of loss that this ushers in—lamentable though the prospect of loss may often seem—form the condition for any affective attachment to take shape in the first place. He disputes philosophical and psychoanalytical traditions that discern in desire an implicit wish to overcome an ontological lack of some absolute or primordial state of being—Lacan's "the Thing," Freud's originary state of equilibrium and Platonism, for instance. By contrast, Hägglund maintains that desire is necessarily underwritten by a constitutive sense of finitude. The concept of chronolibido registers this situation and is defined by the coimplication of *chronophilia* and *chronophobia*:

> Chronolibidinal reading seeks to show that the ambivalence of desire stems from the double bind of temporal finitude. Desire is *chronophobic* since whatever we are bound to or aspire for can be lost: it can be taken away from or be rejected by us. Yet, by the same token, desire is *chronophilic*, since it is because we are bound to or aspire for something that can be lost that we care about it, that we care about what happens.[47]

Only that which can be lost can be desired. *-Philia* and *-phobia* coimply one another; the fact that a moment passes forms the minimal condition for any desire to try to hold onto it. Take away the possibility of loss and so, too, vanishes the impetus to keep:

[44] Munster, "Ethos of Death," 70.

[45] Ibid., 69.

[46] Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[47] Ibid., 14.

> The fear of time and death does not stem from a metaphysical desire to transcend temporal life. On the contrary, it is generated by the investment in a life that can be lost. It is because one is attached to a temporal being (chronophilia) that one fears losing it (chronophobia).[48]

While it is important to recognize that the condition of chronolibido, though constitutive, is insufficient to unilaterally effectuate a particular response, an aesthetic of imperfection can play a conducive role in rousing the flow of chronolibido. That is to say, the fact that loss and desire are intertwined is in and of itself not a guarantee that one will be predisposed to a particular orientation or aesthetic inclination, but imperfection marks a key aesthetic strategy to which artists can turn in order to give form to chronolibidinal investments. Hägglund shows, through readings of the literary works of Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Vladimir Nabokov, that an object can derive its affective power from aesthetically appealing to our faculties of chronophilia and chronophobia. By aesthetically configuring a particular dynamic between these two faculties an art object can invoke pathos—as, for example, when loss is staged as imminent:

> The most intuitive experience we have of perceptual vivacity and intensity is when we see something we love for the last time. When it is on the verge of being lost, it appears as all the more precious and as something I have to hold onto all the more.[49]

Because imperfection is indexical to time's passing and all that it ushers in (finitude, decay, degradation, contingency), there is an argument to be made that those artworks that most vividly agitate the flow of chronolibido tend to draw on an aesthetic of imperfection. This relates to one of the discourses that Ellen Rutten explored in the introduction to this volume: imperfection as necessarily bound up with the workings of temporality. The concept of chronolibido allows us to expand this observation and to better understand the appeal of imperfection when it is called upon to signify finitude, entropy, or decay. An aesthetic of imperfection can magnify the sense of the temporal and thereby deepen chronolibidinal attachment. As an example one may think here of the genre of hauntological music that shows a preoccupation with sonic imperfections (reverb, tape hiss, vinyl crackle, distortion) to

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[48] Ibid., 9.
[49] Michael W. Clune and Martin Hägglund, "Time in Our Time: Clune and Hägglund Debating at Stanford," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 3 (2015): 120.

communicate the corruptibility of both memory and technology.[50] Another poignant example is William Basinski's seminal album *The Disintegration Loops* (2002), a collection of compositions that wrest beauty from technologically induced breakdown.[51] In each of these cases, the object's appeal stems in large part from how its aesthetic of imperfection dramatizes temporality,[52] finitude and fragility, and how it thereby intensifies the audience's chronolibidinal investment.

The concept of chronolibido also provides a way of situating the possible appeal of Munster's digital ethos of death, and this is where *GlitchHiker* reenters the scene. That the game's finite and fragile constitution evoked feelings of care, compassion, and responsibility in its players is explained by how it appealed to the flow of chronolibido: because the game staged its loss as always imminent, the conditions for a deeper and more responsible mode of engagement were created. Because the game was premised on a logic of finitude, and because it communicated its propinquity to loss through a glitch-based aesthetic of imperfection, players came to care for the game in a fashion that diverges from more functionalist tendencies of engaging digital objects.

The cultural significance of this sense of care can be better comprehended through an examination of science and technology scholar Steven Jackson's repair and maintenance paradigm. Jackson calls for a more serious consideration of just how central practices of repair and maintenance are to the contemporary mediascape: "Breakdown, maintenance, and repair constitute crucial but vastly understudied sites or moments within the worlds of new media and technology today."[53] Glitches, in their signification of failure, challenge the tenacity that Jackson signals of thinking about technology only in terms of innovation, acceleration, and permanence. As swaths of energy are expended to kindle the flames of innovation, novelty, and disruption, the banality of the common glitch reveals a constant requirement of maintenance work to ensure that the technological infrastructures facilitating everyday life simply stay operative. The philosophy of frictionlessness tends to gloss over this constant need for maintenance and repair, instead advocating

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[50] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 21. On imperfection as desired outcome in musical practices, see also Kelly's chapter in this volume.

[51] See also Jakko Kemper, "(De)Compositions: Time and Technology in William Basinski's 'The Disintegration Loops,'" *Intermedialities* 33 (2019), https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/im/2019-n33-im04907/1065020ar/

[52] On the relation between imperfection and temporality, see Saito's chapter in this volume.

[53] Steven J. Jackson, "Rethinking Repair," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality and Society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Kirsten A. Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 226.

the practices of replacement and updating. *GlitchHiker*, on the other hand, offered a mode of play that effectively consisted of nothing more than *repair and maintenance work*. That is, the entire point of the game was to deal with emergent glitches and to ward off impending death, and it thereby allocated a central rather than liminal role to repair and preservation. Significant, too, is that the reparative gesture of playing the game could never grant *GlitchHiker* full immunity—engaging it would always mean engaging a fragile object for whose well-being one was made responsible.

Jackson repeatedly invokes the term care in relation to practices of repair and maintenance, not only to capture the multitude of activities required to ensure that everyday technologies simply keep working but also to indicate a possible moral and political dimension to how people relate to technology:

> The ethics of repair admits of a possibility denied or forgotten by both the crude functionalism of the technology field and a more traditionally humanist ethics (which has mostly ignored technology anyway). What if we care about our technologies, and do so in more than a trivial way?[54]

Against an industry logic of seamless and frictionless technology, curtailed only by planned obsolescence (meaning that the life span of devices is artificially delimited to always encourage the purchase of newer, "more perfect" and "more frictionless" updates and devices),[55] such an attitude takes seriously the finitude and fragility of technology and their material effects. It rejects monolithic accounts of technology and acceleration, and is responsive to the "temporalities of ruin, breakdown, and decay"[56] that unavoidably circumscribe one's relation to technology (and indeed, one's relation to all that exists).

The sense of care that Jackson charts is necessarily but also markedly chronolibidinal. While chronolibido is a general condition that pervades all experience, I have already argued that an aesthetic of imperfection and its indexation of finitude can make the effects of the temporal sensible and can thereby intensify the flow of chronolibido. The temporal logic of repair and maintenance reveals nothing so much as the fragility and finitude of—or the necessary logic of imperfection behind—the technological assemblages

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[54] Ibid., 232.
[55] On the pervasive logic of planned obsolescence, see also Saito in her chapter in this volume.
[56] Steven J. Jackson, "Speed, Time, Infrastructure: Temporalities of Breakdown, Maintenance and Repair," in *The Sociology of Speed: Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities*. ed. Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 170.

people rely on: there would be no repair and maintenance needed if things were not always (at risk of) breaking down. This situation might make chronolibido a central concept through which human–technology interaction is understood, but Jackson's work shows that loss and ephemerality—central to the digital though they are (something Munster's emergent ethos of death also discloses)—are not common registers through which digital technology is experienced or theorized.[57] By contrast, *GlitchHiker* comprises a digital object whose fascinating lure cannot be understood without being observant of the sense of loss that haunted it and of the careful practices of maintenance and repair this brought to the fore.

This is important because it allows us to grasp that the atypical attachments of care, empathy, and desire that the game elicited are not trivial, but rather indicative of potentially more sustainable modes of human–technology interaction. Here, it is instructive to briefly consider the work of Bernard Stiegler on how digital technologies predominantly impact and reconfigure human desire. The contemporary technosphere is, according to Stiegler, characterized by a crude delimitation of the possibilities for care and desire, both for our environment and for our own mind. Stiegler's argument is that a contemporary technological culture focused on programmability and rampant consumerism has severely stunted desire and the cultural imagination: by creating and programming artificial needs, "libido is channeled towards the interest of consumption, instigating symptoms of a true destruction of libido."[58] The effects of this destructive drive are, according to Stiegler, widespread: a susceptibility of the mind to be usurped and programmed by digital (marketing) technologies, the global extension of a logic of calculation, and a resultant inability to imagine a future beyond the short-term circuits of digitally induced consumption.[59] The philosophy of frictionlessness facilitates these processes: by tying technology to the navigation of everyday life so seamlessly that people automatically and casually engage it, the space for reflection is diminished. Stiegler bemoans the threat that this insidious focus on consumption poses to the active and productive use of technology.[60] The terminology of production should here be taken not to refer to the capitalist production of commodities but rather to creative and transformative uses of technology that could challenge the dominant technologic of programmed consumption.

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[57] Jackson, "Rethinking Repair."

[58] Stiegler, *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism*, 21.

[59] See, for example, Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 25–7, 51–2, 63.

[60] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 2: Disorientation*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 128.

One way of remedying the unhealthy relation to technology that Stiegler sketches can be found in bringing the temporal constitution of care and desire to the fore in the engagement of technology. The practices of repair and maintenance that Jackson lists fit Stiegler's conception of the productive adoption of technology—repair is about finding fixes and new, often unintended uses instead of yielding to the consumption-driven logic of constant replacement, updating, and optimization. Moreover, repair and maintenance accentuate the temporal: their necessity announces the never-ending threat of loss, and bespeak a way of responsibly engaging the finitude of technology instead of seeing it primarily as an impetus for discarding and substituting all that is broken. This hints at the possibility of a culture in which technological breakdown would more palpably thrust the dimensions and material effects of finitude and fragility into the limelight, thereby rousing the flow of chronolibido. A philosophy of technology more attuned to temporality and finitude—thereby recognizing that perfection-oriented visions of frictionless and optimizable technology forestall a responsible engagement with technology and gloss over the material destruction sedimented in the digital's legacies—could circumvent the digital circuits of programmed consumption and wrest more meaning and sustainability from society's reliance on technology.

Conclusion

GlitchHiker and its aesthetic of imperfection, while modest in scope, provide an empirical example of what a more harmonious relation with technology might look like. Musing on the matter of care for technology, Jackson argues that "to care for something … is to bear and affirm a moral relation to it."[61] As the concept of chronolibido reveals, this relation is from the first instance marked by a feeling for the temporal and for finitude. My analysis of *GlitchHiker* has shown how the flow of chronolibido can be intensified in one's relations to technology—the sense of care that the game evoked emanated first of all from its finite condition and from the way it connected an aesthetic of imperfection to an acute logic of fragility. By drawing on glitches to signify digital decay, *GlitchHiker* forms a key example of the ethos of death and finitude that Munster theorizes. As such, *GlitchHiker* poses an alternative to the design philosophy of frictionlessness and its underlying notion of perfection as outlined in this chapter: the game deviates from conceptions of the digital as a frictionless zone of unbridled expansion and

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[61] Jackson, "Rethinking Repair," 231–2.

ever-smoother connection. Against some of the digital's most troublesome tendencies, the aesthetic appreciation of technological fragility, finitude, and imperfection that the game and its ethos of death solicited reveals a cultural imagination open to alternative ways of relating to technology.

Considering that Jackson encourages a deeper appreciation of breakdown and repair in the interest of building a more sustainable world, it seems especially pertinent that *GlitchHiker* was created during an event organized in purview of the theme of "extinction." The game makes palpable that different modes of relating to technology—illuminated by experiences of care and morality—are possible and, following Jackson and Stiegler, necessary in a world under ecological duress that nevertheless cannot seem to shed the shackles of unbridled consumption. By amplifying the glitch's status as a token of friction and fragility, *GlitchHiker* reminded its audience of the frail and finite nature of technology and thereby shaped the conditions for a less functionalist outlook on technology. Its aesthetic of imperfection made explicit that the game was haunted by finitude and thereby urged its players to care for its fragile composition and to not regard it as simply another entertainment product. The significance of *GlitchHiker*'s aesthetic of imperfection thus rests primarily on its visualization of a distinctly digital form of fragility—a form that, through energizing the flow of chronolibido, staved off illusions of digital immortality or inconsequence and gave way to a decidedly moral relation to technology.

By way of a conclusion, I now return to the words of Zachary Corsa that opened this chapter. As *GlitchHiker* and the work of the theorists discussed here attest, digital technologies are as prone to breakdown and rife with errors as are the technologies that Corsa praises for their imperfections. The way in which the digital's potential pockets of friction are treated under the dominant design paradigm of frictionlessness, however, reveals a detrimental mode of relating to technology that glosses over the material conditions that undergird the contemporary technosphere—something captured by Corsa's critique of the rapid turnover over of "sweatshop-fashioned model[s] of iPhone."[62] *GlitchHiker* offers an alternative pathway: it is an object whose glitch-based imperfections amplify the sense of the temporal that haunts all technologies and in doing so invites its audience to see technology as something fragile and unique. In an age of ecological turmoil, deepening the chronolibidinal bonds and thereby understanding technology as something imperfect and as something to be cared for rather than discarded could provide one way of

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[62] Corsa, "A Landscape of Decay."

negating both the material destruction and mental delimitation effected by the perfection-oriented design philosophy of frictionlessness.

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The Imperfections of Listing the Past: Listing Names in Holocaust Commemoration

Ernst van Alphen

The archival genre of the list is often legitimized by its referential efficiency: a list does not refer generally or metaphorically, but refers to all items, all individuals, and, in the case of a holocaust memorial, to all victims, by explicitly naming them all. This quality of archival organization makes the archive as medium into an ideal, or perfect instrument for referential objectivity.

The referentiality of archives is, however, less perfect than it seems when we consider it from a performative and political point of view. This became clear during the Second World War because of the role archival organizations had in tracing Jewish inhabitants in countries like the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. Whereas in the Netherlands 75 percent of the Jewish population were deported, in Belgium and in France the percentage only added up to, respectively, 40 percent and 25 percent. This enormous difference between the three countries is usually explained by the fact that Dutch municipal archives were perfectly organized, which made it rather easy for the Nazis to find out who was Jewish and who was not. Municipal archives in Belgium and France, by contrast, were messy archives and demonstrated all kinds of systemic and organizational imperfections. In those countries the Nazis had much more difficulty in tracing their Jewish inhabitants. In this respect, the imperfection of messy archives saved the lives of millions of people. In the Second World War case, the more perfect, that is, well-organized, the archive was, the more deadly it was.

This paradoxical conclusion also seems to be relevant for some recent Holocaust memorials. In what follows I will discuss the effects of what I call

In this chapter, I revisit and extend findings that I discussed earlier in Van Alphen, "List Mania in Holocaust Commemoration," *Caught by History* and *Staging the Archive*.

referential imperfection as they play out in a selection of Holocaust memorials and as highlighted in artworks of French artist Christian Boltanski.

Memorials and Lists

The rise of the archival system or organization in Holocaust commemoration is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although archival lists have been used widely since the end of the Second World War, they were at first not always considered to be effective as memorials.[1] Lists were rather seen as instrumental, because they gave access to referential information. In the first few decades after the end of the war it was the narrative mode of diaries and testimonies that was viewed as the most effective means of Holocaust commemoration. The referential information provided by narratives was more extensive, comprehensive, and elaborate than the basic information offered by lists. It is only since the beginning of the twenty-first century that the archival mode has become increasingly import, especially in the form of lists.

Recent Holocaust memorials are often not made according to the conventional format of the monument, or that of the counter-monument (another important trend in the 1990s).[2] Many of these recent memorials consist of lists, are presented in digital form, and can be visited on the web. The most well-known example is probably the redesigned Hall of Names at Yad Vashem in Israel, reopened in 2005. This monument commemorates every Jew who perished in the Holocaust. The Hall of Names houses the extensive collection of "Pages of Testimony" —a listing of short biographies of each Holocaust victim.[3] Over two million pages are stored in this collection. In close connection to the Hall of Names exists the digital "Shoah Names Database," initiated in 1999, in which the names and biographical details of two-thirds of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis have been collected and recorded.[4]

Another example of a digital memorial consisting of a list is *Digitaal Monument Joodse Gemeenschap* (Digital Monument Jewish Community). The Dutch historian Isaac Lipschits initiated this digital monument in the

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[1] For a history and analysis of Holocaust memorials in different countries, see James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

[2] For a discussion of counter-monuments—monuments whose story challenges or problematizes the premises of their own existence—see ibid.

[3] The monument can be visited online at http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/hall_of_names/what_are_pot.asp, accessed September 11, 2019.

[4] The database can be visited at http://db.yadvashem.org/names/search.html?language=en, accessed September 11, 2019.

year 2000 and since 2005 it can be visited and consulted on the web.[5] The main goal of the website is to serve as a memorial. The makers want to keep alive the memory of all Dutch Jews who died in the Holocaust. This means that they commemorate around 101,800 victims by listing them with their name, date, place and country of birth, and the date and camp where they were killed. In the cases where more information about a specific person is available—about, for instance, partners, children, and other relatives—this information is added on a subsequent page. The second goal of the work is educational: to offer later generations the possibility to find out about the Jewish victims of the Holocaust in the Netherlands. What the site teaches future generations about the history of the Holocaust is who, which individuals, were victimized by the Holocaust.

In the Netherlands another impressive memorial has been established, although this memorial is not digital. It is devoted to all Jewish and Roma children in the Netherlands who were killed during the Holocaust. It is titled *In Memoriam: De gedeporteerde en vermoorde Joodse, Roma en Sinti kinderen 1942–1945* (In Memoriam: The Deported and Killed Jewish, Roma and Sinti Children 1942–1945). This memorial was first presented in 2012 in the form of an exhibition, then in book format. Its initiator is the Dutch writer and poet Guus Luijters. He was inspired by a project by Serge Klarsfeld in France, who, already in 1995, published a *Mémorial des enfants juifs déportés de France* (*Memorial of Jewish Children Deported from France*). What these two memorials of children have in common is that, by adding photographs of the children to the listed names and dates, they compensate the factuality and impersonality of lists.

In the case of the two Dutch Holocaust memorials the listing of names is significant in political and therapeutic ways. Listing the names of Holocaust victims also means giving back to them their names. These names were taken from them in the camps as a way of de-individualizing them. They had become anonymous. In Auschwitz their names were replaced by a tattooed number. Thus, listing names of Holocaust victims is a device that reattributes individuality to them. From this perspective, the creation of Holocaust memorials based on listing names seems to be the perfect remedy against traumas of the past. At second sight, however, monuments that list names are less precise than we might think at first, because they create unexpected problems—problems that are the result of the referential imperfections of archival organization.

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[5] The monument can be visited online at https://www.joodsmonument.nl/, accessed February 27, 2020.

The issue I would like to address in this chapter is what exactly these recent memorials, digital or not, perform when they are based on the genre or format of the list and the activity of listing. Within Holocaust studies and Holocaust commemoration, the format of the list is highly respected as well as highly problematic.[6] It is respected because in lists, *all* victims can be acknowledged and represented—not by means of one symbol or allegory that is supposed to represent all victims, but through their own individual names and through information that confirms the individuality of these persons, such as their dates of birth and the dates on which their life ended. That same activity of listing is, however, also problematic because the genre of listing is potentially contaminated by its history: the Nazis particularly excelled in listing. In this context I will not deal with how the Nazis used archival organizations for their genocide. I have already done so at length in my books *Caught by History* (1997) and *Staging the Archive* (2014).[7] Instead I will focus on the imperfect referentiality of lists. As I will argue below, the referential imperfection of lists is caused by the fact that, over time, they are subjected to decay, in the sense that their referentiality dissolves and transforms into symbolic signification.

The Referentiality of Lists

In what follows I will locate the imperfection of archival organization by focusing on the referentiality of archival lists. I will do so by focusing on artistic practices and memorial practices based on lists, because artistic practices are usually highly self-reflexive.[8] French artist Christian Boltanski explores the referential function of lists, raising the simple act of listing into a privileged practice for art. He does so most notably in his artist's books, which he usually creates in the context of an exhibition. Boltanski's art books are not catalogues, documenting an exhibition; they demonstrate in the material form of the book the issues that are also at stake, but differently, in the framework of the museum exhibition. Boltanski's books usually consist

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[6] See about the practice of listing also my analysis "List Mania in Holocaust Commemoration."

[7] See Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Ernst van Alphen, *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media* (London: Reaktion, 2014).

[8] See my book *Staging the Archive*.

of lists. They list photographs, items, names, descriptions of artworks, and the like.[9]

One of Boltanski's many artist books demonstrates that the referential function of lists is to a certain extent illusionary. This book, published in 1994, consists of the real telephone directory of the Swedish town Malmö. The directory is from the year 1993. All Boltanski changed in the number of real copies that were provided to him was the cover of the original directory. A white sheet of paper was glued on top of the original cover, printed with the name of the artist, the name of the museum responsible for this publication (Malmö Konsthall), and the title of this artist's book: *Les habitants de Malmö* (The Inhabitants of Malmö).

The telephone directory as artist's book foregrounds how the referential nature of pragmatic lists is ultimately illusionary. The referentiality begins to evaporate from the moment such a listing is being performed. More and more people on the list will either move to other places or die. After some time, the list only provides the names of people who once lived in Malmö but who are now gone or dead. Boltanski foregrounds the illusionary referentiality of the directory by adding a four-page errata to the directory. A three-page list of names of people is introduced by the following statement: "You can't reach these inhabitants of Malmö on the phone anymore. They died in 1993."[10]

Boltanski's telephone directory creates a Holocaust effect—my term for art whose viewers directly experience a certain aspect of the Holocaust or Nazism—comparable to most other works by the artist.[11] This time, however, it is the listing of names that is responsible for that effect. Over time the directory becomes a memorial of all the former inhabitants of Malmö.

Similarly to what Boltanski did with the Malmö telephone directory, the referential function of lists in his other artist's books is challenged.[12] But the way he undermines the referential function is now different. These lists stand for human beings or objects in the real world. Like arrows, they point to them. But in remarks in the introductions to his artist books, Boltanski redirects their representational function.

The referential reading of the list transforms, in Boltanski's artist's books, into a metaphorical reading of it. This transformation also takes place

[9]   A more elaborate reading of Christian Boltanski's artist books can be found in *Staging the Archive*, especially in chapter Three on Listing.
[10] Christian Boltanski, *Les habitants de Malmö* (Malmö: Malmö Kunsthall, 1993), n.p.
[11] On Holocaust effect (an effect that I also observe in literary texts), see my *Caught by History*, 10.
[12] For relevant examples, see *Archive of the Carnegie International*, *Erwerbungen Rheinischer Kunstmuseen in den Jahren 1935–1945*, *Diese Kinder suchen Ihre Eltern*, *Lost*, *Inventaire du Cabinet d'art graphique 1977–1998*.

in the presentation of his book *Les Suisses morts* (The Dead Swiss, 1990). Explaining why this book exclusively focuses on Swiss people, the artist states the following:

> Previously I made works concerned with dead Jews. But "Jew" and "dead" go too well together, the combination is too illuminating. By contrast, there is nothing more normal than the Swiss. There is really no reason at all why they should die; in a certain sense they are more frightening, because they are like us.[13]

Boltanski reads the list of dead Swiss as a *memento mori*, as a warning that we should all remember our mortality. The referentiality of the list is not completely cancelled but it is overruled by the analogy with the fact that the mortality of these Swiss people is not different from "our" mortality.

What exactly enables Boltanski's reading of lists as metaphorical instead of referential? Although each item in the list has a referent, the fact that the list as such makes the impression of being endless makes the referentiality lose its specificity. The referentiality becomes general or abstract, which creates a paradox. The gradual evaporation of referentiality is an effect produced by listing: the more endless the list, the less specific its referentiality. When the referential function loses its strength, the symbolic reading of the list imposes itself.

Considering this paradoxical effect of listing, it is not really surprising that since the opening of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, in 1982, designed by Maya Lin, so many other memorials have been modeled on this memorial consisting of a list of all names of US military who died in Vietnam. The listing of individual names seems to make these soldiers referentially present. Each name stands for a soldier who died. Their absence or death is momentarily transcended; referentially they are made present again. But the listing, seemingly endless, of all those names has an opposite effect. These memorials are so effective because the listing results in an overwhelming effect of absence. Ultimately it is the incredible, that is, uncountable, number of people who died that overwhelms us. Whereas each individual soldier can be imagined, made "present" by means of a referential name or portrait, the endlessness of the list cannot be imagined. The unimaginable number of people who died strikes us by their absence. This is the moment that the referential function transforms into a metaphorical—or symbolic—one, and the pragmatic list that can be consulted to know

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[13] Christian Boltanski, *Liste des Suisses morts dan le Canton Valais en 1991* (Lausanne: Le Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne, 1993), 86.

who died transforms into a memorial for all those who died. And perhaps also into a *memento mori* for those who still have to die. The success of such memorials in the form of a list depends entirely on the mass-induced dissolution of referentiality.

Boltanski's listing of works also foregrounds the awareness that listings are only partly the result of what they referentially refer to. They are to a great extent the result of the distinctions and categories on the basis of which the listing takes place. What is made present by means of listing is not simply the referential world of objects implied in the list but the conceptual categories used by the archivist and imposed on the referential world.

This brings us to a major controversy surrounding the Dutch National Holocaust Monument (NHM), and the methodology and categories that its architect used to construct the list of names for this monument. The construction of this memorial is at the time of writing under construction, with an expected completion date of 2020. American architect Daniel Libeskind designed a very big monument of bricks and steel for a small, narrow location at Amsterdam's Weesperstreet. The design of the monument was not commissioned: Libeskind took the initiative for designing it himself and offered his plan to the city, or perhaps we should say, he imposed it on Amsterdam. The monument is supposed to consist of a list of the names of all the victims of the Holocaust.

But this design and organization of the National Holocaust Monument creates a major political problem, because how perfect, and referential, can such a definition be? The National Holocaust Monument that at first seems to be dedicated to all the victims of the Holocaust is restricted to the Jewish, Roma, and Sinti victims of the Holocaust. Each victim's name will be placed on an individual brick stone, from which big walls will be constructed. When the chair of the Auschwitz committee Jacques Grishaver was asked why other important groups of victims, like Jehovah's Witnesses or homosexuals, were not included, his answer was that Jehovah's Witnesses could have converted to another religion: it was their own choice to be Jehovah's witness.[14] Homosexuality was also seen a matter of choice. Being Jewish, Roma, or Sinti, by contrast, was, so the maker argued, not a matter of choice, but a racial category. It is striking that the Auschwitz committee legitimized the monument's imperfect restriction of Holocaust victims to Jewish, Roma, and Sinti victims, by the same racial categories that were also used by the Nazis. As a result, this Holocaust Monument is not only created for Holocaust

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[14] See https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/02/21/jehovas-mogen-niet-op-het-monument-6874133-a1547088, accesses on September 15, 2019.

victims, it also creates a Holocaust effect, by adopting the most important Nazi categories.

The Addendum of Lists

Within the same year that Guus Luijters had presented his *In Memoriam* for Dutch Jewish and Roma children, a so-called *Addendum* was published with the book.[15] This *Addendum* contains new lists that were not part of the original lists of the *In Memoriam*. The first was a list of addresses of pioneer camps, or of orphanages. The second list enumerated Dutch children who were not deported from Dutch transit camps, but who had been sent to other countries by their parents, had been caught, and then transported from the Belgian and French transit camps of Mechelen and Drancy. Luijters regretted that his first listing was the result of the decision to insert only children in the list who had been deported from the Netherlands, even if these children were originally German, Hungarian, Turkish, Belgian, or French. Because of this curatorial decision Dutch children deported from other countries than the Netherlands remained unmentioned and invisible in the list.

There is also a list of children who were removed from *In Memoriam*. This was done because they did not adhere perfectly to the definition of childhood as a common denominator for human beings under the age of eighteen. It turned out that some children were not yet eighteen when they were caught and deported, but had turned eighteen when they died in the gas camps. They were, in other words, removed from the memorial, which was only meant for human beings under eighteen.[16]

Luijters' reconsideration indicates, however, the crucial importance of the agent who makes the list. Comparable to Boltanski's responsibility for the categories used in the list of all the acquisitions of the Prints and Drawings Department of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, it is clear that Luijters is responsible for what the list looks like in crucial ways. As the Addendum demonstrates, the list is not referential in an unproblematic way. It builds on categories, motivated or not, that are chosen by the list maker or curator of the list.

After the two added lists, an enumeration follows with corrections to the transport lists out of which the original *In Memoriam* consisted. In the introduction to these corrected transport lists, the kind of mistakes that have been corrected are listed. As becomes clear, the list is presumably never

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[15] See Guus Luijters, *In Memoriam: Addendum* (Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam, 2012a).
[16] See ibid., 7. "Wel opgenomen kinderen die buiten het bestek van het boek vallen," p. 11.

complete, but produces new lists, and lists within lists. There never seems to be an end to this process. The question that imposes itself, then, is: is this proliferation of lists the result of a listing mania or listing obsession, in this case the one of Guus Luijters, and perhaps fueled by the same obsession of the Nazis of the *Sicherheitsdienst?*[17] Or is the referential function of lists by definition illusionary, and can lists be expanded endlessly?

    It is not only Luijters' *In Memoriam* that raises this question. It points to a structural problem of all lists. The memorial list that served as a source of inspiration for *In Memoriam,* Serge Klarsfeld's *Mémorial des enfants juives deportés de France*—poses this question even more pertinently. Klarsfeld's memorial list does not have one but eight "errata," or "addenda," in French called *additif*.[18] After the memorial had been published in 1994, eight extra lists with new information and corrections appeared from 1995 until 2007. The *additives* did not only make all kinds of corrections in the original list, but also added new categories of listing to the original one. When one begins to list, there seems to be no end to this impulse. For this reason, the planned National Holocaust Monument in Amsterdam will also have brick stones without any name on it, so that new names can be added at a later stage. This only partially solves the imperfection of listing names, however: what about names that ended up in the list of names for the wrong reason and that should be removed from the monument? Are the bricks with those names going to be removed?

Conclusion

The listing of names on memorials also happened after the First World War, especially in France and Belgium. Every small town has in the center a memorial that lists all the inhabitants of that town, usually young men, who were killed. In small communities, these names continue to refer to families that are known because they are part of these communities. The names of the individual young men will probably not refer to that individual human being anymore, but to the family to whom the men belonged—and whose name still rings a bell, at least for the people living in that community at this moment. But with big, national monuments like the Vietnam Veteran Memorial in Washington, DC, or the planned National Holocaust Museum

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[17] See on listing mania my "Listing Mania"; see also Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (1996). The Sicherheitsdienst was the intelligence agency of the Nazi Party.

[18] The first *additif* appeared in 1995, no. 2 in 1997, no. 3 in 1998, no. 4 in 2000, no. 5 in 2003, no. 6 in 2004, no. 7 2006, and no. 8 in 2007.

in Amsterdam, the referentiality of the list of names is inevitably imperfect. The Vietnam Veteran Memorial chronologically lists the names of more than 58,000 American soldiers who were killed in the Vietnam War. In the case of this memorial, immediately after it was established in 1982 each individual soldier could be imagined, made "present" by means of a referential name. But now, thirty years later, the referentiality of the list of names is dissolving. The unimaginable number of people who died strikes us by their absence. This is the moment that the referential function transforms into a metaphorical—or symbolic—one, and the pragmatic list that once could be consulted to know who died transforms into a memorial for all those who died. And perhaps also into a memento mori for those who still have to die. The success of such memorials in the form of a list depends now, long after they were established, entirely on the mass-induced dissolution of referentiality.

In the case of the National Holocaust Museum in Amsterdam, the situation is rather different, because it is established more than seventy years after the Holocaust ended. Most names that will be listed have no referential function anymore for future visitors of the monument. It is only the endless number of names that still has its function—symbolically, that is. Whereas it is the referentiality of the list that motivates and legitimizes this kind of memorial, it is precisely this referentiality that has decayed and dissolved over time.

The referential imperfection of memorial listings is first of all caused by the fact that such listings cannot be perfect by default. They are usually messy, which results in addendums: people have to be removed or added to these lists. One can wonder if this messiness of archival systems should be solved in the context of memorials, or if it should be endorsed as productive because it counters a possible Holocaust effect. This kind of imperfection is not only the result of sloppy archival work, it is also the result of the employed categories; whatever the categories are, they are reductive in relation to the archived reality.

But there is a second kind of systemic imperfection that is more fundamental to memorial listings. This more fundamental imperfection is intricately linked to the passing of time. Over time, the referentiality that legitimized the productiveness of listings dissolves, and only symbolic meaning remains.[19] This manifestation of archival imperfection should also be endorsed, because it gives a new function to memorials that otherwise become obsolete.

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[19] See on the nexus between imperfection and temporality, or the passing of time, also Yuriko Saito's chapter in this book.

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Imperfect Metamorphoses of Language: Retracing a Childlike Vision with Artist Xu Bing

Tingting Hui

Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze three language installations by the Chinese artist Xu Bing: *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon* (2001), *Book from the Sky* (1987–91), and *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom* (1997). In these three installations, Xu consciously makes language "imperfect," so as to allow the viewer to reexperience a childlike and playful relation to language. In *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon*, Xu restages a well-known Chinese folktale through the creation of a chain of words from different languages that all share the meaning of "monkey." The artwork offers an alternative reading to the Tower of Babel narrative regarding the multiplicity of language, which departs from the dominant narrative of viewing multilingualism as an undesirable deviation from a perfect divine language. In *Book from the Sky* and *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom*, the meaning of characters is either devoid or veiled. The viewer is confronted with a linguistic milieu that is both familiar and strange, where recognizable patterns of writing become penetrated with "errors" and "mistakes." Both artworks invite the viewer to rethink how so-called perfect language influences its speakers and whether it is tolerant to childish, exploratory approaches.

Considering that Xu consciously and carefully polishes all of the different forms of "imperfect" metamorphoses of language, his works allow us to approach the "imperfection" of language not only as a given status. They also stimulate us to approach language as a cultivated and crafted tool and to critically ponder a creativity that is inspired by a childlike perspective.

Xu Bing's Babel: Monkeys Grasp for the Moon

I could conceive of another story of Babel, in which God destroys the Tower not to create a confusion of tongues to block man's passage to heaven but to facilitate the multiplication of languages so that He can lean on the chain of words to reach down to the illusion of His creation and the image of Himself. With the chain of words, each word is tied to another because of their similar denotation, and each one is the extension of another because of their miscellaneous shapes and sounds.

The installation *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon* (2001) by the artist Xu Bing occasions such a reading. The title is borrowed directly from a Chinese folktale. One day a monkey saw the reflection of the moon in water and became worried that it had fallen from the sky and drowned. He called out other monkeys, linking arms and tails, reaching down from the branch of a tree to save the moon. Inspired by this folktale, Xu's installation, which was exhibited in Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC, in 2001, is made from a chain of words that signifies "monkey" in a multitude of languages. Hanging down from the skylight to a pool of water with shimmering greenish hue, these word-monkeys transform the image of the Babel Tower into a chain or a ladder. The installation invites a new reading of the Babel story. Whereas the construction of the Babel is conventionally interpreted as a vain ambition to come closer to the perfect language of God, the chain resembles the means through which the original is to be redeemed by the multiplicity of languages.

Neither the folktale nor the installation explicitly refers to the myth of Babel; yet, they provide occasions for reinterpreting the multiplicity of languages *not* in terms of sin and punishment but as a manifestation of the desire to come closer to the thing itself through the multiplied ways of saying it—even though the thing itself, which these words aim at, remains an illusion. Be it a tower or a chain, they stand for the quest for a perfect language in which the word and the named thing are one and the same.

A perfect language is, in this scenario, the language of creation. "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light."[1] Walter Benjamin argues, in his article "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," that in the biblical narrative, the divine language is original, precise, and efficacious. It manifests the divine insight into life and nature, order and harmony through the perfect unification of language and matter. The naming language of Adam derives from the language of Genesis. Although it lacks the immediate

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[1] *The Bible*, authorized King James Version (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011), 1.

force of creation and performativity, the language of Adam, received from God, sparkles with divine inspirations and intentions—which means, it possesses the quality of being proper and singular, from which the nature and essence of things shines through.[2] The collapse of Babel, thus, for Benjamin, symbolizes the breach of this perfect unity of language, world, and knowledge. The totality of truth and its expression is no longer unequivocally contained in one irreplaceable word, but becomes fragmented and displaced in a multitude of words that mean the same thing but in an inexhaustible and unessential manner.

Benjamin interprets the destruction of the Tower of Babel as a traumatic separation of humans from the perfect language of God. In fact, over the centuries, the biblical narrative has inspired many linguists, disciples, theologians, philosophers, and lovers of language to search for a perfect language. One of Xu's projects, *Book from the Ground* (2015–16), is precisely carried out with the image of Babel in mind. It is a pop-up book written exclusively in a language of icons and symbols. "The contemporary situation [of globalization] facing the modern man anticipates a way of expression that is immediate and unbound to particular regions," Xu writes, "It is not until now that the signification of the Tower of Babel becomes activated."[3] Xu envisions that owing to its immediate visual recognizability, the iconic language would revive the metaphor of a pre-Babel language in the contemporary context of an image-driven culture. This proposal can barely be said to be novel: from antiquity to early modern period of the European context, scholars and philosophers who dreamed of a perfect language, such as Plotinus, Horapollo, and Kircher, were drawn to Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese ideograms for the same belief that, as Umberto Eco points out in *The Search for the Perfect Language* (1997), "images provide a means of communication that can overcome language barriers."[4]

In his book, Eco observes that in European history, the Tower of Babel narrative has never ceased to entice followers to search for a language that comes closest to the one spoken before man fell from the paradisiacal state. Some understand the perfect language to be an original sacred tongue that mirrored the nature of things without distortion but went lost and was concealed. Many existing languages are enlisted in the competition: Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Gaelic, and Chinese. To make it worse, views differ not only

2   Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume I*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 67–72.

3   Xu Bing,《我的真文字》[*My True Words*] (Beijing: CITIC Press Corporation, 2015; my translation), 231.

4   Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 168.

in terms of *which language* approximates the original perfect language but also in terms of *what* constitutes a perfect language and *how* it should be deciphered. Whereas Dante, for example, argued that what God gave Adam was not a natural language but a set of principles that underlined the universal grammar,[5] Plotinus believed that it was the Egyptian script that was encoded with divine wisdom and knowledge because of its visual design.[6] Both focus their arguments on innate linguistic features which appear to make a certain language a better candidate. In short, for some, the appeal of a perfect language lies in its aptitude for representing and relating to the world in a truthful and totalizing way, which offers the prospect of solving political and religious strife by obtaining a univocal perfect language. Others, by contrast, envision a perfect language that mirrors and expresses human thoughts unambiguously and universally. This leads to a paradigm shift, in which the quest for a perfect language becomes a philosophical project that aims for the construction of a scientific language "which could eliminate the *idola* responsible for clouding the minds of men and for keeping them afar from the progress of science."[7]

As Eco's book illustrates, a perfect language is often understood by its pursuers as a promise of harmony and transparency. The idea of perfection in language is intertwined with notions of originality, singularity, and universality. However, what Eco's book does not comment on is how a perfect language would influence its speakers and whether a perfect language is supposed to guarantee *perfect use*—perfect, that is, in the sense of univocal and unerring usage. Would a perfect language, for instance, eradicate the linguistic differences that separate Virginia Woolf—being a female writer of the twentieth century—from a carpenter of our time?[8] Since the pre-Babel language is depicted as univocal and incorruptible, immune to historical evolutions and individual variations, the Tower of Babel narrative clearly invites one to entertain the thought of undifferentiated use of language. To become a speaker of this ideal and neutral language means to *not* be able to fancy and judge the age, education, social class, and sexuality of the other

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5   Ibid., 44.
6   Ibid., 145.
7   Ibid., 209.
8   I do not mean to say that the language of Woolf is overall better than that of a carpenter, although I do speculate that hers, in terms of its literariness, is more refined and self-reflexive. The comparison here is rather meant to invoke the notion of "heteroglossia," which Mikhail Bakhtin uses to explain the coexistence of different discourses, voices, and registers of languages in novels. Likewise, there is no unified reality in language, which is always "shot through with intentions and accents" and is subject to historical and social stratification. See M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324.

person based on his or her language and accent. The price that one has to pay for attaining such a perfect language is thus to be rendered, blissfully and sickeningly, *invisible* and *irrelevant* to language.

Xu Bing clearly plays with the idea of fashioning a perfect language in *Book from the Ground—but* he cannot be grouped into the pursuers of a perfect language mentioned in Eco's book. His miscellaneous language installations and projects, instead of striking one as serious religious and scholarly undertakings, foreground the idea of playful deviations and *imperfect* uses. In this chapter, I perform a close reading of three of Xu's installations so as to unpack the theoretical and artistic implications of crafting and encountering an imperfect language, and to form a critical thinking of language and creativity inspired by a childlike perspective.

From his earlier work *Book from the Sky* to a more recent experiment with Chinese characters to render landscape motifs, Xu consistently implies the perspectives of a child or a novice learner, whose relation to language is primarily one of apprenticeship, play, and exploration. Rather than a quest for the perfect language, one could summarize his work as an inquiry into imperfect metamorphoses of language. In using that term, I follow Helena Leheckova's observation, in her article "Imperfect Language: *How Come*? and *So What*?" that "children and students of the language can replace correct items with almost anything from the realm of incorrect or non-existent language items."[9] The dimension of errors and play is an important part of a child's experience of language. Xu's language installations, in a way, turn the child's experience of failure to understand and master a language into an artistic expression, which further invites the viewer to participate in and to rethink such failure and imperfection.

Xu's installation *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon*, for example, shows that the path to self-knowledge and our innermost desire is not to be obtained through a perfect language but to be illuminated and retraced in the disjunction between language and an inexperienced, probing child. The moral of the original folktale, which most Chinese children read while sitting on the laps of their mothers or hear before going to bed, is that it will put you in danger once you cannot distinguish the real from the illusionary. Xu's installation, however, gives the collective childhood memory a twist. The didactic message is retold through a playful engagement with words of different languages. Substituting symbols of monkey for monkeys, his work asks: how to grasp the real if language is not only the path and means but also what we are? Does saying the same thing in multiple ways lead one to come

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[9] Helena Leheckova, "Imperfect Language: *How Come*? and *So What*?," *Slavica Helsingiensia* 35 (2008): 123–32.

closer to the thing itself? Xu, in my reading, plucks the didactic parable about vanity and failure out of the collective childhood memory of the Chinese and reinterprets it in terms of the reliance of humans on language as a poetic gesture toward the image of the real.

Childhood Lost: The Book from the Sky

In August 2018, I was at the retrospective exhibition of "Xu Bing: Thought and Method" at Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing. When I entered the first exhibition hall of *Book from the Sky*, a piece of artwork that I had extensively read about because of my research, I was completely unprepared for the impact and sensation it transmitted to me, and realized instantly that I had underestimated the importance of the form of artistic expression. Initially I had been drawn to *Book from the Sky* because of Xu's avant-garde approach to language. The printed texts that fill up the space of the installation are composed of four thousand characters that the artist himself invented. These characters look like Chinese from afar but cannot be read and understood by anyone. However, a viewer who reads Chinese could easily find themselves being tempted into a habit of reading, since these fake characters do comply with the formal principles of the Chinese writing system—for instance, the square frame and the compact and orderly combination of different radicals in each character. Some radicals are even identifiable as meaningful Chinese words.

Temptation and frustration, familiarity and unease: these are the affective responses that this artwork affords me. It is thus a piece of work that explores the nature and limits of language through questioning the culturally tuned inclination for interpretation, whose force is even more pronounced for the local audience because of its reference to Chinese history and philosophy. Xu Bing himself and some scholars point out that this piece of artwork has to do with the artist's first-hand experience with language planning and reform in China and the cultural revolution, during which Chinese characters were altered and abused to promote the communist political agenda. "Therefore, in our initial understanding of words, it has implanted a special gene: subversion—that words can be used to 'play,'" says Xu.[10] At the same time, there are also scholars such as Roger T. Ames and Kuan-Hung Chen who comment on the implications of Taoist tradition and Chan Buddhism in this piece of work.[11]

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[10] Xu, *My True Words* (my translation), IX.
[11] Hsingyuan Tsao and Roger T Ames (ed.), *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011).

As I had been familiar with this piece of work, I was ready to appreciate it from the perspective of an insider. Although I was excited to engage with the artwork's material presence in a gallery space, I took it for granted that it was meant to be a cultural theorist's routine procedure to test and confirm and possibly add something new to what they know. And then I was there. Face-to-face with the giant printed texts hanging from the ceiling and pasting up on the walls, the confusion that I had anticipated acquired a rather rich and nuanced taste. It is a nauseous and thrilling sensation caused as much by the oversized texts, the serene and almost formidable atmosphere, and the visual impact of repetition implied in the typographical style, as by the meaningless glyphs. Whereas the immensity of scrolls, posters, and books, with an overwhelming amount of characters printed on them, suggests an adult world of order and sacredness, these characters' lack of reference to a reality beyond themselves turns the exhibition room into a playground where the sacred is bound to lose both its altar and myth.[12] Insofar as the physical body of the viewer is wrapped in the artwork, it is made possible for form and content to unite into an expressive whole to register its force and to enable a childlike vision of an inaccessible, slightly absurd, yet fantastic linguistic world.

Between the experience of the artwork from above (by looking at the images of the installation) and that of the artwork from within (by being present inside the gallery), as I came to realize, what is left untranslated and untranslatable is the body and vision of a child who has learned to speak but is not yet able to read and write, a child who is in the process of perfecting their language to better make sense of the surroundings.

The grandness and serenity of the room, as if it desires and comments on our smallness, sets the tone for the viewer's subsequent experience of the pseudo-language. Even before one starts to read the glyphs closely, the relation of the viewer to the texts is that of apprenticeship and deference. The confusion and frustration, caused by the eagerness to understand and the failure to do so, is not easy to be dismissed, as it is supposed to belong to

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[12] In an article that reflects on Benveniste's and Lévi-Strauss's thoughts on myth, Agamben observes that games and religious ceremonies are often closely related. Whereas the realm of the sacred is composed of myth and ritual, with the former being the articulation of history and the latter the structured act whose purpose is guaranteed by myth, in the realm of play—here Agamben cites Benveniste, "we can say that play exists when only one half of the sacred enactment is fulfilled, translating myth alone into words and ritual alone into actions." The transformation of the sacred to play is also relevant and interesting in looking at *Book from the Sky*, which, through preserving the graphic and textual structure of characters alone, makes language a prototype for the interplay between the sacred and play. See Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 2007), 78.

the ignorance of a child instead of the incomprehensibility of the texts. The profound sense of rejection, absurdity, and melancholy, which the artwork, in the end, means to expose the viewer to, proceeds from the inability to completely work through a linguistic childhood of innocence and to have our craving for language satisfied. Indeed, how many of us can still recall vividly the bygone phase where our relation to the world is not perfectly and seamlessly clothed in linguistic signs? Our barred access to language often turns out to be a fleeting moment in our life, which is soon rewritten with the all-powerful present experience of a perfect bond between words and things. A linguistic childhood that is marked by an imprecise measure of the fissures and gaps is one that we barely know we have lost. So we walk into galleries and cinemas to illuminate the secret dark chamber of memory and to look for the nostalgia of something that we cannot remember and have not yet learned how to long for. However, whereas it is a lost linguistic childhood that this artwork promises to bring back, it is a childhood that comes to betray us. This newfound child will never achieve the state of perfection through repeated acts of reading and memorizing, because the characters of Xu's installation are meaningless in themselves and resist to be learned. The viewer is doomed to be an eternal apprentice.

Yet Another Time: Two Forms of Childhood

The significance of language is well acknowledged in the discussion of Xu's artworks,[13] whereas its connection to childhood is far from self-evident. "I mentioned in a previous article my personal and unique relation to words," writes Xu in the introduction to his collection of essays *My True Words* (2015):

> My mother worked in the library studies of Peking University. She was busy at work; often when there were meetings, she would have me locked in the stack room. I was from early on familiar with the look and style of all sorts of books, but they were at the same time unfamiliar to me since I couldn't read them back then.[14]

Despite the artist's explicit reference to his childhood memory, his artwork's potential of retracing a childlike experience of language does not draw much critical attention. This is not surprising. Contemporary viewers

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[13] See Tsao and Ames (ed.), *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art*.
[14] Xu, *My True Words* (my translation), IX.

are hesitant to confine their understanding of an artwork to an authorial intention and source of inspiration. On the other hand, childhood is barely thought to be productive to critical theory. Indisputably, in various fields of study such as psychoanalysis, linguistic studies, and anthropology, a substantial amount of research is devoted to childhood as a critical period of development. However, the inverse practice, a critical approach informed by a childlike vision rather than a critical thinking about childhood, is rather uncommon.

"It is not possible to conceive a form of critical thought that is not also, in its every fold, a meditation on childhood," observes Paolo Virno in his article "Childhood and Critical Thought."[15] Walter Benjamin, as Virno points out, is representative in this respect because of his insightful reversion of the pedagogical perspective. Without his persistent and attentive reflection on childhood, Virno observes, Benjamin's sensitivity to the changing condition of art in the modern age would have blacked its much-lauded sharpness. In Virno's words, only a person who has spent a long time dwelling on children's games characterized by the inexhaustible iteration of the same gestures and the same verbal formulas could understand the exact significance of seriality on a grand scale, which by now marks not only the culture industry but all the abyss of immediate experience.[16]

The technical reproducibility of the work of art, according to Virno, is comparable to the childhood fascination with repeating the same things over and over again. Repetition and seriality, which redefine not only the work of art but also modern experience in general, are what make childhood a critical category for understanding what Virno calls the "puerile" society of advanced capitalism.[17] From technology to wage labor, from cultural production to urban life, the modern forms of experience exhibit a lack of self-reflection, a deprivation of meaning, and a mechanical repetition of the same, whose features, as Virno points out, "must be questioned, proceeding from the experience of the subject who, not yet speaking, is in the process of acquiring language."[18] Yet, unlike the child, who demands for the same thing repeatedly because each repetition is a realization of the unrepeatable, and because, to use Virno's words, "one looks for a perfect completeness in every single iteration,"[19] the "puerile" modern subject is an eternal child

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[15] Paolo Virno, "Childhood and Critical Thought," *Grey Room*, no. 21 (Fall 2005): 7.
[16] Ibid., 9.
[17] Ibid., 10.
[18] Ibid., 7.
[19] Ibid., 10.

whose apprenticeship to language is definite and conclusive because his/her obsession is with the form of repetition itself.

With *Book from the Sky*, it is the difference between these two forms of (natural and eternal) childhood and that of (unrepeatable and formal) repetition that the viewer is invited to confront and compromise. Laborious training in reading and writing is necessary for a child to be completely initiated into a language, especially when we are talking about a language such as Chinese, whose written forms often do not reflect the corresponding speech sounds. It is not the first time that I hear people say, "You Chinese people must be very smart; otherwise how could you remember so many complicated characters!" In response to this compliment, any literate Chinese person would tell the same story—how they sit for hours on end to practice writing, with each character at least three times. In fact, written language is challenging for children in general because it requires a cognitive understanding of the symbolic nature of language. A child who is learning to read and write not only has to discriminate real writing from similar shapes and forms, to develop word and print awareness and to know how words and texts are organized spatially, but also to understand and accept the correspondence between written words and speech sounds. It is only through repeated immersion and stimulation that the synthesis of sounds and images and the equation of oral and graphic values become naturalized.

Although the labor of repetition involved in language learning can hardly be experienced as purely enjoyable (as it is in games), each time when one writes a character, this writing act is supposed to be a complete execution of a reality reorganized through a set of principles and formal rules. With *Book from the Sky*, however, it is precisely this reference to a reality beyond the glyphs that goes missing. Whereas the regular strokes and repeated structures within each character do reflect the Chinese script, its symbolic reference is shifted from things, concepts, and phenomena to an existing language. Therefore, every single character, instead of promising to activate a set of possible relations and associations among different speakers and contexts, forms a closure of meaning and a stasis of reference. The four thousand pseudo-Chinese characters, although looking quite different from one another, accumulate into a single overwhelming text that comes to stand for the repeated breach of the bond between words and world. Every now and then certain components of a character would strike a viewer as perfectly meaningful and thus raise the expectation of meaning and the illusion of language. Yet, like a crying child who refuses to be soothed with one or two candies when there are obviously more in the jar, we have learned to desire language in its entirety and no longer feel at ease to live with texts which,

because of the scarcity and inconsistency of readable elements, look like landfill sites of deserted characters.

This installation facilitates the convergence of two forms of childhood. The first one is the lived childhood, which becomes unlocked from the memory inside the gallery; and the other one is the childhood Xu has crafted and presented to the viewer, which is an imperfect copy of the lived childhood. With the latter form of childhood, the sweet encounter with a lost piece of memory is haunted by the tyranny of form; and the laborious yet soothing act of repetition becomes an impulsive and self-denying demand.

Yet Another Language: Square Word Calligraphy Classroom

In *Book from the Sky*, repetition comes into play in various ways; it takes place simultaneously on the level of *language*, *method*, and *experience*. First of all, the language of this particular artwork is that of printmaking. As Xu comments in an interview, it has a direct relation to his reflections on repetition and seriality, which he considers to be the defining feature of printmaking as an art form. Unlike painting, printmaking relies on predetermined, mediated, and repeatable traces of movements, while enabling a balanced aesthetic experience of intellect and emotion.[20] Xu introduces these features of printmaking into *Book from the Sky* as a formal language of the artwork, so as to activate a similarly predefined and impersonal relation between speakers/viewers and language. "Only through prints are these unknown and fake Chinese characters able to be replicated and thought real," says Xu in the interview.[21] By making the form as neutral and unobtrusive as possible, Xu prevents the form of repetition from becoming reminiscent of particular individual and authorial intentionality. It is to be experienced as a pure form that intensifies the truth and illusion of language.

Whereas this piece of work, which is made of paper and texts, assumes an appearance of lightness and transcendence, the actual process of making it is painstakingly monotonous and uncreative. All the four thousand pseudo-Chinese characters are handmade woodcuts, which involve repetitive manual labor of designing and engraving day and night. This contrast between the

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[20] See Xu Bing,《对复数性绘画的新探索与再认识》[New Exploration and Re-understanding of Serial Painting], http://www.artlinkart.com/cn/article/overview/84eiAzl/about_by2/X/761erC, accessed October 16, 2019.

[21] Xu Bing, 《徐冰的八十年代：一场源于想象的超越》 [The 1980s of Xu Bing: A Transcendence that Results from Imagination] (my translation), interview by Xiong Xiaoyi, Artron, August 3, 2015, https://news.artron.net/20150803/n766912.html.

work's apparent ephemerality and the intense labor that its creation involves may seem a mere detail at first sight, but it is the key to Xu's understanding of creative and critical thinking as embedded in repetitive and laborious acts of learning, observing, and practicing. In a letter to a friend in which he talks about modern art and education, Xu comments that the biggest issue with Western art education is its overemphasis on creativity. "In terms of art," says Xu, "it is no doubt crucial for training and cultivating one's faculty for creative thinking. However, the problem is that [the current education system] attributes it to a simple model, instead of [encouraging] a thorough exploration of its production mechanism."[22]

What is creativity? How does it happen? Is it possible to craft a form of critical thought informed by a childlike vision? Xu's installation *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom* provides an occasion for exploring these questions. The installation includes teaching videos, manuals of instruction, copybooks, writing utensils, all of which make it mentally safe and practically easy for visitors to adopt a learner's mindset and to simply try things out. If, with *Book from the Sky*, the serenity of the room is manipulated so as to arouse in viewers a sense of smallness and inhibition, the detailed replication of a calligraphy classroom in the gallery, while conveying an atmosphere of discipline and seriousness, means to simulate a traditional and stimulating environment of learning. The inviting tone and the nostalgic sentiment associated with the classroom setting clearly frame the installation as an inhabitable space which desire the physical presence and engagement of gallery visitors. One sits down and starts to observe: how to hold the brush properly? How much ink should one allow the brush to absorb, so that its contact with paper does not result in an overflowing splatter? From which order should one practice these characters? Slowly the anxiety and excitement of appreciating art gives way to a keen focus on the content and makeup of the learning materials. The characters printed on the copybooks, at first sight, appear false to Chinese speakers and foreign to English speakers. Yet, through repeated observations and practices, one is surprised to find that these characters, although looking like Chinese script, are actually English words written in an alternative way that appropriates the formal principles of Chinese writing. The meaning of the characters thus becomes available to the visitor as a revelation and a reward. An entire new set of questions about the nature of language and the limits of perception begin to stir up in one's mind while the hand continues to carry out an unreflective devotion to ink and paper.

This installation builds up a situation where a creative and critical relation to language and writing proceeds from repeated and even boring acts of

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[22]   Xu, *My True Words* (my translation), 117.

reading and writing. The pleasure of exercising one's intellect is intensified because both the aim and the object of one's critical thinking are concealed, delayed, and then found when least expected. In fact, Xu already started experimenting with this idea of combining English words with Chinese script and calligraphy shortly after he moved to New York. The initial result was *An Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy* (1994–1996), an instruction manual that contains a code of calligraphic script that resembles the English alphabet, explanations of the rules that govern compositions of square words, and illustrations that show how to prepare ink and hold a brush. Later, when it was exhibited in galleries, Xu reframed the work in a classroom setting. By doing so, Xu creates the condition for the emergence of a particular state of mind—innocence, receptivity, concentration, and even boredom—which makes the discovery of a confused tongue all the more exciting and thought-provoking.

Meaning, once discovered, cannot be undone. Being at home with one's language often means the ability to have concrete words dissolve into the natural and undivided flow of thoughts. Except for people who are poets by nature, we allow meaning to dictate our relation to language; we forget and leave behind the child—who mumbles and fumbles, who chases after words, crying for their letter cookies—so as to build a strong bond with meaning. The beauty of the square word project is its implication of an uncompromising linguistic vision that belongs to an inept and ungainly child. Although still being under the yoke of meaning, each word acquires a dignity of its own. Stuck in between the double linguistic and cultural references, it necessitates a mentality of translation to convert image to word, word to meaning.

This piece of work, to put it in a more specific context, comes from the urge of the artist to make sense of and respond to the cultural and linguistic dilemma he found himself in. In Xu's own words:

> After arriving at the US, language and communication became an urgent issue. It formed an awkward relationship with your life: Your faculty for thinking is mature, while your ability of speaking and expressing is childlike. Your affinity with Chinese is deep-seated, while you have to use a language that is unfamiliar and inconvenient. You are a well-respected artist; but in that context, you are not so much different from an illiterate.[23]

Xu explains that as an artist living abroad, he has to deal with a foreign language that makes his expressions childlike. His strategy is to allow this

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[23] Xu, *My True Words* (my translation), 164.

childlike perspective to influence and shape his artistic expressions. In *Square Word Calligraphy*, the foreign tongue becomes an illusive middle ground. Two languages meet halfway, displacing and redeeming each other through a fanciful fusion of meaning and form. A Chinese speaker can immediately relate to the graphic and calligraphic form, whereas an English speaking person may mine for meaning. The square word is a language that undoes its native speakers; or rather, it turns *accented* Chinese English speakers into its "natives." When it comes to textual representations of foreign accents, a common practice is to misspell the words and transcribe the sounds literally. Xu, however, makes the Chinese English accent an entirely visual and written form. Although the dimension of sound is lost with Xu's visual representation of the accent, the emphasis, in this way, is shifted to the simultaneous presence of two languages and the double reference to two cultures in each single word. As if they were listening to a speaker with a thick foreign accent, the viewer has to make great efforts to filter out the interference of another language.

Conclusion

Virno says that to survive the capitalist society of spectacle, we need to return to the "egocentric language" of children, "renovating the infantile feeling of language as something one accesses, of language as a faculty."[24] What Virno means here is to retrace a childlike relation to language, which is governed, first and foremost, by the desire of communication and the satisfaction of self-expression.

In a way, Xu's artworks have spelled out the possible forms of this egocentric language of children. Xu has developed the "living word" in *Living Word* (2001), in which flocks of birds, which have the shape of the Chinese character (鳥), take flight from the dictionary definition of bird inscribed on the floor; the "landscript" in *Landscript* (1999), *Reading Landscape* (2001), and *The Suzhou Landscripts* (2003–13), in which landscape motifs (for instance, trees, grasses, and mountains) are sketched with corresponding Chinese characters that indicate trees, grasses, and mountains; and "iconic language" in *Book from the Ground*, in which icons and symbols completely take the place of language in terms of storytelling. Besides all these different forms of children's egocentric language (living word, landscript, and iconic language), in this chapter, I have closely analyzed some other forms of "egocentric language" crafted by Xu: the multilingual effusion in *Monkeys*

[24] Virno, "Childhood and Critical Thought," 11.

Grasp for the Moon, the childish glossolalia in *Book from the Sky*, and the dream language in *Square Word Calligraphy*.

Xu's language installations shift the dominant narrative of searching for a perfect language (as elaborated in Eco's book) to the alternative means of crafting and polishing that, following Leheckova, I have labeled *imperfect metamorphoses of language*.[25] The shift of focus is not due to the impossibility of language to mirror reality and thoughts truthfully, but to the concern that a perfect language is not tailored to express human passions and desires, and thus is principally intolerant to childish and exploratory approaches. Xu's artworks showcase that in language, imperfection can be attempted and achieved via different means—with "achieve" being a rather counterintuitive word here, since I assume that few people are keen on achieving the status of an "imperfect" speaker. On the one hand, the image of an imperfect speaker is often associated with children, foreigners, and any social group and class whose language diverges from the standardized form. The term "imperfect," in this case, is used in a negative way to mark the limited proficiency of the speaker, whose use of a language deviates from the linguistic norm.[26] On the other hand, the imperfection in language can be fashioned and crafted into an artistic expression. The Italian and Russian avant-gardists' experiments with the audiovisual dimensions of language, for instance, because of their suspicion toward and rejection of sense, let language "deform" and lose its familiarity, so as to enhance one's direct engagement with language itself.[27] Xu, likewise, by estranging different language forms, reinvokes the memory and experience of a lost linguistic childhood in his artworks, making the "imperfect" language forms in his artworks a critical category, through which the viewer comes to relate to language in new and exploratory ways.

The idea of an *im*perfect language comes into play in Xu's artworks at two levels. First, all the different forms of language in his installations are far from perfect, for in none of them do sound, visual, meaning, and thing unite into a harmonious entity that guarantees proper access to truth and knowledge. Xu's "egocentric" languages are not subject to the common understanding of language, which overemphasizes language as a tool for communication and thus renders the experience of language itself, if not impossible, then firmly limited to the domain of poetry. Second, neither the pseudo-language in

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[25] Leheckova, "Imperfect Language."

[26] See Nancy C. Dorian, "Language Shift in Community and Individual: The Phenomenon of the Laggard Semi-speaker," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 25 (1980): 85–94; and Silvia Dal Negro, *The Decay of a Language: The Case of a German Dialect in the Italian Alps* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 29–33.

[27] See Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (ed.), *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

Book from the Sky nor the square word in his other work has a native speaker. Rather than invoking the image of an ideal language user, they are results of close encounters between a language and an eccentric and "imperfect" speaker. When it comes to an "imperfect," erring tongue, as Xu seems to suggest, it is not the idiosyncrasies of the speaker that have to be bypassed or overcome. It is language itself that has to bend its form and meaning, and to be reinvented with the rigor of an innocent and daring child.

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Part III

Imperfect Selves

"I Am a Strange Video Loop": Digital Technologies of the Self in Picture-Perfect Mediations

Patricia Pisters

Technologies of the Self

"Who am I?" and "Who are we now?" are age-old questions that have gained momentum in the digital age, where the selfie has become one of the most common tools to respond to these questions. On average, 93 million selfies are taken every day.[1] Selfies are a way to confirm self-identity and our own selfies are fun, usually taken with some self-irony.[2] Selfies can be considered as a contemporary form of technologies of the self, a term that was proposed by Michel Foucault to indicate how individuals can shape and govern their own lives. In his earlier work, Foucault demonstrated how individuals have always been dominated by "technologies of power" that objectify the subject to institutional rules and normative behavior in changing historical contexts of medical care, education and law, order and the prison system.[3] In the early 1980s, Foucault shifted his focus to the capacities of the subject to constitute and transform itself. In his last and unfinished work, he centered on what he

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1   See https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/miscellaneous/global-addiction-selfie-facts-and-moments-from-around-the-world/click-click-click/slideshow/69810065.cms; https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-3619679/What-vain-bunch-really-24-billion-selfies-uploaded-Google-year.html; and https://www.hqpress.org/blog-2/2018/11/20/the-selfie-generation, accessed September 23, 2019.

2   Gita Laksmini Soerjoatmodjo, "I Selfie Therefore I Exist: A Preliminary Qualitative Research on Selfie as Part of Identity Formation in Adolescents," *Humanoria* 7, no. 2 (April 2016): 139–48; Fessler Leah, "Know Thyself: Scientists have Figured Out Why Your Selfies Are Funny and Authentic but Everyone Else's Are so Narcissistic," *Quartz*, February 17, 2017.

3   Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1977); Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Madness in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Tavistock, 1967).

called "technologies of the self," the specific techniques that human beings use which permit individuals "to effect by their own means … a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[4]

While Foucault had a historical approach and returned to the Greek classics and Christianity to find moments of change in the concepts of the ancient wisdoms "know thyself" and "care for the self," it was already clear in Foucault's own work that this notion of "the self by the self" was gaining new push in late capitalist neoliberal contexts. In *The Birth of Biopolitics* Foucault defined the man of neoliberalism as an "entrepreneur for himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his success and his earnings … who produces his own satisfaction."[5]

Taking Foucault's observations on technologies of the self as a starting point—and pairing them to recent findings in cognitive neuroscience and critical feminist perspectives—in this chapter I investigate how the self is constituted in a contemporary setting of neoliberal digital media culture. Inspired by Esther Gould's documentary *A Strange Love Affair with Ego* (2015) and other contemporary media examples, I ask: What are the particular technologies of the self that the digital entrepreneur has at their disposal? What kind of operations on body and soul, what kinds of satisfaction is afforded by digital technologies of the self? What consequences does the selfie-induced conception of perfection carry for the tolerance for imperfection, especially when we consider this from a feminist point of view?

And might a (digital) aesthetic of imperfection form a productive counterweight to the rampant narcissism unleashed through selfie culture? Rather than saying that the selfie is good or bad in itself, I will investigate the possibilities and limits of sustainable self-perception within the conditions of contemporary digital life and propose to see the selfie as *pharmakon*, a poison as well as possible cure for new senses of self that juggle between demands and dreams of perfection and realities of imperfection.

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[4] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Huck Gutman, Patrick Hutton, Luther Martin (London: Tavistock, 1988), 18.
[5] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2008), 226.

Necessary Primary Narcissism

The sense of self has been investigated by storytellers, philosophers, scientists, and artists for many centuries, and there are no conclusive answers to the mysteries of "knowing thyself." The classic way of appropriating one's own body image is the visual self-reflection in a mirror-like surface. As the myth of Narcissus already pointed out, this self-reflection does not automatically give us the security of a stable self. On the contrary, Narcissus did not recognize his own image, and misrecognition and alienation seem to be part of the strange process of matching our reflected self-image to our inner self. In the late nineteenth century narcissism was introduced in relation to human psychology. In his essay "On Narcissism" Sigmund Freud distinguishes two forms of narcissism.[6] First there is the "normal" form, primary narcissism, the infant's initial focus on itself, which serves as a sort of defense mechanism to protect the self in its gradual separation from the mother and to develop a minimal or core self; in psychoanalysis it is generally understood that some basic form of self-love is a necessary condition to establish healthy relations to one's self and to others. The other form, secondary narcissism, is an exaggerated form of this basic and necessary self-love, pathological narcissism that produces unrealistic self-magnification, megalomania, and an exaggerated focus on the self at the dispense of (relations to) others.

In "The Mirror Stage" Jacques Lacan extended Freud's concept of primary narcissism and connected basic self-recognition to a visual mediation: the moment where the infant recognizes itself for the first time in the mirror as an image of an Ideal-I, a more perfect version of its own still incomplete self-experience.[7] This entails that for Lacan the I is always formed in relation to an object (the self in the mirror, or another person that can function as Ideal-Ego). Again this is considered a normal part of development into a healthy human being where the initial misrecognition of the self-as-other also invites relations to the other.

Filmmaker Victor Kossakovsky has movingly demonstrated the power of the mirror stage and self-perception in his short film *Svyato* (2005).[8]

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[6] Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, ed.James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 67–102.

[7] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 93–101.

[8] The film can be watched online at https://vimeo.com/31901502, accessed September 23, 2019.

Fascinated by the effects that the mirror had on his young son when he saw himself reflected for the first time, Kossakovsky regretted that he had not filmed this process of visual self-discovery. So when his second son, Svyato, was born, he took away all the mirrors in the house. One day when Svyato was almost two, he placed a huge mirror in the playroom and filmed what happened. What we witness in the film is how the child slowly discovers its image in the mirror, first as an other whom he tries to connect to by offering toys, waving and laughing, before getting angry and hitting the image. Then Svyato slowly discovers that the image is himself, pulling faces in front of the mirror, trying out every emotional expression and different poses. At the end of the film the father appears in the image and helps Svyato to recognize himself as himself and as distinct from his father. "Do you like how you look?," the father asks. "Yes," Svyato says, who kisses his mirror image, then embraces his father and runs away from the mirror to continue his play with his toys.

In a very moving way, Kossakovsky presents us the power and importance of this "narcissistic technology of self" that seems to be crucial for the development of healthy self-esteem and a sense of self. But what happens in a culture where we are constantly invited to produce and distribute self-images?

The Culture of Selfies

When he worked on the technologies of the self, Foucault was inspired by Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* that had been recently published.[9] Lasch argued that American postwar life is increasingly characterized by the normalization of pathological forms of narcissism. While the book was often read as a conservative plea for prewar community feeling, family values, and the restoration of authority and classic gender divisions, Lasch explained both in an afterword in *The Culture of Narcissism* and in his following book *The Minimal Self* that this was not his intention.[10] Rather, he wanted to demonstrate that a "therapeutic sensibility" of personal well-being and the need for psychic security made the narcissistic personality a typical symptom of neoliberal media culture, but he did not understand narcissism as just plain selfishness. Returning to Freud, Lasch elaborates the idea of narcissism as part of the psychological repercussions related to

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[9] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).

[10] Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984).

changes in society. He argues that the pathological dimension of narcissistic culture is not so much related to its secondary megalomaniac forms pure and simple, but rather that there seems to be a kernel of insecurity that narcissism seems to compensate: "narcissists suffer from a feeling of inauthenticity and inner emptiness."[11] And so he returns to (normal and necessary) primary narcissism to sustain a minimal form of self that is under new pressures in the late 1970s. As he puts it,

> The concern with the self, which seems so characteristic of our time, takes the form of a concern with its psychic survival. People have lost confidence in the future. Faced with an escalating arms race, an increase in crime and terrorism, environmental deterioration, and the prospect of long-term economic decline, they have begun to prepare for the worst, … commonly by executing a kind of emotional retreat from the long-term commitments that presuppose a stable, secure and orderly world … to hold one's own life together in the face of mounting pressures.[12]

Lasch adds that it is not just a reaction to sociopolitical danger that makes the subject retreat to itself, but also a response to media culture and "the replacement of a reliable world of durable objects by a world of flickering images that make it harder and harder to distinguish reality from fantasy."[13] The self, in short, becomes the only stable center, an anchor for "psychic survival" in an unstable universe full of "flickering images." Narcissism, Lasch further contends, seeks both self-sufficiency (the perfect self) and self-annihilation (the imperfect and loathed self), which restores the archaic one-ness with the world and the other (the one-ness with the mother before birth, Freud and Lacan would say). The normality of primary narcissism as a first defense mechanism against loss and separation tends to turn into its pathological forms of self-magnification of the perfect self on the one hand, or worthless self-loathing on the other.

While Lasch spoke of the predigital age, his observations are still relevant today, now that the camera switch mode of our cellphones has encouraged a renewed culture of narcissism that we could call the culture of the selfie. The selfie, a digital self-portrait taken with a mobile phone and disseminated on digital platforms such as Flickr (where the first selfie appeared in 2004), Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and other social sharing platforms, is incredibly popular and ubiquitous, realizing what Marshall McLuhan

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[11] Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism*, 239.
[12] Lasch, *Minimal Self*, 16.
[13] Ibid., 19.

already in the 1960s indicated as the narcissistic appeal of men "fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves."[14] The magnetism of the selfie is a dazzling global phenomenon—one which, in itself, can simply be considered as a way of self-exploration or self-confirmation that, obviously, is not necessarily pathological.[15] Perhaps we can assess these contemporary technologies of the self as yet another response mechanism to preserve a minimal "picture-perfect" self.

So where then is the threshold of the pathological and how does thinking about perfect and imperfect selves interconnect with digital technologies of the self? In his book *Sad by Design* Geert Lovink argues that the narcissism in the selfie cannot be considered as if it were an individualistic trade, but rather is a "technological gesture, produced by a specific hardware condition (a smartphone with a built-in camera, always-on cell, reception, selfie sticks), threading through photography software and dispositions of being."[16] Lovink proposes to critically investigate the acceptance of our selfies being quantified, circulating on Snapchat, Instagram, and other platforms, commodifying our smile and our sadness. He thus takes Lasch's psychological interpretation of the minimal self to a sociopolitical analysis that is crucial. For my purpose here, however, I want to remain in the realm of the psychological and cognitive aspects of selfie culture and the contemporary sense of self.

Clearly there are explicitly dangerous versions of selfies to make the selfie taker noticeable in this "flickering image world." As Bent Fausing argues in his lecture on "Self-Reflection in Digital Media," extreme selfies such as disaster selfies (selfies at the site of an accident), daredevil selfies (on the edge of a cliff, tipping over a boat, on top of a skyscraper, blindfolded driving a car), or sell-tape selfies (where selfie-takers wrap their face in sell tape and look like a Bacon painting) somehow seem to say "I am still a subject and self-reflect myself despite the threat of real danger or disaster."[17] This phenomenon provokes the limits of self-sensing and delivering proof in and as a self-image. What I want to explore here is perhaps another form of extreme selfies, where the selfie taker becomes obsessed by taking and posting selfies. What are the specific conditions that can give further insights in the widespread obsession with selfies and the way they operate on our

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14 Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 41; Brooke Wendt, *The Allure of the Selfie: Instagram and the New Self-Portrait* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2014), 7.

15 Elisabeth Day, "How Selfies Became a Global Phenomenon." *The Guardian*, July 14, 2013.

16 Geert Lovink, *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 163.

17 Bent Fausing, "Self-Reflection. To Bend Back, to Mirror, and to Think the Digital Visual Media." Lecture at International Seminar *Reflecting Ourselves Through Digital Media* (University of Copenhagen: 3 November 2016), 6.

psyche? There is evidence that pathological forms of narcissism, selfies and social media use, can become addictive and related to mental illness, even "selfitis."[18] To understand the underlying mechanisms and the possible effects of the selfie on our psyche, and its relation to intolerance of imperfection, I want to extend the psychoanalytic insights that I have started out with, and move to more recent theories and findings in neurophilosophy and cognitive neuroscience.

I Am a Strange Video Loop

In *I Am a Strange Loop*, Douglas Hofstadter departs from the idea that the self does not exist as a fixed entity or thing that we can return to.[19] In making this claim, Hofstadter shares some principles with philosopher Thomas Metzinger and contemporary cognitive neuroscientists who have argued that the self (even a minimal self) is a process in which we constantly shape and reshape the sense of being someone.[20] Our inner image of our self (or self-model) is continuously produced by constructing senses of ownership that function as a "tunnel through reality" that we consider as our ego.[21] Moreover, what is important is that this metaphor of a tunnel works not only for the self but also for the collective techniques of the self. The inner landscape of the self is shaped not just by an individual nervous system but also by a collective environment, which is, increasingly, a media environment. What happens when we see this idea of the self as a continuous process in connection to the technologies of the self in contemporary media culture that proposes that only the perfect is good enough?

  Let us first look at Hofstadter's main argument. Fascinated by the age-old question how the idea of an "I" emerges out of mere matter (the cells and atoms of our body and brain), Hofstadter proposes that the "I" is formed in looping patterns between different material and immaterial levels of reality, which constitute the self in experience. These loops are strange, because they somehow flip between lower physical levels of the brain of atomic particles, molecular movements, and neurons and the higher level patterns,

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[18] Will Stor, *Selfie: How the West Became Self-Obsessed* (London: Picador, 2017); Janartanan Balamkrishnan and Mark Griffiths, "An Exploratory Study of 'Selfitis' and the Development of the Selfitis Behavior Scale," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 16, no. 3 (2018): 722–36.

[19] Hofstadter Douglas, *I am a Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

[20] Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

[21] Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (Philadelphia, PA: Basic Books, 2009).

the symbolic abstractions where the idea of an "I" takes shape: "Constantly, relentlessly, day by day, moment by moment, my self-symbol is being shaped and refined—and in turn, it triggers external action galore, day after day."[22] Every action and reaction, however minute, is registered, looped back and forth and "my self-symbol slowly acquires concise and valuable insight into its nature as a chooser and launcher of actions, embedded in a vast and multifarious, partially predictable world."[23] In short, the self is an ongoing, constantly looping and updating process, where changes may occur in self-referentiality and the notion of the self may evolve and transform. Even if, in order to call it a self, the idea of a minimal self remains important and occurs when changes stabilize.

The returning image throughout Hofstadter's book is the video feedback loop, a phenomenon that is typical for electronic (video) and cybernetic (computer) media. Video can give immediate feedback on the screen (contrary to analogue film which first needs to be developed), and when one films the screen at the same time that it is projected, the image starts to create whirling feedback loops. But there is a key difference with the strange loops that make up human selfhood: "In the TV setup, no perception takes place at any stage of the loop—just the transmission and reception of the bare pixels."[24] The TV loop, put differently, is not a strange loop that jumps between "acts of perception, abstraction and categorization, between raw stimuli and symbols that imbues the loop with strangeness; … it is just a feedback loop."[25] So the disinterested camera that produces a locked-in loop is not the same as the subjective way of reacting and reflecting of the human brain that constitutes a self. In other words, according to Hofstadter, because the human mind is more flexible and makes *strange* loops, I am not a locked-in *video* feedback loop. And yet, I think here we have a root of the problem of the mechanism of "selfitis," because the problem may have become that we *have* become something like *strange video loops* nevertheless. Video technology as such seems to lend itself more particularly for the self-portrait because of the instant feedback image that it provides, which made Rosalind Krauss propose video as an inherently narcissistic medium.[26] Before returning to video, and digital video by extension, as narcissistic medium

[22] Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop*, 183.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 187.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Rosalind Krauss, "Video, the Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1, no. 1 (1976): 50–64. See also Raymond Bellour, *Eye for I: Video Self-Portraits*, trans. Lynne Kirby (New York: NY Independent Curators incorporated, 1989); Ina Blom, *The Autobiography of Video: The Life and Times of a Memory Technology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

of unsustainable perfection, first some additional unpacking from cognitive neuroscience and philosophy is in order.

Surfing Uncertainty

Hofstadter's dynamic strange loops that form the "I" can be explained by looking at recent findings in neuroscience. The idea of feedback loops has found evidence in neuroscientific experiments that demonstrate that our brains are prediction machines—machines that are constantly processing and updating incoming information. These ideas of the brain as a feedback processing machine have been synthesized by Andy Clark in his book *Surfing Uncertainty*.[27] We (our bodies) continuously receive sensory input (colors, forms, sounds, smells, and other sensations) and our brain has to figure out what this often ambiguous input means; it does so by constantly making predictions, or educated guesses, about what might be generating the signals imposing on us and by anticipating how to react to, navigate, and understand the world. All this happens for large parts on a very unconscious level, where we are not aware of the patterns that we put to work to make sense of the world, others, and ourselves. However, as Clark argues, "We are not cognitive couch potatoes idly awaiting the next 'input,' so much as proactive predictors— nature's own guessing machines forever trying to stay one step ahead by surfing the incoming waves of sensory stimulation."[28] The predictions work on many levels, where stored knowledge based on previous experiences with the world forms patterns that function as top-down probabilistic generative models. These top-down predictions are confirmed, corrected, and adapted based on incoming bottom-up information in repeated feedback loopings between expectation and the reality of the sensory experience. This is also known as Bayesian predictive processing.

Obviously there is much more to say about this, but the point I want to make in connection to Hofstadter's idea of the self as a strange loop is that there is evidence that these strange loops operate according to Bayesian prediction principles as just described.

Predictions, however, have a speculative element, something we are not sure of as it is not verified yet. There are degrees of probability, but by and large (and on a very basic level of brain activity) we are, as Clark puts it, "surfing uncertainty." Taking this idea of the brain as a foretelling processing

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[27] Andy Clark, *Surfing Uncertainty: Prediction, Action and the Embodied Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[28] Ibid., 52.

machine that leaves room for mistakes, adaptation, and learning, it is also possible to relate it to the idea of self-recognition. Neuropsychologists have suggested that self-recognition also operates according to Bayesian principles of prediction and adapting to prediction error signals. When I look at myself, how do I know the person I see in the mirror is really me? We continuously assess our bodies and our sense of self as "the most likely to be 'me.'"[29] So self-awareness is malleable and also deals with this basic uncertainty, even though the brain looks for the most optimized predictions.

All this seems very relevant to contemporary digital selfhood, where the selfie becomes the main visual pattern of self-recognition and self-confirmation. The catch, however, is that we might get stuck in the visual feedback loops of contemporary media culture. To return to the question of the possible pathological dimensions of our selfie-culture, I will now turn to some enlightening media cultural case studies to see how the selves in these cases surf the waves of their uncertain imperfect selves looking for perfection. In no way am I arguing that these video feedback loops of the selfie are the one and only cause of pathological narcissism or related mental health issues such as depression and suicide. By focusing on this element of digital culture today, I do want to emphasize that this is an important element in the technologies of the self as picture-perfect mediations and one of the agents in current psychopathologies of media culture today.

A Strange Love Affair with Ego

In her documentary *A Strange Love Affair with Ego* (2015) Esther Gould investigates the question of the self via her own relationship to her two-year older self-confident, beautiful, and creative sister Rowan, who was also diagnosed with a narcissistic personality disorder. We never see Rowan in the film. Instead Gould follows four Rowan-like girls in their quest to become successful by gaining a great career, great friends, leading an independent and interesting life, while at the same time she has a virtual dialogue with her sister via letters in voice-over or text images. Gould clearly admires these outgoing characters in their expressive and narcissist self-centeredness, but she also shows their vulnerability, their doubts and insecurities. In fact, the film intelligently and respectfully articulates how self-images can turn into

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[29] Manos Tsakiris, "Looking for Myself: Current Multisensory Input Alters Self-Face Recognition," *Plos One* 3, no. 12 (2008): 1–6; Matthew Apps and Manos Tsakiris, "The Free-energy Self: A Predictive Coding Account of Self-recognition," *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 41 (2014): 85–97.

infernal technologies of the self when the ego swims in a sea of freedom and responsibility "to be your own product;" and when the self seems completely determined by self-designed and aestheticized externalized images.[30] In contemporary media culture the question of "Who am I" seems to be in need of confirmation in the realm of the spectacle of social media, and of likes and ratings that are constantly fed back to us. What does this do to our sense of self, the film is asking. The freedom to create one's self-image has a flip side: not only do we zap from one mirror image to the next but it also becomes harder to find a healthy connection to one's own "minimal self." There is great uncertainty and loneliness in this mirror hall of freedom and self-production. One of the girls in Gould's film takes selfies all night, posts them on all her social media platforms, and waits for any likes and comments.

They don't come. Characters in *A Strange Love Affair with Ego* struggle, almost literally asking "what is the selfie most likely to be me?" but getting lost and trapped in the strange video loops of the selfies and responses in their media profiles.

They are not the only ones. Psychological studies that deal with narcissism and social media put Gould's filmed characters in a contemporary context of the digital age. A recent study from the American Psychological Association indicates that curating one's own perfect public image becomes all the more a burden when "exposure to other's perfect self-representations within social media intensify one's own body image concerns and sense of social alienation."[31] Studies among Facebook users conclude that narcissism is correlated with more intense use of social media, while positive self-esteem is correlated with less active social media use.[32] Another study on posting selfies on social network sites investigates the gratifications of posting selfies and reports some of the answers indicating: "My main reason for posting selfies is to let people know that I have a social life and to make it seem like

[30] See also Boris Groys, "Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility," *E-flux Journal #7* (June–August 2009). Boys also raise the issue of uncertainty, arguing that (self)design is "primarily a mechanism for inducing suspicion." He indicates that "every act of aesthetization is always already a critique of the object of aesthetization simple because this act calls attention to the object's need for a supplement in order to look better that it actually is" (3).

[31] Thomas Curran, "Perfectionisms Is Increasing over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences From 1989 to 2016," *Psychological Bulletin* 145, no. 4 (2019): 412.

[32] Soraya Mehdizadeh, "Self-Presentation 2.0: Narcissism and Self-Esteem on Facebook," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 13, no. 4 (2010): 357–64; Agata Blachnio, Aneta Przepiorka, and Patrycja Rudnika, "Narcissism and Self-esteem as Predictors of Dimensions of Facebook Use," *Personality and Individual Differences* 90 (2016): 296–301.

I am constantly doing something fun and cool."[33] It seems a strategy of self-centered perfectionism for psychic survival indeed.

Thus, we create strange love affairs with our Ego's that hide an authentic and very fragile quest for the self that is going on underneath all the images that we put out there in the online world. As indicated at the beginning there is nothing wrong with a certain primary form of narcissism, self-esteem, and self-love. On the contrary, a minimal or core self is important for a healthy sense of self.[34] However, our media technologies of the self seem to invite more easily pathological forms of narcissism, where it becomes harder to find any alternatives between a larger-than-life, exaggerated sense of self, always perfect, beautiful, and loved by everyone; and a less than zero, a diminished sense of self that is worth nothing. In such fragile situations of insecurity, predictive processing (and the normal construction of a minimal self), it turns out, comes with a dark side. Predictions about the self can go awry, leading to delusions and hallucinations that compensate for ontological insecurity. Esther Gould's sister Rowan is a tragic case in point. She was convinced that Madonna was deeply in love with her and was waiting to pick her up at LAX airport. Arriving in Los Angeles, obviously there was no Madonna waiting for Rowan. She was then diagnosed with an extreme form of pathological narcissism: self-magnification and self-annihilation going hand in hand, with tragic and deadly consequences. In 2007 Rowan committed suicide.

Cruel Perfectionism

In her "Notes on the Perfect" Angela McRobbie expresses her worries about the dangerous and terrible consequences of these mental health conditions of picture perfectness entangled with our media apparatuses from a feminist perspective.[35] While psychoanalysis and neurosciences may tell us something about the underlying psychological and brain mechanisms of our current forms of narcissism, McRobbie points out another dimension of the same phenomenon. She argues that Foucault's technologies of the self are indeed

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[33] Taylos Wickel, "Narcissism and Social Networking Sites: The Act of Taking Selfies," *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 6, no. 1 (2015): 1.

[34] Other psychopathologies, especially those on the schizophrenia spectrum, also seem to be related to a distorted or lost sense of a minimal self. See for instance Michel Cermolacce, Jean Naudin and Josef Parnas, "The 'Minimal Self' in Psychopathology: Re-Examining the Self-Disorders in the Schizophrenia Spectrum," *Consciousness and Cognition* 16 (2007): 703–14; and Vittorio Gallese and Francesca Ferri, "Psychopathology of the Bodily Self and the Brain: The Case of Schizophrenia," *Psychopathology* 47 (2014): 357–64.

[35] Angela McRobbie, "Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times," *Australian Feminist Studies* 30, no. 83 (2015): 3–20.

part and parcel of contemporary neoliberalism, which is grounded on the violent idea of perfectionism, the self-generated pressure to be flawless, based on unrealistically high standards that are implicitly based on social pressure.[36] McRobbie gives several heartbreaking examples of contemporary cultural life that demonstrate how the perfect life and the perfect body have become the impossible-to-live-up-to standard, especially for girls and young women. She refers among others to the suicide of journalist, television presenter, and model Peaches Geldof, who a few months before her self-chosen death (at the age of twenty-five) had written a column in a women's magazine "extolling the joys of the perfect domestic idyll … which she had created with her husband and two small babies."[37] In spite of appearances, the reality of depression and addiction caught up on the illusion of the perfect life, which McRobbie designates as a form of "cruel optimism," a term introduced by Lauren Berlant.[38] Perhaps we should say *cruel perfectionism*.

McRobbie's feminist analysis focuses in particular on the "apparatus of the perfect" as the specific technology of the self that shapes contemporary female subjectivity, inviting women to live up to the impossible task of having it all (career, motherhood, sexual and social life, beauty and youth), coupled to an ethos of competitive individualism; all intensified by displaying these successes on social media, collecting "likes" and followers. As McRobbie surmises: "The *dispositif* of the perfect expects the young woman to 'fix' things for herself, by means of a constantly monitored life-plan. It is a practical mode of self-government and … a handmaiden for contemporary neo-liberalism."[39] Returning to her earlier work on the girlish style of Carrie Bradshaw's *Sex in the City*-like postfeminist masquerade (where young women seem childlike and needy, and deep down desiring domesticity, and thus not dangerous to the existing norms of patriarchy) McRobbie argues that contemporary feminism, instead, is translated into an inner drive of perfectionism that also keeps women at a safe place away from power because their striving for flawlessness and overburdened psychic life will catch up on them.

We can find many examples of McRobbie's observations in popular culture where images of perfection and individual competitiveness are thriving. The main character in Darren Aranofsky's film *Black Swan* (2010), ballet dancer Nina Sayers, played by Nathalie Portman, is a case in point. "I just want to

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[36] See also Paul Hewitt, Gordon Flett, and Samuel Mikail (eds.), *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach to Conceptualization, Assessment, and Treatment* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2017); and Paul Hewitt Gordon Flett (eds.), *Perfectionism: Theory, Research and Treatment* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2002).

[37] McRobbie, "Notes on the Perfect," 3.

[38] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[39] McRobbie, "Notes on the Perfect," 7.

be perfect," she explains her obsession with endlessly practicing her fouetté turns in front of her mirror.[40] While Nina does not constantly take selfies, and the film makes clear that her possessive mother—who expects her daughter to fulfill her own failed dreams—is also a reason for the development of her mental breakdown, clearly her drive for excellence and perfection belongs to the competitive neoliberal condition of creating your own success. "The only person standing in your way is you," Nina's choreographer whispers in her ear while she sits in front of one of the many mirrors in the film. And so she goes on and on, strains her body, develops anorexia, exhausts her mind, starts to hallucinate. The film puts us directly in her mental world and makes us understand how reality and illusion start to blend under such oppressive conditions, to the point where, once more, perfection can only be reached in death.

Nicolas Winding Refn's *The Neon Demon* (2016) takes up the issue of competitive femininity from the dark angle of the LA fashion world. As Linor Goralik demonstrates elsewhere in this volume, fashion is a site where (bodily) perfection is contested with special fervor. In Refn's film, a beautiful sixteen-year-old girl, Jesse (played by Elle Fanning) enters the jungle of the modeling industry. She is an immediate success, mainly because she shines with youth, purity, and innocence, something that everybody wants to have a slice of. In an interview for *Sight & Sound* Winding Refn specifies that he wanted to make a film about the insanity of beauty.[41] He demonstrates this by showing how his protagonist develops from guiltless girl to malicious narcissistic adolescent, surrounded by jealous comodels and predatory agents and photographers. Winding Refn's style is more symbolic, surreal, and over-the-top bloody and violent than the realistically portrayed hallucinations of *Black Swan*, but the message is by and large the same: competitive and embodied striving for perfection is deadly.

A last film worth mentioning in respect to the violence of pursuing narcissistic gratification in image culture and social media is Brady Corbet's *Vox Lux* (2018). In this film Celeste (another role by Natalie Portman; her younger self is played by Raffey Cassidy) is a super celebrity, a pop star who rises to fame after surviving a school shoot-out and singing at a memorial service a song composed by her sister. While clearly Celeste is not perfect (her performances are rather mediocre), the point here is that media culture has made her into a superstar who is conceived as flawless: because she is famous, she must be perfect. *Vox Lux* also painfully shows that this perception is

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40 Patricia Pisters, "I Just Want to Be Perfect: Affective Compulsive Movement in *Black Swan*," ed. Anne Rutherford. *Cine-files, #10*, special issue *Cinematic Affect* (2016).

41 Christina Newland, "The Beauty Myth," *Sight&Sound* (July 2016): 26–30.

turning around an empty shell. The film shows Celeste's denial of and struggle with her hollow sense of self, while keeping up the performance onstage. The violence in the film evolves neither from self-exhaustion, as in *Black Swan*, nor from jealous attacks, as in *The Neon Demon,* but from the selfishness of survival and fame, explicitly coupled to the mechanisms of terrorism. School shootings and other gun attacks run through the narrative, pointing to the same online and digital media mechanisms to gain attention and effect.[42]

"Have the Decency to Meitu Yourself"

The preoccupation with the self may have originated in the Greek tradition of the idea of "a good mind in a beautiful body," or "kalokagathos," but the cell phone and global media culture have made the selfie "world famous."[43] HoneyCC, for instance, is one of China's biggest online influencers on Weibo and on China's largest video-sharing platform Meipai, with her own makeup brand and millions of followers. As Jiayang Fan notes in her article on China's selfie obsession, like many other online celebrities and influencers, HoneyCC became a multi-millionaire by posting selfies in branded clothing or fashion items, which then sell by the tens of thousands.[44] She is also connected to Meitu, Inc., the company that launched, among others, a photo-editing app that is also named Meitu, which means "beautiful picture" in Chinese. In 2016 it had over a billion unique users worldwide (half of them in China and other Asian countries). The Meitu M8 phone automatically "upgrades" any selfie to a better version of yourself: your phone can make your face whiter, narrow your jaw, slim your cheeks, widen your eyes, make you thinner, or, with the Beauty Plus filter called "mixed blood," create an Eurasian appearance. All "tailored toward a standard of beauty—mostly female beauty—that is particular to China and countries like South Korea and Japan: pale skin, elfin features, skinny limbs, eyes wide and guileless as a baby seal."[45] The app's standards for beauty are very comparable to the features of Jesse in *The Neon Demon*, indeed. Referring to the competition to get into universities and to find a good job, to many users the app to beautify yourself is seen as a step

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[42] Also indicated by Groys: "In our time, every politician, sports hero, terrorist or movie star generate a large number of images because the media automatically covers their activities." Groys, "Self-Design," 1.

[43] Will Stor, *Selfie: How the West Became Self-Obsessed* (London: Picador, 2017).

[44] Jiayang Fan, "China's Selfie Obsession: Meitu's Apps Are Changing What It Means to Be Beautiful in the Most Populous Country on Earth," *Annals of Technology*, December 18 and 25, 2017.

[45] Amie Tsang and Emily Feng. "China's Meitu, an Aspirational Beauty app, Goes Public." *The New York Times*, December 14, 2016.

toward success in work and society, democratizing beauty. "Many women always feel like they have flaws," said Ms. Liu, twenty-three, a graduate film student who uses Meitu to narrow her face, shrink her nose, and remove dark circles from under her eyes. "They all wish that through some kind of method they can make themselves more beautiful. Meitu is the cheapest and most convenient way to do this."[46]

According to Jiayang Fan, on average people take forty minutes of editing their face before uploading it to social media, usually involving several apps, each with their particular strengths. We see here another variation of the video looping mechanism operating in Bayesian patterns, looking for the best version of the self, with the particular effect that the distance between the Meitu mirror reflection and reality (or reality in the actual mirror) becomes larger. It is no wonder that the beauty industry and plastic surgery have also grown exponentially to reduce this gap between selfie and reality in China and elsewhere in the world.[47] Often this leads to desired results. On the other hand, social norms make it harder to accept any flaws that reinforce the use of Meitu products. Meitu's chairman confirms that editing your pictures ("to meitu") has actually become a matter of ordinary courtesy: "In the same way that you would point out to your friend if her shirt was misbuttoned, or if her pants were unzipped, you should have the decency to Meitu her face if you are going to share it with your friends."[48]

This last point brings us back to Foucault's neoliberal technologies of the self as biopolitics: social norms are internalized and become self-imposed standards of perfection. Combine this with other social standards of accumulating social credits for perfect behavior that China is now testing (the correct smile, the right cloths, keeping to all the rules), all measured by other media technologies such as facial recognition, ratings, likes and algorithmic surveillance, and we have entered the science fiction reality of *Black Mirror*. In the episode *Nosedive* (S3E1 2016) of this popular Netflix sci-fi series, living up to the rules of perfection has become the normativity that is impossible to live up to. The episode demonstrates how technologies

[46]   Ibid.
[47]   China seems to be at the forefront of the selfie-cult and cell phone obsession. The relation between social media, irrational body ideals, body dysmorphia, eating disorders and increase in plastic surgery in the United States, Canada and Great Britain is also indicated in Curran, "Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time," 412. See about the phenomenon of selfie-surgery also, for instance, the *Vice* video "I Got Surgery to Look like my Snapchat and Facetune Selfies," https://video.vice.com/en_asia/video/plastic-planet-i-got-surgery-to-look-like-my-snapchat-and-facetune-selfies/5bedcd66be40775d88072966. In his epic short film *Zombies* (2019), shot in Kinshasa, Congolese-Belgian artist Baloji addresses the lure of the selfie in an African context; see https://vimeo.com/329764956.
[48]   Fan, "China's Selfie Obsession."

of the self come to coincide with technologies of power when optimal self-versioning has become not just a quest of the self but a civic duty. We soon might need jewelry that molds faces into perfect smiles, indeed, as proposed by Linor Goralik later in this book. Or we need to reintroduce the acceptance of bodily flaws, as suggested by Yuriko Saito in a previous chapter.

Media as Pharmakon

All these cases above demonstrate McRobbie's point that the *dispositif* of perfection is the trap of neoliberal competitive individualism that in particular women are sensitive to. When they do not meet their internalized standards of beauty and perfection, self-discipline and self-punishment in endless looping patterns may lead to anorexia, orthorexia, and other obsessive compulsive disorders; depression and suicide are the real and present dangerous consequences. In addition to McRobbie's feminist observations I would like to add that while girls and women are indeed more vulnerable to these new social (media) pressures,[49] it is by no means that men are not susceptible to these new challenges of perfectionism. As Will Stor observes in his book *Selfies*, men may be more obsessed with their muscles, but they are not immune to eating disorders and to creating the perfect body image.

In the Norwegian television format *True Selfie* (2017), we see both young men and women struggling with their mental health in constructing a sense of self that can comply with their self-expectations. In this program (the format was also exported to Dutch television), eight adolescents are asked to film themselves during several weeks in which they explicitly show their more vulnerable sides and struggles. Once a week the participants convene for a group therapy session in which they talk about their psychic struggles of depression, social anxiety, obsessive sporting, and eating disorders. Clearly none of them can handle their inner norms of perfectionism. Narcissus can't live up to the extremities of self-imposed societal norms of beauty, health, and social success. But showing their vulnerable and imperfect "true selfies" might help themselves as well as others. Participants of *True Selfie* indicate that making *imperfect* selfies helps them to get a better grasp on their self-image.[50]

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[49] Dennis Campbell, "Depression in Girls Linked to Higher Use of Social Media," *The Guardian*, January 4, 2019.

[50] For the claim in question see https://www.npo3.nl/true-selfie/17-04-2018/BV_101387566.

This makes *True Selfie* a good example of what we could call a *media pharmakon* of the contemporary mediated sense of self, referring to Derrida's revival of another Greek term: the *pharmakon* that designated both poison and medicine.[51] On the opposite spectrum of the shackles of picture-perfect mediations, there are many examples of the ways in which social media helps people to create a version of themselves that they feel more happy with and connect to others. Besides the acceptance of true and imperfect images of ourselves, an important case in point for the positive effects of selfies are the transgender transformation vlogs that show and share the process of becoming man/woman/transgender on social media. These vlogs are an important help in community building, self-acceptance, and changes in social normativity about gender fluidity.[52]

In sum, we need to consider the different elements and mechanisms that can render these new technologies of the self as oppressive, when the constant visual feedback loop of the digital video image proposes an unbalanced self-image of a picture perfectness that is impossible to live up to. The selfie has its origins in video technology, which is a technology with narcissistic characteristics. Our current selfie culture is an extreme form of this narcissistic medium's perpetual intrusion, and we have to acknowledge both its liberating effects of creating our own self, as well as the risk of creating feedback lock-ins of images of cruel perfection in which one may lose one's ability to connect, to others and even and especially to one's self.

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[51] Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 63–171.

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[Essay] The Forced Samaritan: On Face-Distorting Wearable Objects

Linor Goralik

One of the collections developed by Japanese jeweler Akiko Shinzato is named "Self-confidence boosters" (2018). Among other laconic objects made of polished brass wire—some are helping the wearer to keep her back straight, others force her to keep her chin up, all of them seem to follow the popular idea that if you take a confident "position," your self-esteem will rise—she introduces a "Smile booster." Hooked to the wearer's ears (just like eyeglasses), this contraption gently yet firmly pulls her lip corners to the sides, thus making her walk around with a perpetual smile on her face (Figure 11.1). This creation, which perfectly represents a trend for face-distorting objects in contemporary wearable art, can easily be perceived as an antonym of another art object, created by the world-famous jewelry designer Shaun Leane. He used two long, sharp metallic rods connected by a mouthpiece that forces its wearer's mouth into an aggressive, offensive grin, and a viewer's imagination—into disturbing thoughts about stereotypical "wildlings" and their cannibalistic tendencies.

Wearable art pieces that intentionally distort the wearer's body (see Rei Kawakubo's "Lumps and Bumps" collection (1997), officially named Body Meets Dress/Dress Meets Body,—probably the most famous example of this kind of work,—or artist duo lucyandbart's "Germination" (2008)[1]) do not appear out of nowhere. They can be seen, among other things, as artistic reactions to the rapidly developing social discussion on the idealization of the body in contemporary society as well as on the new visual culture and its demands on every individual's physical shape. Within the domain of wearable art, objects that distort and change the wearer's face deserve special attention

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[1] For photos of these collections, see https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1997-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons (for Kawakubo) and the section on "Germination," in Agnes Rocamora's and Anneke Smelik's *Thinking through Fashion: A Guide to the Key Theorists* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 174–6.

Figure 11.1 Akiko Shinzato, *Self-Confidence Boosters*. Image courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Yoshitaka Kinjo.

as something that may cause an individual to cross, rather uncomfortably, something that I would like to call the "third line of body control." During the individual's socialization, she is first taught to take control over her bowel movements and urination; later to control her gestures, posture, poses, and impulses to move; and yet later she learns, mostly through social interactions, to control her facial impressions, both to meet the requirements of various social conventions and to protect her privacy. Perfecting the skill of facial control, she perfects the absolutely necessary art of performing emotions—an art that allows an individual to successfully communicate not only her thoughts, feeling, and intentions but also her gender, class, cultural affiliations, age and other parameters that weave together into the personal and social identities recognized and reflected by her surroundings.

Jewelry and wearable art objects that force facial expressions on the wearer can, thus, be seen as something quite ambivalent. On the one hand, in wearing them an individual loses the "third line of body control"; on the other hand, she can be imagined doing the exact opposite: many authors of these art pieces claim that their creations help the wearer to literally pass control over facial expressions to an inanimate object.

An object created by Lauren Kalman, a Detroit-based visual artist, as a part of her series named "Devices for Filling a Void" (2015), might serve as a perfect example of the loss-of-control paradigm. Plugging both of the wearer's nostrils and urging her mouth to gape, this gold-colored device not only gives the wearer's face a dim-witted expression but also makes her salivate uncontrollably (Figure 11.2), creating a situation that lushly exceeds

Figure 11.2 Lauren Kalman, *Device for Filling a Void (1)* (2015). Inkjet print. Courtesy of the artist.

the limits of the socially accepted by forcing the wearer to cross not only the third but the very first line of bodily control: the control over her effluvia (Imme Van Der Haak's "golden snot" that is meant to be inserted into a nostril pushed some similar buttons). At the same time, Kristina Cranfeld's project "Ownership of the Face" (2011) might provide an optimal illustration for the concept of outsourcing control over emotional performance to a wearable device: one of Cranfeld's creations, for example, is a smile-forcing mouthpiece that supports a pair of double-convex lenses which make the wearer's eyes look enormous (Figure 11.3).

Cranfeld claims that the devices that she created during her work on the "Ownership of the Face" project, as well as a short mockumentary by the same name, "portray a future where facial expressions of the work force are

Figure 11.3 Kristina Cranfeld, *Ownership of the Face* (2011). Courtesy of the artist.

exploited purely for corporate needs and to advertise a strong and successful company image."[2]

These two devices—one by Calman, another by Cranfeld—provide us with artistic perspectives on a genuine mistrust of the face as a performance instrument: on the one hand, its powers might be abused and thus should be forcibly limited,; on the other hand it cannot be trusted to keep up with the social conventions and should be carefully controlled.

While Cranfeld reflects on the socially accepted performance of emotions by developing the idea ad absurdum, Latvian artist Auste Arlauskaite takes a different approach and creates silver neckpieces that push the corners of the wearer's lips down, thus causing her to break the social convention of "looking amiable" at every moment.[3] Similar work is done by Lucie Vincini: her metallic mouthpieces for men pull the wearer's bottom lip down, baring his teeth and forcing an expression of almost primal aggression onto his face.[4]

We can zoom in on these two artistic approaches to the issue—transgression through over-zealousness and transgression through negation,—through an in-depth look at how artists treat a subject that, by its very nature, occupies a significant place in any conversation about the face and its role in an individual's compliance to social norms: plastic surgery. We can recognize the "overzealous" approach in "Hook and Eye" (2008)—another project by lucyandbart, the artist duo Lucy McRae and Bart Hess, who performed "low-tech plastic surgery" on museum visitors by creating elaborate gluable masks with fishing lines and sewing hooks-and-eyes; in Sophie Duran's "Imperfectionist" project (2009), which includes a wearable facial device with a (faux) lip-inflating mechanism; or in Lalitsuda Settaapithan's silver-and-lace facial corsets that "emulate plastic surgery" (2013). At the same time, Turkish designer Burcu Büyükünal has created a collection named "Terrifying Beauty" that uses curved gilded wire to distort facial features. The artist sees her work as a critical commentary to the global unification of faces into the same "pleasant" mold by means of plastic surgery.[5] Imme Van Der Haak has included ear-distorting golden accessories in her "Configurations" (2010) project in order to emphasize the fact that beauty can appear in many

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[2] Cranfield makes this claim in an interview with the online project *The Passenger Times* in 2013, https://thepassengertimes.com/2013/05/10/kristina-cranfield-art-department/, accessed February 18, 2020.

[3] See, for an example, https://thejewelleryactivist.tumblr.com/post/80954898399/auste-arlauskaite-body-adjustment, accessed February 18, 2020

[4] For representative examples, see https://www.current-obsession.com/rca-babes-lucie-vincini/, accessed February 18, 2020.

[5] See https://burcubuyukunal.wordpress.com/2008/09/20/terrifying-beauty/ for a short comment by the author on her work, accessed February 18, 2020.

different forms, and for "Wrinkles" (2013), Noa Zilberman has cast multiple glue-on golden wrinkles in the shape of her natural ones to be worn on face and neck, as a reaction against plastic surgery's never-ending fight with skin aging.[6]

Each work by these and other authors who work with face-distorting objects reflects at least on one more significant parameter in the process of emotional performance: the relationship between public and private, between intimate and social. Naomi Filmer's plastic-and-metal "Chocolate Mask" (2001) not only forces the wearer to keep her mouth open in a lusting, eroticized manner, thus emphasizing total loss of emotional control, but also creates an impression of a chocolate-covered face: this is an embodiment of gluttony, a very private sin made public (an effect that is only amplified by Filmer's comment that she has molded the mask after her own facial features).[7] Jizhi Li's "Perfectly Imperfect: Look at My Face" project (2016) includes mouthpieces that not only bare the wearer's teeth but also look like a materialized snarl of aggressive speech forcing its way out of her body.[8] The name of Jizhi Li's project bares another important element of the face-distorting wearable objects: they often transgress the social norm by simply attracting special attention to an individual's face. Sascha Nordmeyer's "Communication Prosthesis Portrait Series" (2009), a scarlet silicon device that "creates grimacing facial expressions," may not force the wearer's face into any easily recognizable "emotion," but its author wittily claims that the HyperLip "will enhance your communication skills, make you look smart in any circumstance, be a great conversation piece at a party, raise a few eyebrows and certainly get you tons of attention" (Figure 11.4).[9]

All the described objects can be seen as an embodiment of the inner processes of perfecting our physical performance of emotional reactions— and yet, paradoxically, the very idea of wearing a "prosthetic" to keep a socially appropriate smile in place or to present disgust in reaction to an

[6] For details about the "Configurations" and the "Wrinkles" jewelry series, see https://www.immevanderhaak.nl/Configurations and https://www.noazilberman.com/the-wrinkles-project, respectively, both accessed February 18, 2020.

[7] See https://faceculture.blogspot.com/2010/01/naomi-filmer-chocolate-mask-for-another.html for a photo and a short description of the work, accessed February 18, 2020.

[8] See https://my.academyart.edu/about-us/news-events/news/2016/october/jizhi-li--dazzling-the-jewelry-industry for photos and a description of this work, accessed February 19, 2020.

[9] The citation stems from an interview with design journal *Dezeen* in 2014, https://www.dezeen.com/2014/08/12/hyperlip-sascha-nordmeyer-plastic-mouth-prosthesis-facial-distortion/, accessed February 19, 2020.

Figure 11.4 Sascha Nordmeyer, *Communication Prosthesis Portrait Series (Politician)* (2009). Communication Prosthesis is also known as HyperLip. Courtesy of the artist.

ethically unacceptable situation is transgressive in itself. We are required to perform our emotional responses, verbal as well as nonverbal, in perfect sincerity—a fact that amplifies the redundancy of all the wearable objects described above. On the other hand, should we give our imagination a chance to run wild, we could probably rationalize the use of Akiko Shinzato's "smile booster" in the office, or of Jizhi Li's devastating "Perfectly Imperfect: Look at My Face" facial piece at a funeral. In a world that would accept the fact that rational performance of emotions is a significant part of our social behavior, an investment in such "performance props"—just like an investment in proper grieving attire—would probably be seen as an appropriate attempt to be better people, after all.

Dream in a Suitcase: An Immigrant's Transformative Journeys to Imperfect Homes

Domnica Radulescu

The writer is a foreign country.

—Marguerite Duras[1]

In a foreign country my family is like shattered glass.

—Aglaja Veterany[2]

Notes on This Essay's Format

The present essay is personal, hybridic, fractured, and nonacademic even though significant traditional scholarly research has gone into it together with field, ethnographic, and experiential research. I am interested in creating a different genre, in which critical inquiry is interwoven with creative writing and memorialistic discourse. To illustrate the rechanneling of the brokenness caused by exile and displacement into a different kind of celebratory wholeness in this chapter I offer: (1) brief musings on the experience of the exile, immigrant, nomad; (2) short incursions into some of my explorations of immigrant art, trauma theater, and arts of intervention by theater artists I have connected with intellectually, artistically, and personally; (3) selected examples of my own fiction and theater works that reveal modalities of reinvention, and of creating spaces of belonging through the crafts of storytelling and performance. Other than the linguistic, spatial, and cultural imperfection that marks both the works of the artists I explore and my own art, there are several other layers of trauma that I explore—namely political

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[1]   Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 66.
[2]   Aglaja Veteranyi, *Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta*, trans. Vincent Kling (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), 124.

violence, genocidal wars, and social inequity, specifically poverty. Finally, while I explore positive transformations of imperfect realities through innovative artistic creations, I also warn against the risks and dangers of idealizing imperfection at the levels of socials ills, injustice, and poverty, particularly with regard to cultural appropriations from marginalized communities, such as the Roma people, also erroneously known as "Gypsies."

In light of Virgil Nemoianu's theories of literature as "a preservation of defeat"—and, paradoxically, as "a force of renewal"—I pursue the transformation of the experience of exile and displacement largely through its manifestations in literary creations, in particular theater. In this exploration, I am interested in the ways in which the imperfection of exile meets the "relaxed imperfection and smiling defeat" that, according to Nemoianu, is literature, thus creating a glorious form of "imperfection," that is, "envisioning possibilities, and nursing dreams."[3] While exile is a loss and a profound one at that, it is also a form of rebirth—and in the cases of political exile, an extreme measure of finding freedom from oppression, war, genocide. Equally, while literature is considered secondary to history and social science with regard to factual truths and historical facts, it is also, in Nemoianu's words, "a force of renewal," precisely because it "partakes of irrationality, randomness and surprise, rejection and dispersion,"[4] namely of what is most authentically representative of the organized chaos that is our human journey on earth. Well before Nemoianu's theorizing on literature's fertile imperfections, Joseph Brodsky claimed loudly the power of literature with the self-assurance of an exile writer from the former Soviet Union—one whose strongest grasp on reality and strategy of survival had indeed been the moving sands of literary universes in a world of oppressive certitudes and terrifying utopias. In his lecture on the condition of the exile writer, Brodsky asserts the regenerative and transformative powers of literature as the only salvation in our messy violence-ridden world:

> Should the masters of this world be better read, the mismanagement and grief that make millions take to the road could be somewhat reduced. Since there is not much on which to rest our hopes for a better world, since everything else seems to fail one way or another, we must somehow maintain that literature is the only form of moral insurance a society has; … that it provides the best argument against any sort of bulldozertype

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[3] Virgil Nemoianu, *Imperfection and Defeat*: *The Role of Imagination in Human Society* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006), 20–1.

[4] Ibid., 24.

mass solution— if only because human diversity is literature's lock and stock, as well as its raison d'être.[5]

Before Brodsky, another exile Nobel Prize winner, the French Algerian writer Albert Camus, stated in his 1957 acceptance speech in Sweden that "by definition [the artist] cannot put himself today in the service of those who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it," while at the same time the artist cannot possibly "in good conscience dare set himself as a preacher of virtue" for "truth is mysterious, elusive, always to be conquered. Liberty is dangerous, as hard to live with as it is elating."[6] And even earlier than Camus's speech, Pablo Picasso, yet another exile artist of the past century, pointed to the paradoxical nature of art in relation to any form of absolute truth or perfect certainties:

> Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. … The "lie" is the construct that transforms all those decisions into an experience for the art's audience. The "truth" is the point of the exercise, or what the artist hopes to share through artifice and artistry.[7]

To illustrate some fertile encounters between the bittersweet imperfection of exile and the "relaxed imperfection" of the truthful "lies" of literature, I have chosen several works by immigrant writers who have put themselves indeed in the service of those "who suffer" history and not of those who make it, authors of hybridic art who navigate between poetic memorialistic prose, experimental dramatic texts, and theatrical performances. They are: Aglaja Veteranyi's dramatic poem *Why the Child Is Boiling in the Polenta*, the work of the Belgrade based DAH Theater group, and a handful of my own prose and dramatic texts.

Reflections on Spaces of Exile and Creativity

It has always been about the suitcase: what to take and what to leave behind, what to hold on to and what to let go of. In the summer of 1983, I packed up a modest collection of belongings, clothes for all weather, a handful of family

5 Joseph Brodsky, "The Condition We Call Exile," *New York Review of Books*, January 21, 1988.
6 Camus, Acceptance Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, December 1957. Retrieved February 19, 2020, from https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1957/camus/speech/.
7 Pablo Picasso, "Statement to Marius de Zayas," in *"Picasso Speaks": The Arts*, 315–26. New York, May 1923, 315–26. Reprinted in Alfred Barr, *Picasso* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946), 270–1.

photographs, a volume of poetry, a collection of short stories I had written in my native Romanian, and I said goodbye to my family, my country, and the twenty-two years young woman that I was and boarded a one-way flight to Rome for the revolution of my life, with the intention of never returning as long as the dictatorship lasted. With the passing of years and acquisition of renewed understanding, the brokenness produced by that initial trauma of displacement has been channeled and transformed into new real and imaginary homes, into mosaics of experience and spaces of reinvention.

Since my arrival as a political refugee in the American city of Chicago in the 1980s, during one of the coldest winters of the century, different variants of the question "Where are you from?" have been asked of me hundreds of time. In the words of the writer and theoretician Sara Ahmed, this question "becomes something you reside in" and "to be questionable can feel like a residence."[8] Both through my writing and my life choices I have become the "architect" of my own residence of foreignness. Like many other exiled writers across literary history, from Ovid, to Dante, to Vladimir Nabokov, to Joseph Brodsky, Salman Rushdie, Marjorie Agosin, or Edwidge Danticat, to name just a few, I have tried to build "imaginary homelands" and to be my own suitcase. In his book of poems *Tristia*, written in exile from his beloved Rome, the poet Ovid says: "Behold me, deprived of native land, of you and my home, bereft of all that could be taken from me; my mind is nevertheless my comrade and my joy; over this Caesar could have no right."[9] This fierce sense of freedom that the exiled artist experiences once left with nothing but their own mind and creativity is a bold and painful stretch across frontiers, an impulsive embracing of the unknown in a reckless but necessary desire to make the whole world one's own. As an artist of the written and spoken word who has chosen her adoptive country and the language of her art with deliberation, I function and exist across communities of thought and imagination rather than within national and ethnic lines, which I have always found imprisoning and from which I escaped thirty-seven years ago.

Memory is a deceitful and unreliable vehicle of experience in general, and the memory of a person displaced from their native locations is significantly more deceitful and unreliable. The new environment where we have resettled, taken refuge, and that we have immigrated to no longer holds in its landscapes, sensorial and cultural realities and language, the recognizable traces of our experiences and development in the native country, and it is only our faulty memory that holds those traces of our existence and of who

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[8]   Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 116.
[9]   Ovid, *Tristia*, *Book VIII*, trans. A. L. Wheeler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924).

we once were. It is mostly this layered and often labyrinthic transformation of experience into memory from the angle of the drama of uprooting and resettlement that I try to explore in my writing, the present essay included.

Having to contend with a conscience split between lost spaces and unfamiliar spaces, the mirror of the exiled writer is forever broken: reality, the self, memory, the perception and representation of space and time will always have irreparable cracks, yet it is the cracks that account for the troubling beauty of their art. Joseph Brodsky noted that "exile is after all a kind of success."[10] As he elaborates on the fate of the exile writer in comparison to regular refugees, Brodsky equalizes the two categories of exiles in saying that "what our exile writer has in common with a Gastarbeiter or a political refugee is that in either case a man is running away from the worse toward the better."[11] In speaking about his experience of trying to retrieve the image of India from his memory as he is writing as an exile in London, Salman Rushdie said that the immigrant writer "is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost. But there is a paradox here. The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed."[12] Again the imperfection of the broken mirror of memory becomes an asset for the creative artist who is attempting to recreate spaces that she or he has lost contact with through the act of displacement but which acquire an added level of poignancy in the creative imagination and its artistic products.

The art emerging from the experience of exile is one such example of "a kind of success" achieved at the expense of a profound sacrifice and loss of the self as well as from a simultaneous reinventing of the self and of repiecing together the broken mirror of memory. In Platonic philosophy, our very life on earth is an exile from and an imperfect copy of the perfect world of ideas, or "Forms" as he called them in his *Symposium*, and in the dialogue of *Phaedrus* in particular.[13] However, it is precisely the "imperfect" particulars of our world and its sensorial richness that account for much of its texture, color, and complexity. To bring this thread back to the discussion of exile, the immigrant poet Adam Zagajewski hints at the sublimity of the imperfection of our world in his poem "Try to Praise the Mutilated World" (2002):

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[10] Brodsky, "The Condition We Call Exile."

[11] Ibid.

[12] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 11.

[13] Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato, Volume II: The Symposium*, trans. R. E. Allen. See also Nehamas, "Plato on the Imperfection of the Sensible World," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1975): 105–17.

Try to praise the mutilated world. Remember June's long days, and wild strawberries, drops of rosé wine. The nettles that methodically overgrow the abandoned homesteads of exiles.[14]

Edward Said, on the other hand, elaborates on the irreversible trauma of exile in memorable words, which warn us of the danger of fetishizing it as we consider its sociopolitical consequences on the larger scale of our world and this historical moment:

Exile is the unhealable rift between being and a native place, between the self and its true home. Its sadness can never be surmounted. … [E]xile is tremendously secular and unbearably historical; … it is produced by human beings for other human beings, and … like death, but without death's ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from traditions, family and geography.[15]

I am such a person myself, torn by "the unhealable rift" of exile yet also enriched by its multiplicity of perspectives and bold explorations of uncharted territories, frontiers, margins. An immigrant/exile from a former Communist country, I am interested in the ways in which the ontological uprooting of exile influences the aesthetic shapes of works that have emerged from this experience, and in the ways in which it determines not just what we write about but also how we write about it. Given the ontological nature of the experience of displacement from one's native country, the creative imagination that emerges from this experience will bear the marks of rupture, fragmentation, existential alienation. It is, however, precisely these scars that endow the writings of countless exiled writers, with their unique beauty and power.

On the upside of his considerations on exile, Said also noted boldly that "modern Western Culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees," and the critic George Steiner asserted that a certain genre of twentieth-century Western literature is written by exiles about exiles "wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic."[16] The experience of displacement marks not only the content of exilic writings but the very shapes of this art, the construction of characters, and the jagged narrative lines.

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[14] Adam Zagajewski, "Try to Praise the Mutilated World," in *Without End: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2002).
[15] Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 173.
[16] Ibid., 174, and Steiner cited in ibid.

Through my work as a literary and theater critic I have explored with particular attention the aesthetics of exile novelists and playwrights whose works bear the marks of brokenness and mutilation, of dystopian, lost or recreated worlds, while as a creative artist I have myself created works in the genres of fiction and play-writing whose topics and characters have imperiously demanded to come to life in fractured forms and broken mirrors. What is lost in wholeness is gained in realness. By "realness" I do not mean realism, but "the real" in the sense that Jean Baudrillard meant in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) as the "original," the "territory," the viscera of reality, and not the copy or, in Baudrillard's words, "the copy of the copy." The immigrant writing that I am interested in and that I create myself points to the very core of the real, "the territory" and not "the map."[17] I focus on the spaces between the viscera of experience as it takes place in historical time and its transformation into a work of the creative imagination. And since we are talking of works derived from the trauma of displacement, the truthfulness of such works emerges quite often precisely in their cracks and perceived imperfections. It is in the brokenness and the "mutilation," in the fractured narratives, the mixing of comic and tragic styles, the quilting of multicolored and often jagged, even incongruous, fragments that the loss and trauma of exile might have the chance of producing meaning and of even bringing about some measure of healing.

Storytelling as a Place of Belonging—Examples of Exilic and Trauma Writing

The examples that I offer in this essay are meant to illustrate the channeling of trauma, loss, and displacement into spaces of belonging. These spaces are created through the quilting of fractured, imperfect, tragicomic aesthetics, narrative, and dramatic shapes that replace lost wholeness into regained realness. These are forms that "praise the mutilated world" not despite but precisely because it is mutilated, and they do so by being themselves fractured and discontinuous, in particular when compared to classical aesthetics of linear narratives and realistic representations.

Simultaneously, I need to stress that—while in this alchemy of transforming loss into gain, brokenness into realness, exilic experiences and discourses into spaces and languages of belonging, and of creatively turning the painful and negative dimensions of trauma into positive forms of reinvention—it is

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[17] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Gaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 161–3.

important to avoid leaping into utopian images of loss of country, language, nomadism, immigration, and all other forms of displacement or social inequality. As the critic Yuriko Saito points out, "it is critically important to maintain the negative assessment of imperfection, as it may indicate a need for corrective actions."[18] While "the aesthetics of imperfectionism offers one strategy for developing a capacity to appreciate what is otherwise considered a deficiency and inadequacy," as in the case of wild gardens, overgrown lawns, tattered clothes, or, in our case, the experience of displacement, it is equally important to recognize the social ills and inequities that come with this aesthetics. Such injustices are often the immediate effects of the trauma and drama of exile, immigration and refuge-seeking from war and violence-ridden environments.[19]

Said's words regarding the reality of immigration are even more relevant now as we face the objectionable realities of today's formidable flow of asylum seekers and refugees, most recently the separation of families and the placing of young children in cages at the US-Mexican border.[20] He talks about "immense aggregates of humanity" who "loiter as refugees and displaced persons," "undocumented people, suddenly lost, without a tellable history."[21] The immigrant or exiled artist must balance the artistic channeling of these imperfect realities of displacement, migration, and poverty with the acute lucidity of the need for change and social justice and with a healthy skepticism toward any literature emerging from these experiences, including their own. For, in Said's words, "to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations" (2002, 174). Similarly, Brodsky noted, in discussing the plight of undocumented immigrants worldwide:

[18] Saito, "The Role of Imperfection in Everyday Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 15, no. 1 (2017). Retrieved February 15, 2019. https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=797.

[19] The full quote from Saito (ibid.):

These examples of imperfection often indicate social ills and injustice, and the negative aesthetics associated with them is the best means of signaling that something is amiss and change or improvement is in order. These aesthetic manifestations communicate social problems more powerfully and effectively than things like statistics regarding the poverty rate. Our sensibility assaulted by these negative aesthetic experiences affects us immediately and viscerally, and I believe that it is important that they affect us this way.

[20] For more information on the separation of families ordered by the Trump administration, see: https://www.npr.org/2019/06/20/734496862/how-the-trump-administrations-zero-tolerance-policy-changed-the-immigration-deba.

[21] Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 176.

Nobody ever counted these people and nobody, including the UN relief organizations, ever will: coming in the millions, they elude computation and constitute what is called, for want of a better term or a higher degree of compassion: migration. Whatever the proper name for these people, whatever their motives, origins, and destinations, whatever their impact on the societies which they abandon and to which they come may amount to—one thing is absolutely clear: they make it very difficult to talk about the plight of the writer in exile with a straight face.[22]

The exiled artists whose works most contribute to the creation of spaces of belonging from experiences of displacement are also those who simultaneously point with lucidity toward the ills of the world with a call toward addressing and repairing them. There is no sublimity of any kind in the image of toddlers snatched from their mothers' breasts and put in cages or in that of countless homeless people who fill the streets of modern urban areas around the world from the most to the least developed countries in the world.

In this chapter, it is not my intention to idealize in any way displacement, wars, loss of home, or abject poverty. Rather, I wish to point to the ways in which some creative artists may draw inspiration from the very inside chambers of such realities as a means of revolt and resistance, as a measure of healing and launching an urgent call toward social justice. While the work of such artists shines with the particular beauty of brokenness and mutilation discussed here, it also draws attention to its own imperfection and insufficiency when faced with the crude realities outside its spheres of representation.

Aglaja Veteranyi—Home Is in the Journey

Why Is the Child Cooking in the Polenta? (2012) is a cross-genre novel/epic poem/monologue that tells the wrenching story of a young girl traveling with her family of circus actors across the world, after having escaped their native Romania. The story emerges from the author's own life as a child in a family of circus people who escaped Ceausescu's Romania, taking with them circus paraphernalia. The author, Aglaja Veteranyi, was herself that circus girl, whose ethnicity in the story is ambiguous and possibly alludes to that of Roma people, the eternal nomads, marginalized and oppressed for centuries. The image of the itinerant circus performers overlapping with that

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of the Roma becomes like an aggregate symbol of all "loitering" refugees. Her dramatic poem is written from the perspective of a young girl terrified of the possibility of the death of her mother, whose circus act is to hang by her hair in the trapeze. I consider Veteranyi the emblematic exile writer to the point of flagrant literality, where she documents in a puzzled and fractured voice a nomadic and terror-filled existence, telling, living, and recreating a story of displacement and homelessness. The fractured and dreamy narrative is held together by the crystal-clear and perky voice of the young girl. It is in this crystalline voice that the trauma of a perpetually itinerant childhood and youth, the brokenness of the "shattered glass" that her family becomes in a "foreign country" are rearranged and forged into a redeeming world of dreams, ironies, and haunting poetic discourse.

The voice of Veteranyi's child protagonist cuts through the core of this life in translation and from the honesty of the voice comes a certain sad irony, a melancholy humor almost like the cliché face of clowns, half-laughing half-crying. This strident and terrified child's voice telling a biography in syncopated rhythms and cinematic imagery is the running thread through a world of broken images and experiences away from home in a dizzying and often cruel carnival. Here I share some examples:

> "This house is a home, my sister says. Here you have to put on a lot of weight, or else you'll be crushed by the mountains. And you need lots of skin to get warm." "And then I let my skin fall to the ground." "IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY MY FAMILY IS LIKE SHATTERED GLASS." "WE MUST NEVER GROW FOND OF ANYTHING" "HOW MANY PLACES ARE FOREIGN COUNTRIES?"[23]

Veteranyi's discourse has no reverence for logical syntax, chronology, or continuity of space, as it is the product of a life on the road and a consciousness in translation. Languages, relations to spaces, relations to self—all are "like shattered glass" and are made even more haunting as the story is told in the voice and from the perspective of a child. The chaotic journey of the circus performers is stunning in both its literality and symbolism as the reader/ spectator sees the world reflected in pieces that are often all mangled up, upside down and inside out as if seen through the shattered glass of a mirror.

The storytelling itself is a nomadic experience about nomadic lives and mixed ethnicities told in absurd contradictions. "OUR STORY," Veteranyi writes,

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[23] Veteranyi. *Why the Child Is Boiling in the Polenta*, 80, 81, 124, 15, 87; capitalizations original—DR.

SOUNDS DIFFERENT EVERY TIME MY MOTHER TELLS IT. We're Orthodox, We're Jewish, we're international! / My grandfather owned a circus arena, he was a salesman, a captain, travelled from country to country, never left his own village and was a locomotive engineer. He was a Greek, a Romanian, a farmer, a Turk, an aristocrat, a Gypsy, an Orthodox believer.[24]

The Balkan fragmentation and exilic disorientation soar to unmatched heights of ironic poetry in Veteranyi's discourse, mixing categories and superimposing contradictory realities onto one another to a startling multiplication of identity. And it is in this disjointed storytelling technique, held together by the unbreakable thread of the girl's relentless and irreverent voice, that the egregious reality of homelessness is turned into a space of belonging, maybe even something resembling a home. This wrenching yet unsentimental ballad to life on the road, to the sadness of circus life, and the cynical laugh of rootlessness that is Veteranyi's poetic and dramatic work, is also a beautiful illustration of an aesthetic that is equally flesh, blood, politics, and nourishment: in the brittle voice, in the shards of glass, in the spikes of irony lies also the survival of the heroine.

"At the end the grandmother stands at the door and waves," tells Veteranyi's narrator. This is the description of the end of the movie that one of the characters has made, and not the ending of the story in the first degree. We never know how that story ends, but the image of the grandmother waving evokes endings, departures, separations, as well as new beginnings, a sense of nostalgia and yearning, all in a layering of fictional universes. As if conscious of the power of storytelling, the girl protagonist/narrator confidently projects herself into immortality: "Then when I die the light will go out and I'll be alive again. I'm never going to die completely."[25] Aglaja Veteranyi committed suicide at the height of her writing career, having herself been that circus girl living on the road who only became literate as an adult. From wherever she may be rambling in her other-worldly exile from our wretched world, hopefully Aglaja Veteranyi rejoices in her dream come true, for indeed she is never going "to die completely."[26] For those of us left here amid the many

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[24] Ibid., 53; capitalization original—DR.

[25] Ibid., 65.

[26] In an interview in *Cinema Without Borders* (November 17, 2013), the director gives a beautiful description of how she created the movie trying to follow the spirit of Veteranyi's book. She notes that the girl who played the young Aglaja could not read, so she had to teach her the lines. The actresses who played the little girl and the teenage Aglaja often practiced by looking at each other in a mirror—a setting that bears an uncanny resemblance to Veteranyi's own early illiteracy and the mirror imagery in the novel.

imperfections of our "mutilated world," Aglaja's journey is an example of overcoming the desperation of exile, the difficulties of nomadism, and the humiliation of poverty through a bold and luminous creative voice that builds spaces of refuge and imagination along the way. It should also sensitize us to the social ills outside the realms of the imagination in the reality in front of our eyes, and hopefully incite us to action.

DAH Theater—Turning Horror into Beauty

The following example is one of extraordinary courage in the face of the destruction of war, and a model of turning a sinister reality into an art of healing and beauty while never losing awareness of the need for peace and social action. In 1991 a group of courageous Serbian female performers and directors gathered under the name of DAH Theater and created in Belgrade—just as their country was preparing to hold Sarajevo under siege and to wage war with age-old neighbors—both a theatrical space and a theatrical project. The project was launched to bear witness to the raging war, but mostly to create a peaceful world of belonging. This was meant to be a site of real ceasefire, where the body and the soul could rest and engage in the creation of art instead of war.[27] The DAH Theater has functioned, grown, and developed ever since, bearing witness to the violence of war, keeping and artistically channeling memories of victims and survivors, creating spaces and artistic structures of resistance and remembrance, and promoting the celebration of diversity.

   During the last three decades, the DAH theater group, in collaboration with the Serbian feminist activist group Women in Black,[28] gathered stories of Bosnian and Serbian female victims and survivors of the war and the mass genocidal rapes waged against them by Serbian soldiers, and published them in a book titled *Women in Black. The Women's Side of War* (2007).[29] The

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[27] See the DAH Theater website for the full information of the theater's history, modes of production, and their repertoire over its almost thirty years of existence: https://www.dahteatarcentar.com/aboutus.html.

[28] Women in Black are a group of Serbian women opposing the war. They would gather in public spaces dressed in black and stand in silence as a sign of protest, remembrance of the victims of war, and resistance to its absurdity and horror. The group has grown over the years confronting many dangers, often suffering violence by regular citizens and supporters of the war, and it still engages in silent antiwar performances in Belgrade, protected by a cordon of police.

[29] The book consists of a large collection of first-hand narratives by actual survivors of the Bosnian War and of the rape camps, told in the first person and largely unedited. It circulates almost anonymously for fear of reprisal and is hard to obtain. I personally was able to obtain the book with the help of Dijana Milosevic, the artistic director of DAH who put me in touch with one of the members of Women in Black in Belgrade. Jankovic,

DAH Theater production titled *Crossing the Line* (2009) emerged precisely from these stories. The show stages many of the accounts of women who have survived the unimaginable and yet still had the strength to tell their stories. The performance is built from an interweaving of parts of stories performed by the three main actresses of the DAH Theater in a stunning exhibit of passionate storytelling, stage movement, singing, and dancing. Movie images of Bosnian women and of the war are at times superimposed on the live performance, which evokes the Brechtian techniques of collage and the postmodernist aesthetic of mixed media. At other times, depending on whether the group is traveling or performing in their own theater space in Belgrade, the actresses coordinate their stage actions with a filmed version of the same show, creating a dizzying and overpowering effect of mirroring images reverberating into infinity and offering a larger-than-life experience.

Both the processes by which the DAH Theater creates its performances and the end result of their final theatrical products are a beautiful illustration of the aesthetics of trauma. Reflective to a degree of the postmodernist merging of the levels of the real and the imagined, of actual footage of war and personal stories, of superimposing genres and aesthetic categories, boldly taking the harshest truths and realities of their time and incorporating them in the shows, the director and performers of the group operate according to very high standards of theatrical professionalism as they stylize and transform raw stories into performance art that uses the space of the stage in startling ways and produces startling visual effects and stage actions.[30] The techniques used in the creation of their shows are largely those of devising, as they mostly perform their own work created in collaboration and through the merging of texts, ideas, stories, and images that come from different sources. Because of the collaborative creation the performances bear the marks of diverse artistic points of view, yet they form a cohesive theatrical entity. This is the reason for the freshness, rawness, and also unexpected quality of their performances: they emerge organically out of experience yet are creatively transformed into art through bold imaginative processes and with the performance strategies borrowed from European theater innovators such as Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba (see also Figures 12.1 and 12.2).[31]

Mirka, and Stanislava Lazarevic. *Women in Black: Women's Side of War*, trans. Dubravka Radanov, 2007.

[30] As is evident from the illustrations included here.

[31] Jerzy Grotowski, like Eugenio Barba, developed a theater practice that made the actor and the actor's body the very center of the theater experience, often subjecting actors to strenuous physical work and use of the body on stage. See Eugenio Barba, *On Directing and Dramaturgy: Burning the House* (New York: Routledge, 2010); and Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theater Anthropology. The Secret Art of the Performer* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Figure 12.1 *The Presence of Absence*, DAH Theater, Belgrade, directed by Dijana Milojevic; DAH Theater Ensemble. Photography: Dijana Milojevic, 2013. Maja Vukovic.

One of the DAH Theater's most recent productions, *The Presence of Absence* (2015), is inspired by the aftermath of wars and genocidal events and focuses on the disappearance of people as a result of abductions. As stated in the production catalog, "during the civil wars in ex-Yugoslavia over 40,000 people have gone missing. That number is drawn from: the conflicts in Croatia during two separate periods in 1992–93 and 1995. Around 5,500 persons disappeared, of which 3,380 were identified, while about 2,120 persons are still classified as missing."[32] *The Presence of Absence* was devised from numerous testimonies of family members of missing people. This is how artistic director Dijana Milosevic frames and describes the performance and its role in the understanding and healing processes necessary when those who were once loved and present in our lives have disappeared:

[32] Catalog design by renowned Serbian artist Nesa Paripovic. To be noted that the DAH production catalogs such as this one are not just production programs but extensive production documents that offer invaluable details on the production, the actors' work, and the overall scope and relevance of the production. 2011–12. *Crossing the Line*. Performance program. 2013. *The Presence of Absence*. Performance program, designed by Nesa Paripovic.

Figure 12.2 *The Presence of Absence*, DAH Theater, Belgrade, directed by Dijana Milojevic; DAH Theater Ensemble. Photography: Dijana Milojevic, 2013. Left to right, clockwise: Maja Vukovic, Sanja Krsmanović Tasić, Nemanja Ajdačić (with violin).

> History tells us that the only way of healing a society after atrocities have taken place is to go through the painful process of truth telling. This is still on-going within our region. Our performance is a contribution to that effort. People cannot just disappear, they can die of illness, or they can be killed in wars or be murdered, but they cannot just disappear. Roses were carried by mothers from Plaza del Mayo in Argentina, in their ongoing circling, searching for the truth about their missing. … Hundreds of roses were carried by families of the disappeared from Đulići, Bosnia, who left them on the sites of the concentration camps where their dearest had been taken and all trace of them had disappeared.[33]

Holding the memory of historical violence and human suffering in the exquisite receptacle of a work of art that honors it is a necessary political gesture. Such a gesture renders all of us more human and more lucid in an inhuman world whose violence defies reason. If indeed, as the playwright Erik Ehn has noted, genocides are an attempt "to forbid history—to forbid

[33] Interview with the DAH theater cofounder and artistic director Dijana Milojevic, 2014.

the making of meaning by barring our real and imaginative abilities to gather history,"[34] DAH Theater has responded to such attempts by creating safe spaces of questioning and remembrance, of community and meaning making, of salvaging histories and of turning horror into safe spaces where even the sublime can be encountered through the artistic gestures of the actors/witnesses/survivors.

My Personal Testimony: Creating in Exile and Turning Displacement into Spaces of Belonging

In between my nomadic lives several picaresque heroines came to life in my novels and plays as I find myself in perpetual revolutions between critical inquiries, dramatic embodiments, and imagined lives, in a never-ending pull between different countries and cultures, between belonging and rootlessness. As bell hooks, I keep trying to find in the "margins, a space of radical openness."[35] My heroines create utopian spaces of courage and inventiveness, color and passion out of broken hearts, losses, and displacements. They attempt to create alternative Americas, alternative ways of being in the world, and they question the very shapes in which we have gotten used to tell stories of violence, oppression, and suffering. These alternative ways of being are what the protagonist of my recent novel, a survivor of atrocious acts of violence at the hands of Serbian soldiers during the Bosnian War of the 1990s, expresses in the following episode:

> You know what people say, that you have to remember the past so you don't repeat the same mistakes in the future? Look … it's not true that people remember and then they don't commit atrocities anymore because they remember the past and don't want to repeat it. On the contrary, they have the model of past carnages and they keep perfecting that model … they do! What happens actually is that people become even more desensitized, they experience aesthetic pleasure, they cry, they feel good about themselves because they emote in front of a film about the Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide. That's not the kind of make believe that we need, because it *is* real, it doesn't need to be made up, those horrors actually do happen to real people. Marija paused and

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[34] Erik Ehn, *Soulographie: Our Genocides* (New York: 53rd State Press, 2013), 248.
[35] bell Hooks, *Yearning, Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002), 148.

breathed deeply. I took her hand and held it tightly. It was incredibly warm, like a bird that had just landed exhausted in my palm.[36]

By having my own protagonist Marija question both the relevance and ethical value of creating art inspired by genocides and atrocities, I am to a degree subverting my own work of narrative fiction by asking the reader—in an almost Brechtian manner—to connect both with the fictional character and with the actual reality she is referring to without concession to any form of sensationalist retelling of tragic stories. Here, I am channeling my own doubts with regard to the redemptive value of art, yet also paradoxically reconfirming its powers of healing. "Tell the truth without telling the story," suggests Marija, after which she manages to take her truth to the next level, that of holistic survival: Marija [was] "shrouding us in a cooling silence of forgetful dis-remembering. It wasn't really like forgetting," remembers her life-long friend Lara and the narrator protagonist, "you remembered it but it didn't touch you and you said farewell to it."[37]

As someone who has lived at crossroads and comes from a country of crossroads, who has opted to throw herself into the larger unknown crossroads of the world, I have created heroines who choose to live at crossroads precisely as spaces of belonging and freedom. This is what my heroine says toward the end of my novel *Train to Trieste*, in a chapter titled "Indiana, crossroads of America":

> I have chosen to live in the flattest, most boring landscape of the American Midwest. I love the flat, flat, wide endless cornfields, where the sun rises and sets with a vengeance every day, having no mountains, no valleys, no undulating earth to hide behind. This space soothes my heart. I have the illusion, in its straight immensity that my native land is just over the horizon. Just beyond the stretch of cornfield is the backyard of my aunt and uncle's house in the Carpathians.[38]

As a writer, scholar, artist, teacher who lives in, creates in, and teaches in languages other than her own native language, one must be, in the words of Hélène Cixous, "a thief of language" or, in the French innuendo, "une voleuse de langue,"[39] which means both to fly with language and to steal language. Cixous urges female artists to be "thieves of language" and thus make up

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[36] Domnica Radulescu, *Country of Red Azaleas* (New York: Twelve, Hachette, 2016), 229.
[37] Ibid., 230.
[38] Domnica Radulescu, *Train to Trieste* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 261.
[39] Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, 254–64 (Brighton: Harvester, 1981).

for the fact that they have been excluded from language and relegated to the realm of silence. As a female exiled artist, I am doubly a thief of language, of several languages, as I tell my stories, as my heroines tell their stories in languages other than their native one. In *Train to Trieste* (2008), the heroine Mona confesses that "sometimes I want to steal everybody else's country and miss it."[40] Having to give up, forsake, relinquish our own first familiar, native cities, landscapes, and stories forever, we have to appropriate and make our own the adoptive or adopted cities and landscapes. My heroine is doing her damnedest to spill her past, her memories, her language onto her American-Chicago environment. She brings it all together—her past, and her present, her memories and her living moment, her languages, cultures, spaces—into a carefully sewn colorful quilt:

> Slowly, in the Chicago cold, I learn how to live within freedom. I make a little place for myself within its wild vastness. And there is me, the little piece of me in the mosaic of America. Do you see me there? I'm the one with the maroon down coat from a secondhand store and grey boots that are too tight for my frostbitten feet. I'm right there, standing on State Street between the Russian woman selling apples and bananas and the Mexican man with the hot-dog stand. Do you see me now?[41]

In my search for the real and desire to hold on to the real I turn to live theater and performance as the ultimate forms of expression that offer us sanctuary from the banality of evil, as I have attempted to show in the section about the DAH Theater's work. Unlike narrative, theater offers the delicious opportunity of embodying concepts and using the actor's body on stage to incarnate otherwise abstract notions, revolutionary ideas, and ineffable realities. It also offers the possibility for those of us whose identities are splintered across countries and languages to reembody and play with our diverse selves and bring them all together in a cathartic manner on stage. The barrage of images, subliminal advertising, the myriad forms of technological modes of communication that exclude the physical presence of the individual, the body, voice, live presence of people, have created new strategies of estrangement and oppression of the individual.[42] This is why I passionately cling to the experience of the live body of the actor that creates

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[40] Radulescu, *Train to Trieste*, 207.
[41] Ibid., 195.
[42] This aspect is aptly criticized by Jean Baudrillard in his seminal work *Simulacra and Simulation.*

meaning on stage and to the sacred relation established between the actor's body and the presence of a live audience.

Often my heroines take me to the darkest places of history and illustrate extraordinary capacities of survival and resistance in a violent world—one that too often is hostile to women and their power, as is the case with Lina and Mina, the heroines of my recent play *Exile Is My Home: A Sci-Fi Immigrant Fairy Tale* (2014), which was inspired by the realities of immigration and the genocidal wars that cause it (see Figures 12.3–12.5). The play traces the eerie journey of two female lovers who cross the galaxies and travel from planet to planet in search of home, peace, memory, a place to belong, after having survived wars and unimaginable acts of violence. Mina and Lina visit planets devastated by wars that had started from inane reasons, terrifying snow-covered lands where bodies and souls are brutally separated and hearts frozen in the moment of yearning for lost homes and families. They recover a lost son, land on a planet where the inhabitants soothe their yearnings for home through role-playing and gorging on edible landscapes, and finally return to planet America, a dystopian landscape haunted by fascist immigration officers and cannibalistic "haters." The heroines, tied to each other for life by a fierce bond of love and friendship, save the day and recover their lost memory as they save the life of their lost son, and rid planet America of its grotesque racists and "haters." My heroines are survivors who find meaning after trauma and reinvent a comforting version of home while reinventing themselves on the move. They are travelers whose journeys are as heroic as they are obstacle-ridden and they initiate new trajectories for the creation of a world based on love, imagination, collaboration, and humor.

MINA: I was born in exile. Where were you born? LINA: I was born on the way to the market.

MINA: Oh, that makes sense then, that's why we get along. Why we sort of get along. In any case, it's better than with the others who were born somewhere precise. Good for us that we were born in the air.

LINA: Nowhere. MINA: Out there. LINA: In the air.

MINA: If it wasn't so damn inconvenient to spend one's life on the road, I would say living in constant exile is the best home there is.[43]

The eerie and fantastical style of the play is an attempt at evoking the inconsolable sadness of exile and homelessness, all the while confirming its

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43 Domnica Radulescu, *Dos Obras Drmaticas de Domnica Radulescu*, Spanish transl. Catalina Iliescu Gheorghiu (Valencia: University of Castellon Press, 2017), 32.

Figure 12.3 *Exile Is My Home: A Sci-Fi Immigrant Fairy Tale*, Domnica Radulescu. Theater for New City, New York, directed by Andreas Robertsz. Photography: OneHeart Productions, 2016. From left to right: Nikaury Rodriguez, Mirandy Rodriguez, Noemi De la Puente.

Figure 12.4 *Exile Is My Home: A Sci-Fi Immigrant Fairy Tale*, Domnica Radulescu. Theater for New City, New York, directed by Andreas Robertsz. Photography: OneHeart Productions, 2016. Vivienne Jurado, A. B. Lugo, Nikaury Rodriguez, David van Leesten, Mirandy Rodriguez, Noemi de la Puente, Mario Golden.

Figure 12.5 *Exile Is My Home: A Sci-Fi Immigrant Fairy Tale*, Domnica Radulescu. Theater for New City, New York, directed by Andreas Robertsz. Photography: OneHeart Productions, 2016. A. B. Lugo, Nikaury Rodriguez, Vivienne Jurado.

enormous potential for adventure, cultural and geographic richness, and ultimate freedom. The heroines' interplanetary travels coincide with their storytelling and, similarly to Veteranyi's character, their stories change with their travels. Inversely their journey also functions as an exploration of their traumatized memory, which, in turn, produces and retells their story in different styles and from different perspectives, until the ending, which brings it all together both as a form of healing and of home-finding:

GUATEMALAN MASSAGE THERAPIST:	Yea, good job everybody. We are the new Scheherazades, story tellers and massage therapists in one. We put disointed bodies back in shape and twisted hearts back in rhythm. We buy time, we save our lives, one day at a time, one story at a time, one heart at a time. We'll never be unemployed.
TAXI DRIVER FROM UZBEKISTAN:	That should get us work permits and legal status if anything ever will.

MINA: You are right about home LINA. I've missed it too, I was just trying to get
        us through our journeys and keep us from remembering too much.

LINA: I know. I would have died without you. I was just trying to keep us
        from forgetting too much and becoming too empty like two hollow
        balloons floating aimlessly around the world.[44]

At the crossroads between fluid memories and forgetting, the heroines find
their home and their strategies of survival, like Scheherazade, night after
sweltering night, in the imperfect and fertile rotundity of the story.

Cultural Appropriations as the Downside of Idealizing Imperfection

Inspired by my own travels to the Spanish region of Andalusia, my play *The
Virgins of Seville* (2017) engages the immigrant experience of Romanians
and other eastern Europeans to western Europe, particularly Spain. It also
uses the dramatic style of the tragicomic, leaps into the carnivalesque, and
the use of theater within theater as a game of mirrors and reflections of
reflections, a *mise en abîme* which parallels the concentric identities, cultural
reverberations, and hyphenated existences of migrants and displaced people.
Here, too, I primarily take the point of view of female refugees and immigrants,
desperate mothers looking for lost sons, migrant workers and sex workers
in the margins of society, women of all walks of life searching for home,
questioning and reinventing the notion of home as in the following scene:

> VIRGIN OF THE CAVES: Where is home?
>
> VIRGIN OF AFRICA: Good question, where is home? My home is
> in a willow tree by the Danube River. I'm not from Africa, I just say so
> because it sounds cool and people turn their heads. I'm just a Polish
> Gypsy Romanian homeless prostitute.
>
> VIRGIN OF ANTIGUA: I miss my mother, I miss my daughter, I miss
> my dog, I miss my apple tree, I miss my stove in Romania. I became the
> Virgin of Antigua because it sounded cool and exotic. Everybody wants
> exotic here, exotic sells. If you're not exotic enough, you die.
>
> RAMONA: Home is in a little log cabin in the Appalachian
> Mountains. Home is in a cave at the bottom of the ocean. Home is in
> a stone house at the foot of the Carpathians. I go back and forth, back

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[44] Radulescu, *Dos Obras Drmaticas de Domnica Radulescu*, 116.

and forth, I'm always on the run, always crossing the Atlantic one way or another.[45]

During my journey to Seville, I visited the neighborhood of Triana, known as the district of the "Gypsies"/Roma people for centuries. Flamenco songs were written on colorful mosaics in the street, in piazzas, and on walls. They spoke of passionate and tragic loves, of living in the margins of society, of deep yearnings and of the travails of life in exile, of crossroads, and water crossings: "ventanas de la muralla/ventanas que dan al mar/por donde yo veo venir/los barcos de la caballa."[46] Such traumatic crossings of frontiers and escapes from oppression are not unlike the crossings of thousands of today's refugees washed ashore, sailing or swimming across perilous seas, reaching the shores of Greece, Italy, Spain, Turkey, pushed from country to country, from refugee camp to refugee camp, from one hellish state of homelessness to another.

During my visit and research of Flamenco art and its origins in that glorious Spanish city, I was struck to discover the flagrant cultural appropriations that came with the popularization of this art and of Roma culture in general. I found myself at the intersections between the authentic Flamenco art in its desired preservation as a multilayered performative art performed by Spanish Roma artists and its many sanitized or utterly exoticized forms for tourists who want a taste of that Spanish soul, an exotic experience without any real desire of understanding the history of the genre. The Flamenco art is organically connected to the history of the Roma people in Spain and is equally a history of surviving poverty, oppression, violence. Flamenco locales, bars, restaurants, or dance venues that feature Flamenco music and dance abound and allure tourists eager for an "authentic" experience of Southern Spain. Very few of them, however, recognize the Roma people as the main creators, performers, and protagonists of Flamenco songs and art, and the "cante gitano," "cante jondo," or "deep song" in particular as its main source. This art form can be traced back to as early as the fifteenth century, with the first arrivals of "Gypsies" from India to Andalusia. The "cante jondo" is the oldest form of the flamenco song and unlike idealized Western notions, it is a song of grief, desperation, and death wishes and not of joy and love of life. Originally, this form of expression was not even created as a form of entertainment but rather as a manner of venting the suffering of the Roma

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[45] Radulescu, *Dos Obras Drmaticas de Domnica Radulescu*, 162.

[46] "Windows in the wall, windows that overlook the sea where I see the fishing ships," translation mine. Lines from the Roma songs inscribed on mosaics in the neighborhood of Triana, in Sevilla Spain.

people and the hardships of their daily lives.[47] It later provided inspiration for many of Garcia Lorca's poems, who, although not of Roma origins, was Andalusian and raised this poetry of suffering to the wider dimension of humanity. The "deep song" is an art form that "reaches out beyond its limited boundaries and shows the world how to cry."[48]

This lesson of channeling suffering into song—and art as strategy of survival and not of entertainment—is largely lost and disregarded in the huge Spanish entertainment industry that uses the art of the Flamenco as a central point of touristic attraction. The magnificent Fiesta de Abril held in Seville after the Semana Santa (Holy Week) is now a multi-million Euro holiday held in the historic Remedios district. The Sevillana dresses and the men's costumes which are modeled from the Gypsy horse fairs of several centuries ago are worn by middle- and high-class Spaniards and cost anything from 200 Euros at best into the thousands. Simultaneously, the actual Roma people in town, either local or migrant like the Romanian Roma, walk around the grounds of the glittery fiestas begging for euros, selling roses, or offering palm readings.[49] In reality, Roma people have been treated as pariahs, oppressed, enslaved, and egregiously marginalized to the lowest, most impoverished layers of society, their art, customs, and dress have been flagrantly appropriated by settled societies and communities across the globe, without any credit given. As the authors of a recent article denouncing such appropriations rightfully stated, "morally bankrupt appropriators who use Romani culture as a form of escapism, erase us; they make us disappear. Cultural appropriators steal the spaces that should be rightfully given to actual Roma voices, in a world that seldom listens."[50]

[47] See Timothy Mitchell, *Flamenco Deep Song* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 1–5.

[48] Mary Etta Hobbs, *An Investigation of the Traditional 'Cante Jondo' as the Inspiration for the Song Cycle 'Five Poems of Garcia Lorca' by Elisenda Fabregas*, Doctor Dissertation, University of North Texas, 2004, 1–5.

[49] On the website of the Canadian-Romani Alliance, Julia Lovell, Romanichal activist, and Amanda Schorr, Romanichal/Sinti activist and scholar, coauthored an excellent blog article titled "Cultural Appropriation and the Gypsy Industry" (2017), in which they rightfully denounce the myriad cases of appropriations of Roma culture, art, jewelry, clothing, festivities, customs in sensationalized and consumeristic ways, whether in Europe, the United States, Canada, or Australia. See also Ricardo Armillei, "Romanies in Italy and Australia: The Concealment of Romani Culture behind false Myths and Romantic Views," in *The European Diaspora on Australia: an Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Bruno Mascitelli, Sonia Mycak, and Gerardo Papalia, 28–51 (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2016); and Lincoln Tan, "Romani Gypsies Accuse Traveling 'Gypsy' Fair of Exploiting Gypsy Culture." *New Zealand Herald*, March 5, 2017. Retrieved February 19, 2020 from https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11812277.

[50] Julia Lovell and Amanda Schorr, "Cultural Appropriation and the Gypsy Industry." Retrieved May 10, 2019 from https://gypsyindustry.wordpress.com. In the beautifully

The cultural appropriations of this important aspect of Roma culture and art by Spanish and many other consumerist societies—my own Romanian culture being itself a big culprit in this area—are a kind of insidious ramification of "poverty tourism." In such voyeuristic practices, the cultural products that emerged as cries of loss and desperation by oppressed communities living in the very margins of society, working in coal mining or other backbreaking jobs, and suffering abject poverty, have been appropriated by the dominant culture and turned into money-making products of a consumerist society that only they can afford. As case studies of "slumming," "poverty tourism," "slum tourism" or "dark tourism" through guided tours in the slums and favelas of India or Brazil demonstrate, tourists pay for such tours the money that would buy a week's food for the people that are being voyeuristically visited, in order to have a "real-life" experience and to "satisfy their curiosity regarding the precarious living conditions of the urban poor."[51]

While acquiring knowledge and information about poverty with the scope of engaging in socially conscious activities of any kind in order to alleviate it is of course admirable, the mere acquisition of knowledge of first-hand poverty and the selling of its cultural products at prices that the original creators of these products could not afford themselves is definitely less than admirable. What does, however, have ethical value is the telling of the story from the inside of communities in the margins; is creating silence so that the voice of the girl in the "vardo" can soar and be heard, like the voice of Aglaja and her trapeze ballerina mother, living in tents and on the road; is the transmission of and respect for the truth about the origins of such cultural products as the Flamenco; and the refusal of the tourist trappings of copies of copies of such products for entertainment value.

In the absence of stable homes and in the exhausting searches for home, the truth-telling *story* itself is the only reliable form of belonging, perhaps precisely because of its fluid borders and hyphenated identities. Literature, in its stubborn "preservation of defeat" and "relaxed imperfection," draws from the brokenness caused by exile and political trauma in fractured forms and

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crafted and historically accurate documentary *Opre Roma: Gypsies in Canada* (2000), directed by Tony Papa, Julia Lovell, and her father Tom Lovell, together with other Romani and Sinti artists and scholars such as the renowned Ronald Lee, offer powerful testimonials of the history of the Roma people, their persecutions, and the many forms of artistic expression, particularity in the area of dance and song, that they have created over the centuries in parallel with the egregious appropriations of these same forms by non-Roma people and communities. See also the collection *"Gypsies" in European Literature and Culture* (2009), prefaced by Ronald Lee and coedited by Valentina Glajar and Domnica Radulescu.

[51] Manfred Rolfes, Poverty Tourism: Theoretical Reflections and Empirical Findings Regarding an Extraordinary Form of Tourism," *GeoJournal* 75 (2010): 437.

irreverent ironies that illuminate the human truthfulness of such experiences with much more poignancy than most statistics, history books, or verbose lectures about social inequality. I embrace Jean-François Lyotard's skepticism of meta-narratives and his theorized reliance on small narratives, singular events, local personal stories, "petits récits" that are grounded in specific and diverse human experiences rather than in any unifying discourse.[52] Maybe exile is the fundamental illustration of the postmodern condition as it jolts one out of all certainty about the stability of truth and breaks any illusion of an immutable spatial, moral, or cultural reality. So, if, in Marguerite Duras's words, "the writer is a foreign country" and a foreign/exile artist carries their country in their story, in their literal or metaphoric suitcase, this double foreignness may just be a home of "radical openness." Ultimately it has been precisely because of the fluidity of such story/homes, the portable nature of dance, song, and the stories encapsulated in them that both the Roma people and their art have survived over the thousand years of their nomadic and too often pain-ridden existence. The flamenco poets and artists knew that, wherever they may land or arrive, one thing nobody could take from them is the story, the song that sings and dances the story. Home is in the story. Survival is in the story. So thought the young woman on the September morning when she left her country with a volume of stories in her suitcase running for her life.

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[52] See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*: *A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), and the introduction to this book, as well as his book *The Postmodern Explained to Children* (1992). See also Claire Nouvet, Zrinka Stahuljak, and Kent Still, *Minima Memoria: In the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), which discusses the great impact Lyotard had on modern thinking and his criticism of grand narratives and embracing of personal stories and local events as a way of retelling history.

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Polder Panda: Imperfection and Love in Dutch Dairy Farming

Oskar Verkaaik

In the spring of 2018, the Dutch Association for Endangered Domestic Animal Species (Stichting Zeldzame Huisdierrassen, SZH) launched the so-called "Polder Panda" campaign. Since this media event, "Polder Panda" is a nickname for a local Dutch heritage breed, known as the *Blaarkop* or "White-head" (Figure 13.1). The "White-head" is a cow, not a panda. But its head, a play of black and white, with black spots accentuating the eyes, vaguely resembles that of a panda. Moreover, the nickname conveys an emotional attachment to a loveable but endangered animal. In the Netherlands, the Blaarkop is rapidly becoming what anthropologists call a "charismatic species," that is, a species that attract "a disproportionate amount of attention in conservation" because of its appealing physical features.[1]

Today the Blaarkop is generally considered an "imperfect" cow, even by the growing number of farmers and activists who care for the animal. Its alleged imperfection is a matter of comparison. Dutch dairy farmers consider the Blaarkop imperfect compared to the dominant Holstein breed. The Holstein is an originally Dutch cow that was exported to the United States in the early twentieth century, where it was improved to produce an enormous amount of milk and then exported back to the Netherlands to replace almost all other breeds. Since the 1970s, most heritage breeds, including the Blaarkop, have become endangered breeds because they simply cannot compete with the Holstein in terms of milk production. If the Holstein is the perfect milking cow, all other Dutch breeds have become lesser cows.

For centuries, humans have tried to improve cows by various techniques of breeding. In that sense, cow breeding can be seen as a forerunner of scientific interventions to improve species by artificial selection and genetic

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[1] Monika Krause and Katherine Robinson, "Charismatic Species and Beyond: How Cultural Schemas and Organisational Routines shape Conservation," *Conservation and Society* 15, no. 3 (2017): 313–21.

Figure 13.1 Blaarkop cows in the fields belonging to the dairy farm De Hooilanden near Bennekom, The Netherlands. Photograph: Oskar Verkaaik.

modification. Margaret Derry, who is an artist and a historian as well as a breeder of "purebred" cattle herself, has shown in books like *Bred for Perfection* (2003) and *Masterminding Nature* (2015) that the objectives of breeding have changed over time and from place to place. Cows have been bred for strength and size, health, muscles and meat, and of course milk production.[2] "Breeding for perfection," in Derry's terms,[3] was motivated by various intentions—and as we will see, in the Netherlands this resulted in changing notions of the perfect cow.[4] What will also become clear below is that under the influence of global agricultural capitalism, in the twentieth century breeding for perfection has increasingly become a single-purpose practice, aimed at the increase of milk production, often at the cost of other intentions, such as the health and the physical strength of cows. One particular kind of breeding has thus become dominant over other ones.

The definition of a "perfect" cow has likewise become more narrow. During my fieldwork among Dutch dairy farmers, I found that there was

[2] Margaret E. Derry, *Masterminding Nature: The Breeding of Animals, 1750–2010* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

[3] Margaret E. Derry, Bred for Perfection: Shorthorn Cattle, Collies, and Arabian Horses since 1800 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

[4] Bert Theunissen, "Breeding for Nobility or for Production? Cultures of Dairy Cattle Breeding in the Netherlands, 1945–1995," *Isis* 103, no. 2 (2012): 278–309.

generally agreement that the US-bred Holstein is, in local jargon, a "top-sport cow" compared to other breeds like the Blaarkop. But I also saw that an increasing number of farmers, biologists, and activists turn away from the perfect Holstein cow and begin to value other, supposedly "lesser" breeds more and more for reasons of health, taste, tradition, sustainability, and even love. For them, the Blaarkop may be "imperfect" compared to the Holstein; it is also less alienated from its biology.

In her recent book *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), anthropologist Anna Tsing defines "alienation" as the process in which things, humans, and animals are "torn from their life-worlds to become objects of exchange."[5] In the process, parts of complex milieus become "stand-alone objects."[6] Although they do not use this terminology, local lovers of the Blaarkop see this process as the reason behind the success of the Holstein. The perfect cow is a stand-alone cow, torn from its original life-world. To make their point about alienation, farmers argue that the Holstein cannot survive on grass alone and is hence a very demanding cow, which needs to be fed large amounts of food supplies. Its constitution requires that its environment adjusts itself to the cow instead of the other way around. The comeback of the Blaarkop, then, is a powerful critique of an alienating form of dairy production and a plea for more sustainable forms of farming that place the cow back in its milieu. If the Blaarkop is imperfect, it is precisely that quality that makes the cow part of a bigger world. Its imperfection is a way of being connected.

How and why Dutch farmers replaced their local breeds for Holstein cows since the 1970s has been well-documented. I briefly repeat that story here, but the larger part of this chapter is devoted to the comeback of the Blaarkop and other local breeds. I am particularly interested in two questions: how do farmers explain its imperfection compared to the Holstein cow? And how did this imperfection turn into a moral argument for another, more sustainable form of farming, which reestablishes the mutual links between cow and farmer? Placing current developments like the Polder Panda campaign in the historical context of various *regimes of "breeding for perfection"* allows us to see how, increasingly, the definition of the "perfect cow" is framed in terms of milk production maximization. Following the way the term perfection is used by Dutch farmers, I take "perfection" to mean something like "completely achieving its objectives" or "completely fulfilling its functions."[7]

[5] Anna L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 121.

[6] Ibid., 122.

[7] Cf. Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, "On Perfection: Conclusion." *Dialectics and Humanism* 8, no. 12 (1981): 11–12.

These "objectives" and "functions" relate to different and changing normative breeding regimes. In a regime of milk production maximization, the norm is to increase the amount of milk per cow. The cow that produces less milk then becomes the imperfect cow, as its production deviates from the norm. In another regime, however, the norm may be to breed healthy cows that are in tune with the environment, which would make the Holstein the imperfect cow. The common understanding of the Holstein as the perfect cow indicates the extent to which one breeding regime has become dominant. In that sense, the act of defining one breed as perfect and the other as imperfect is both normative and political.

Imperfection and the Web of Life

As Anna Tsing, following many other anthropologists, has shown, the effects of capitalism may be dominant in a global market, but at the same time these effects often trigger surprising alternative exchange relations. In Tsing's example, increasing commodification generates and facilitates elaborate gift-giving relations.[8] In our case, the trend toward milk production maximization has set in motion a range of unexpected processes and reactions that restrict the capitalist logic. Efforts to maximize milk production have created new, unexpected problems for farmers.

One such complication, as we shall see, is biological in nature. Holstein cows fall ill more often and die younger than cows that produce less milk. Their health issues raise moral-political concerns as to what extent it is ethical to breed a cow that is so far removed from its original biology that it needs complex food supplies to stay healthy and produce. Since these food supplies—soy, corn, and so on—are often produced in foreign countries, there are also environmental concerns. And then there are cultural and aesthetic issues, as when farmers prefer local breeds to the globalized Holstein cows.

The concerns that Holstein breeding trigger, raise questions about the relations between humans and cows—relations that, thanks to thousands years of breeding, rank as a global success story.[9] Anthropologists have documented human–cow relations ever since they studied pastoralist societies.[10] More recently scholars have developed the notion of "multispecies assemblages." This concept was coined to be able to look at human–animal

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[8] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, chapter 9.
[9] For details, see Marleen Felius, "On the Breeds of Cattle: Their History, Classification and Conservation" (Ph.D diss., Utrecht University, 2016), 11.
[10] See for instance Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

relations from a multiple, rather than exclusively human perspective. Donna Haraway, leading theorist in science and technology studies, defines multispecies assemblages as "a contact-zone of mutual dependencies and asymmetrical relations."[11] The concept is also meant to explain "how species enter the political frame."[12] What I argue in this chapter is how these multispecies assemblages of human–cattle relations take shape in the context of global capitalism and its local, moral, biological, environmental, and political discontents. In the Polder Panda case, two theoretical debates come together that are usually kept separated. The first is a discussion about the ecological consequences of capitalism. Whereas classical critiques of capitalism, from Marx to contemporary authors like Hardt and Negri,[13] emphasize the exploitation of human labor and the decline of human dignity, more recently environmental historian and historical geographer Jason Moore[14] has highlighted the ecological ramifications of global capitalism. In labor as in ecology, the spirit of capitalism is based on the assumption that humans have the right and capacity to master the environment and social worlds in the name of freedom. This thinking is based on the same form of human exceptionalism that is theoretically critiqued in the multispecies literature.

The second debate into which the Polder Panda discussions feed is summarized by philosopher Michael Sandel in his monograph *The Case against Perfection*. Sandel argues against the notion of human mastery and the power to manipulate environments in the case of genetic engineering. Genetic modification, according to Sandel, represents "a kind of hyperagency—a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires."[15] New genetic technologies convert chance into choice,[16] make us less willing and capable to accept "gifts" from nature. Ultimately, they decrease our sense of solidarity, because failure is no longer seen as misfortune or bad luck but as the result of irresponsible choices.

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[11] Haraway in Laura A. Ogden, Billy Hall, and Kimiko Tanita, "Animals, Plants, People, and Things: A Review of Multispecies Ethnography," *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 4 (2013): 10.

[12] Isabelle Stengers, "Including Nonhumans in Political Theory: Opening the Pandora's Box?" in *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life*, ed. Bruce Braun and Sarah J. Whatmore (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 3–33.

[13] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[14] Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

[15] Michael J. Sandel, *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 26–7.

[16] Ibid., 87.

So far, the discussion about genetic engineering mainly focuses on human applications, possibly because in the case of animals, genetic engineering is not so different from commonly accepted practices of breeding. In the case of cows, humans have used breeding to genetically improve the animals for centuries. However, as Derry argues in *Bred for Perfection*, these practices never had such far-reaching biological, economic, and environmental consequences as they did for domesticated species and breeds like cattle, dogs, or horses.[17] The Holstein breed is a case in point. Traditional forms of cow breeding were based on a variety of concerns that prevented the occurrence of genetically inflicted imbalance mainly by avoiding inbreeding. In the case of the Holstein, by contrast, one concern—the maximization of milk production—came to dominate all other aspects of a cow's life. This took place in the context of an increasing globalized form of rural capitalism. It should not come as a surprise that forms of resistance like the Polder Panda campaign occur in the Netherlands. This small country is a leading player in agriculture, including dairy farming, a position it has managed to maintain thanks to highly innovative agricultural entrepreneurship. The fact that such a densely populated country, where agricultural land costs a small fortune, is still a major exporter of agricultural products, including milk, is in many ways remarkable. But the Netherlands is also the place where this form of scientific capitalist agriculture has met serious criticism. Since 2006 the Dutch parliament includes a so-called Animal Party (*Partij voor de Dieren*). This small but steadily growing party critiques the bioindustry and, more generally, the notion that humans have the right to use and exploit animals for their own well-being. Dutch philosopher Eva Meijer has argued for the notion of "political animal voices,"[18] extending the notion of "political animal rights." She follows in the footsteps of political philosophers like Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka,[19] who challenge the idea that only humans can be political actors. In this sense, the Polder Panda campaign is part of an increasingly vehement political debate.

The plea for appreciating the imperfection of the Blaarkop and other heritage breeds is in a way a compromise between these radical positions. Although critical of innovative factory farming, most Polder Panda activists do not accept the radical rejection of human exceptionalism cum rural capitalism either. As we will see, they fight for a return to pastoral ways of farming not for nostalgic reasons but because they see these traditions as

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[17] Derry, *Bred for Perfection*.
[18] Eva Meijer, "Political Animal Voices" (Ph.D dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2017).
[19] Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

ultimately more sustainable than present-day forms of dairy farming. The price we pay for this return to previous practices of dairy farming, they argue, is a reduction of milk production per cow. But other benefits, including economic ones, compensate this loss. Ultimately, their plea for perfection resembles Sandel's defense of imperfection as a condition that generates forms of solidarity, empathy, and social life. The difference lies herein: Sandel mainly talks about solidarity between humans, whereas in the Polder Panda case the point is a restoration of being attuned to a world that includes, but also goes beyond, the human sphere and encompasses what Moore calls the web of life.[20]

The Rise of the Holstein

The global success of the Holstein has made the Blaarkop an endangered animal. At first, the notion of a domesticated animal being threatened by extinction may seem odd. Intuitively it may be thought that endangered species live in the wild. Moreover, one could wonder why one would allow a creature that is the result of decades, if not centuries, of breeding to go extinct. Wouldn't that be a waste of effort? However, as law-and-ethnography scholar Irus Braverman's shows in her book *Wild Life*, all species are more or less under the care of humans now, even those we consider wild.[21] It is therefore a question why, until recently, few people cared much about the endangered status of breeds like the Blaarkop, whereas species that are considered wild are under constant conservationist scrutiny. One answer may be that cows, as domesticated animals, primarily have economic value rather than value in terms of life and biodiversity. As such, traditional breeds can become economically redundant in case they can be replaced for more productive breeds, whereas it would feel absurd to most people to argue that, say, whales or rhinos are economically redundant.

The decline of the Blaarkop and other Dutch breeds began in the 1970s and accelerated in the 1980s. Historian of Dutch dairy cattle Bert Theunissen writes that the transition "may have escaped city dwellers, but … to the experienced eye was dramatic."[22] In a very short period of time, a long-standing breeding tradition that had given the Netherlands a leading reputation in global dairy farming came to an end. American Holsteins replaced local

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[20] Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.
[21] Irus Braverman, *Wild Life: The Institution of Nature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).
[22] Theunissen "Breeding for Nobility," 279.

breeds like the world-famous black-and-white dairy cattle globally known as the Holland-Friesian. The irony of this story is that the Holstein, in fact, originated from the Holland-Friesian cow. In the late nineteenth century, some 7,500 Holland-Friesians were exported to the United States. In the following decades, the Holland-Friesian would gradually become known as the Holstein. The Holstein, however, had become a different cow than the original Holland-Friesian due to a new breeding logic that departed from the traditional Dutch practice. In brief, whereas Dutch breeding was aimed at creating a "robust" cow—that is, a healthy cow producing milk rich in fat and eventually a tasty piece of meat—American breeding programs mainly aimed at maximizing milk production. Theunissen describes this change as a clash between two "cultures of breeding"[23] and a transition from breeding as an art into breeding as a science.[24]

Notions of distinct breeds, or in Dutch *rassen* (races), began to emerge in the nineteenth century. In 1822, the first herdbook was established for the English Shorthorn cattle. It took another half a century before, in 1874, the first herdbook for Dutch cattle breeds saw the light. This trend resulted in an increasing attempt to define—mainly by a trained human eye—the pure and authentic traits of a particular breed. It was the skin that accounted for race according to ever-stricter rules. The Blaarkop, for instance, should be completely black with a white head (next to the black-and-white Blaarkop, there is also a subbreed of red-and-white Blaarkop). White "socks" or lower legs were a sign of impurity.[25] All this was a radical break with earlier practices, when health, strength, and milk production were considered more important than aesthetics and pure bloodlines, resulting in massive cross-breeding between different types.[26] As a result, even today genetic differences within recognized breeds are larger than across breeds.[27] The notion of purebred cattle, then, was clearly "an invention of tradition,"[28] if not a myth of origin.

The obsession with racial purity was initially a British aristocratic concern. "Breeding was mainly an occupation of the gentry, who emphasized pure

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[23] Ibid., 280.

[24] Ibid., 279.

[25] There is an obvious parallel with nineteenth-century eugenicist discourse and the notion of pure human races constantly under threat of pollution. For a critique of this way of thinking and how it continues to inform present-day imaginaries of ethnic and racial communities, see Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

[26] Personal communication with Marleen Felius.

[27] Personal communication with Mira Schoon.

[28] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: University Press, 1992).

bloodlines to the point that purebred cattle with long pedigrees became a symbol of the British ruling class,"[29] writes Marleen Felius, author of *Cattle Breeds—an Encyclopedia.* Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, herdbooks became more and more in demand in the context of overseas trade. Cows and bulls were increasingly bought from catalogues rather than the traditional cattle market. Theunissen observes that "whereas a Dutch farmer would never buy a cow that he had not inspected himself, New World geographical distances necessitated American farmers to rely on catalogues and certified pedigrees."[30] Global capitalism bred racial purity.

Because of the different breeding regimes in America and the Netherlands the Friesians and the Holsteins began to part ways. This was partly the result of the size of the country. In the United States and Canada, there existed different breeds for milk and meat production. American breeders therefore "continued to breed the imported Friesians as a pure dairy type."[31] Such a differentiation was hardly possible in a small, densely populated country like the Netherlands. More importantly, in Europe the Friesian increasingly suffered from the reputation that the Holstein has now. Although generally recognized as a "milking machine," the Friesian was also seen as a weak and demanding cow, only able to survive on the rich soil of the lowlands. The quality of its milk was considered poor and the breed was believed to be susceptible to such diseases as bovine tuberculosis.[32] "Effeminate aristocrats," they were called outside of their local Friesland. As a reaction, Dutch breeders began to breed a different type of animal: the so-called "dual-purpose" cow—both milk and meat—that could survive on poorer soils, gave a richer kind of milk, and was healthier. This decision impacted negatively on the quantity of milk produced. However, it was this practice of breeding that became dominant in the first half of the twentieth century, and that developed into a particular normativity or a "culture" of what was considered proper breeding, known in Friesian as *kreas* ("decent") breeding, as opposed to *rûch* ("rough") farming. If the local norm was *kreas*, extensive forms of farming ranked as *rûch*.[33]

This does not mean that there were no counter-currents to this culture of "decent" farming. Even before the invasion of the Holstein, the dominant breeding culture was challenged by the rise of artificial insemination from

[29] Felius, "On the Breeds of Cattle," 54.
[30] Bert Theunissen "Breeding without Mendelism: Theory and Practice of Dairy Cattle Breeding in the Netherlands, 1900–1950," *Journal of the History of Biology* 41, no. 4 (2008): 654.
[31] Ibid., 299.
[32] Theunissen "Breeding for Nobility," 282.
[33] Ibid., 283.

the 1950s onward. Geneticists from Wageningen University, the leading university of agriculture in the Netherlands, argued for what they called scientific interventions to enhance milk production. Breeders, however, saw things differently and farmers followed them. As Theunissen writes, "Breeders and farmers concentrated on excellence of conformation, which in their view guaranteed the robustness of the breed."[34] The perfect cow was the animal that won high prices at cattle shows, where conformation—an indicator of health and strength—mattered more than milk production alone.[35] This approach may to some extent have been the result of a distrust of modern technologies, but it is also likely that breeders and farmers knew their history. An exclusive focus on milk production had, after all, damaged the Dutch dairy cattle's reputation earlier in the twentieth century. Their insistence on "robustness," then, could also be seen as a warning against the dangers of scientific farming. For them, the perfect cow combined a number of concerns: pedigree, health, looks, as well as commercial value. Breeding for perfection was still considered a balancing act.

The story of why breeders and farmers eventually gave up their resistance in the 1970s and 1980s is a complex one and involves, among other factors, the powerful Christian Democratic policy of rural modernization, as well as efforts by the European Economic Community to restructure agriculture in response to the recession of the mid-1970s. These developments forced farmers to scale up, while colleagues went bankrupt, left dairy farming for good, and aspired to a middle-class suburban lifestyle. Those who managed to survive had, more than ever, to compete globally. Profit margins became so tight that every liter of milk mattered. In that competition, the Friesian and Blaarkop were powerless to the Holstein, which easily produced a thousand liters of milk more per year. Once convinced of the Holstein's exceptional qualities, Dutch farmers and breeders quickly adapted to the new norms of scientific dairy farming. Companies like Holland Genetics became world players in artificial insemination and scientific breeding, exporting Holstein semen across the world, including the Global South. Other forms of technological innovations earned the Netherlands the nickname of the Silicon Valley of dairy farming.[36]

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[34] Ibid., 291.
[35] Ibid., 286.
[36] See, for instance, Heidi Schultz, "Step Inside the Silicon Valley of Agriculture: A Powerhouse of Innovation, This Tiny Country Embodies the Future of Farming," *National Geographic*, October 16, 2017. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/urban-expeditions/food/netherlands-agriculture-food-technology-innovation/, accessed October 6, 2019.

Before long, however, a new form of resistance against extensive industrial farming came up, this time from new actors, including university-trained biologists; veterinarians; recreational farmers who keep cattle next to a paid, often middle-class job; or new-style farmers who combine organic and other novel forms of farming with such activities as recreation (rural campsites and so on) or alternative forms of care (buddy systems between cows and autistic children, for instance). It is in this context that the Association for Endangered Domestic Animal Species (SZH), which launched the Polder Panda campaign in 2018, was founded. Established in 1978, this organization is one of several European partner organizations that seek to save local domestic breeds from extinction. The SZH no longer contests the notion of the Holstein as the most perfect cow. Unlike Dutch breeders and farmers of the 1950s and 1960s, they accept that, economically speaking, no other breed can beat the Holstein. Interviewing farmers, I have rarely met anyone who argued that the Dutch breeds constitute the most "decent" form of farming. This is hardly surprising, given that several of these breeds have become endangered breeds. The Blaarkop is no longer considered a proud animal that can take care of itself. In the global context of capitalist and scientific dairy farming, it has become an imperfect animal that needs protection and care.

Auke and Reini

To give an example of what this protection and care looks like in practice, I will now give an ethnographic vignette of a Friesian couple who decided to replace their Holsteins for Blaarkop cows. With this ethnographic description I aim to give an impression of the arguments and sentiments behind such decisions. It gives a brief insight into the thoughts and experiences of a farming family and the way in which they gradually turned away from regular dairy farming to a more sustainable form of farming with Blaarkop cows. This example is also meant as an introduction to a more summarizing analysis of the critique of the aspiration for perfection in terms of milk production maximization.

In 2018, I visited and interviewed farmers who replaced Holsteins for so-called heritage breeds like the Blaarkop, including Auke and Reini Stremler who live near a little village in the province of Friesland and who had recently exchanged their Holstein cows for Blaarkops. I interviewed both of them on their farm, which Auke took over from his parents in 2004. He was still a regular farmer then, like all of his neighbors. In his words, at the time "the general idea was: more, more, more. That is what you learned at

agriculture college." Dairy farmers are dependent on banks, food providers, and milk companies, and they all pushed for bigger farms and higher milk production. All his neighbors had Holsteins, and so did he and his wife Reini. But their farm was not very big and they worried about their future. They had young children to care for.

A few years before Auke and Reini took over the farm, the province had presented a plan to create more nature reserves. In the Dutch context, that usually means converting small patches of agricultural land into areas where birds and insects can live without being disturbed by industrial farming activities. The use of fertilizers is prohibited, but organic farming without the use of chemical manure, antibiotics, and elaborate food supplies is usually allowed. The idea is to reestablish a pastoral landscape in which farming goes hand-in-hand with the return of flower diversity, meadow birds, and insects. On regular farmland, this agricultural diversity has disappeared up to the point that you will find a larger variety of flowers, birds, and insects in a city like Amsterdam than in rural areas.[37]

Auke thought little of these plans. Converting good farmland into nature reserves appeared to him like giving hard-won polders back to the sea. For him it felt like going into the opposite direction of progress. When the province asked him to consider organic farming, he said no, and continued to do so for several years. But then a friend who had started a new farm in another part of the country invited him for a visit. It turned out that half of this friend's cows were Blaarkop cows, the other half Holsteins. He also explained to Auke that Blaarkop cows are not demanding cows. According to him, Holsteins only eat 75 percent of what you feed them. He fed the leftovers to the Blaarkop cows. He also told Auke that their milk was fatter with more protein and that he was paid a higher liter price.

As Auke told me, he thought his friend's arguments very persuasive. He also talked with him about his concerns about converting farmland into nature reserve. Most of the land on which Auke and Reini farmed was not theirs. It belonged to the province of Friesland, which put pressure on them to buy it. Agricultural land cost 40,000 euro per hectare. They needed a loan to buy the land, which the bank was not willing to give. His friend, however, explained that when agricultural land becomes nature reserve it drops 85 percent in value. On a little piece of paper he showed Auke that they would be able to buy the land from their own savings.

Auke related to me how his friend had explained that it was impossible to turn farmland into nature reserve and continue keeping Holsteins. When

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[37] See, for instance, https://synchroon.nl/inspiratie/biodiversiteit-in-de-stad/, accessed October 8, 2019.

land becomes nature reserve, one is no longer allowed to mow the grass before June because of the meadow birds' nests. By then the grass will be eighty centimeters high. Holsteins, he explained, only eat long grass when they are not giving milk, but the Blaarkop will eat it at all times.

At the end of that visit, the cows came back from the field to the barn to be milked. Auke and Reini were watching the animals as they returned. Reini said to Auke, "I like them, they are beautiful cows." Auke thought so, too. In his recollection that was the moment Reini and he decided to change to Blaarkop cows. He sold his Holstein sperm on the internet, bought Blaarkop sperm instead, and began to cross-breed his Holstein cows with the new sperm. The first calf looked like a Blaarkop. During the time of my visit, almost all of their cows were Blaarkop.

During the interview it became clear to me that Auke had become a fervent advocate of Blaarkop cows. He talked enthusiastically, for instance, about the ways in which he had seen their land change. "In summer," he said, "our land used to be yellow, because of the drought. When you use fertilizers, the grass does not root very deep. But if the soil becomes poorer because you do not manure it any more, the roots will dig deeper until they reach the clay. There is more water in that deeper layer, and more minerals, too. Now the grass stays green all season." He also explained that the cows leave the barn a little later in the season, because they have to wait until the birds have finished brooding. When the chicks have left their eggs, the cows go outside because the birds need insects to eat, and the insects arrive with the first cowpats. When the birds are still sitting on the eggs, Auke said, he never goes into the field to look for them, because at night predators like foxes and stone martens will follow the human scent to track the nests and eat the eggs. "You never had to worry about these things with Holsteins," Auke said. But he also explained that he liked worries like these. He felt that there is more life around him. It used to be him and Reini, the kids and the cows, he said, stressing that now there are birds and eggs and foxes to take care of, too.

In a similar vein, he talked about how their social world has changed. They had started a little farm-shop to sell their own cheese. It brings other kinds of people to the farm, like tourists who enjoy the scenery, or chefs in search of local cheeses to serve in their restaurants. For a while, Auke said, feared losing contact with his neighbors, who did not understand what they were up to. Even his own father said: "You must have bumped your head real hard." But over time they became curious. According to Auke, "a lot of people would like to farm in a different way. But most of them are prisoners of banks and consultants who push farmers to scale up. But more and more I'm being asked to talk at information meetings. So I tell them I would not have survived if I had done it the old way. I would have been too small."

Their production of milk has dropped with three thousand kilos a year, but they get a higher liter price because of the milk's quality. Auke claimed that they spend less on the vet, on antibiotics, and on food supplies. "We have scaled down instead of up," he concluded, adding: "I had never thought that was possible."

Framing the Heritage Breed Case

The Stremlers are but one example of the renewed appreciation of heritage breeds. This new awareness, however, runs parallel with an ongoing diminishing of the heritage breed's population. According to the SZH, the organization that started the Polder Panda campaign, in 2019 the total number of Holstein cows in the Netherlands was approximately 1.47 million. The second biggest breed is the local MRIJ (named after the three rivers Meuse, Rhine, and IJssel) with approximately ten thousand animals. Next come the Blaarkop with 2100 cows, followed by even smaller breeds like the original Holland Friesian or Black Pied Dutch Friesian (1600), the *Lakenvelder* or Dutch Belted (1600), the *Brandrood* or Dutch Burnt Red (950), the *Fries Roodbont* or Red Pied Friesian (500), and the *Witrik* or Dutch Whitebacked (500).[38] According to the Rio de Janeiro Declaration of Biodiversity of 1992, a breed or species is considered endangered once less than ten thousand individuals are left. According to this definition, all of these breeds are endangered, except possibly for the MRIJ, of which some ten thousand are left. Most of them showed decreasing population numbers in the last few decades. Only the most charismatic of them, like the Blaarkop, remained more or less stable, while the Lakenvelder population showed an upward trend in the late 2010s. The number of breeders that specialize in these particular breeds also rose, from twenty-eight for the Lakenvelder in 1980 to more than three hundred in 2014.[39]

When the SZH and analogous organizations were founded in several European countries, probably the main concerns were the loss of biodiversity and the well-being of cows. The SZH itself is a good example of how biologists from Wageningen University, together with veterinary scientists from Utrecht University, took the initiative to protect local breeds and warn against the dangers of a Holstein monoculture. SZH-affiliated biologists and

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[38] See "Onder de paraplu van de SZH," *Zeldzaam Huisdier*, Vol. 42, nr. 3, page 14. No author mentioned.

[39] Reurt Boelema, *De Lakenvelder: Niet uit het veld te slaan* (Zutphen: Roodbont Publishers, 2014), 94.

geneticists argued that breeding practices were focused too much on short-term incentives to increase milk production, while losing sight of the long-term perspective to prevent inbreeding and maintain biodiversity.[40] The genetic material of large populations often goes back to the sperm of a very limited number of bulls. According to already quoted geneticist Sipke Joost Hiemstra, you need twenty-five unrelated bulls and twenty-five unrelated cows to prevent inbreeding, but in practice breeders often only use one or two bulls. The genetic variety within the Holstein population therefore became very small. For this reason alone, biologists argued, it was necessary to maintain a sustainable population of other breeds. Their genetic material was needed to keep the Holstein population healthy. Partly for this reason, the Centre for Genetic Resources of Wageningen University keeps a sperm-bank of heritage breeds.[41] From this biodiversity perspective, then, the importance of heritage breeds is emphasized instrumentally as a genetic pool to periodically revitalize the Holstein population. On their part, veterinarians also initially raised the issue of heritage breeds out of concern for the Holsteins. For instance, the veterinarian Geert Boink, who was cofounder and, at the time of writing, chairman of SZH, worried about the health and the constitution of the Holsteins. He called the heritage breeds more "robust," a term that runs as a buzzword in the heritage breeds discourse. During an interview I had with him, Boink referred to Holstein as "top sport cows" that are programmed to eat up their body while giving milk. Like cyclists racing the Tour de France, he explained, their performance requires an exceptionally high amount of calories—one that cannot be compensated for by the intake of food. Even elaborate amounts of food supplies cannot prevent the cow from becoming thinner and thinner. Typically the Holstein cow has two lactation periods, that is, it calves twice and is milked for about ten months after each birth, and is then considered unproductive. According to Boink, this genetic impulse to give more than the body can compensate for "is at odds with the biology of a cow." As a vet, he considered it his responsibility to warn against this trend.[42] It must be said that Holstein farmers contest this gloomy picture, saying that they keep their cows for two or three years longer than Boink suggests.

The way the heritage breed case has been framed has gradually changed over time. With growing resistance against industrial and scientific farming, the number of arguments in favor of the local breeds has also increased.

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[40] Personal communication with Geert Boink, one of the founders of the SZH.

[41] See https://www.wur.nl/en/Research-Results/Statutory-research-tasks/Centre-for-Genetic-Resources-the-Netherlands-1.htm, accessed June 24, 2021.

[42] Personal communication with Boink.

Many of these arguments also feature in the story of the Stremlers. Almost all farmers with whom I have talked said that financially, lower food and veterinarian costs compensated substantially for the decrease in milk production. For this reason, heritage breeds are particularly interesting for smaller farms and a countertrend to the dominant tendency to upgrade. A farmer in the Southern province of North Brabant who keeps MRIJ cows says:

> Our cows give seven thousand to eight thousand litres of milk a year—to perhaps nine thousand litres for Holsteins. But I save at least ten percent on the cost of food. My neighbours bring their Holsteins to the butcher when they are five years old and get very little for them because they hardly have any meat on their bones left. I bring my MRIJ cows away when they are six years old and get a decent price for it, because the butcher can sell it to restaurants and upmarket shops as first-class meat.

Increasingly, heritage breeds are promoted in the context of slow-food and local-food trends. This is a relatively new argument in the Netherlands, where the emphasis has been on quantity rather than quality for a long time. Not so long ago, Dutch agricultural products had the reputation of being cheap but tasteless.[43] However, Dutch food culture has gradually changed, with a growing appreciation for local products—framed, in some cases, as "imperfect" but "authentic," as we read elsewhere in this volume—for which customers are willing to pay a higher price.[44] Apart from the Polder Panda campaign, the SZH also runs the so-called *Zeldzaam Lekker* ("Rare and Tasty") campaign to promote the special quality of local beef. Like Auke and Reini Stremler, farmers with whom I talked increasingly sell their dairy products and meat from their farm, bypassing the middlemen and raising profits. Others sell their products online directly to customers.

The reorientation on local food also raises questions about future Dutch policies regarding agriculture, and dairy farming in particular. Dutch farmers mainly produce for export; but these economic aspirations have increasingly devastating effects on the local environment. To give just one example, since the bigger and heavier Holsteins are prone to develop foot diseases in the originally swampy meadows of the lowlands, the level of ground water is

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[43] See, for an exemplary news report on this problem, https://www.agf.nl/article/83776/telers-strijden-tegen-het-imagoprobleem-van-de-nederlandse-tomaat/, accessed June 24, 2021.

[44] See De Hooge's contribution to this volume; and Frank Heuts and Annemarie Mol, "What Is a Good Tomato? A Case of Valuing in Practice," *Valuation Studies* 1, no. 2 (2013): 125–46.

artificially lowered to prevent this from happening. (Remember that the Dutch polders are man-made land thanks to elaborate systems of water management.) As a result, the peaty layers just below the surface dry up, releasing the CO_2 that is stored in the peat. Moreover, meadow birds that need swampy land to eat and breed disappear. The return to local breeds that are used to wet grounds would be a solution, but that would lower the export of dairy products.[45] As a Friesian farmer of Red Pied Friesian said in an interview with me, "the Netherlands produces approximately eleven to twelve billion litres of milk a year. With forty cents a litre, that is some five billion Euros, not a lot on the total GNP. So why would you want to feed the world for such a relatively small profit? The answer is, farming policy is no longer determined by individual farmers but by men in Corleone suits." In the context of climate change and the significant portion of CO_2 emission from dairy farms, such questions are now increasingly raised by Corleone-suit-wearing men themselves.

The environmental issue is probably the most powerful argument for local breeding today. A Blaarkop farmer in the province of Groningen told me:

Holsteins die when you only feed them grass. They become thin, fall ill, and eventually die. You need to feed them corn and soy and other stuff that is imported from South America. Within thirty years, with the climate change transition coming up, that practice will come to an end. So we need the local breeds again, they are the cows of the future.

Or listen to a Blaarkop farmer near the town of Wageningen. Not from a farmer family herself, she started with Holsteins.

But they are horrible cows. When they reach their peak, they give sixty litres of milk a day. But we wanted to be an organic farm, farming with what the land offers, without all the food supplies. We thought that the cows would adjust to that, but they simply go on producing sixty litres a day. They are marathon runners, they just go on till they drop dead. Some went lame, others got other infections. We had the vet around almost every day, it felt like we were running an old folks home rather than a farm. The vet said "You need to give them concentrates." But that is imported from the tropics. You can get rich quickly if you want to, but we didn't make that choice. I became a farmer because I wanted to work with nature, not destroy it.

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[45] See "Deze koe moet de landbouw in zompig veengebied redden. Nadeel: ze is stronteigenwijs," *De Volkskrant*, published March 27, 2019.

The increasing popularity of local breeds is reflected in the establishment, in the course of the past decades, of multiple foundations devoted to one particular breed. It is here that you see the return of strict standards for phenotypes that came up in the nineteenth century. For the Lakenvelder or Dutch Belted, for instance, the foundation has formulated rules about the preferred breadth of the white belt that separates the black or red front from the back.[46] Lakenvelders, however, are typically cows for recreation farmers. Professional farmers cannot afford to be so choosy. They care less about phenotype than about the cow's constitution or milk production. The same is true for the national heritage argument. Whereas the SZH regularly argues that the Polder Panda and other local breeds are part of the traditional national landscape, farmers are more practical. Some Holstein-rejecting farmers, for instance, have shifted to other European breeds like the Jersey or the French Montebeliarde for the same reasons that others have returned to the Blaarkop or the MRIJ. For them, the main point is a break with industrial scientific farming of which the Holstein has become a symbol, rather than the restauration of the national landscape or the creation of the perfect Lakenvelder or Blaarkop.

Admiration and Love

Throughout the last two centuries, three different ideals or *regimes of perfection* have shaped the practice of cow breeding. I have described these three as the pursuit for purity of blood, for the strong and "robust" cow, and finally for the maximization of milk production. The purity-of-blood regime initially came up as a British aristocratic ideal, but was given a boost due to international trade. Key in determining whether an individual belonged to a particular breed were exterior traits such as the color and the pattern of the skin. In the Dutch language, this ideal led to a language of race (*ras*); globally, it spawned an elaborate scientific discourse on the classification of breeds and the true and authentic characteristics of breeds. In the mid-twentieth century, Dutch breeders and farmers developed a practice of "decent" breeding that emphasized a strong and healthy constitution of animals. Key moments were the many fairs—from local to international events—where animals were compared and praised on traits like the shape of the legs, the patterns of the veins in the udder, or a straight back. The rationale was the so-called dual-purpose cow, which gave a decent amount of milk without eating up its own body before it was taken to the butcher. At the same time

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[46] Boelema, *De Lakenvelder*, 9.

in North America, a new ideal focused exclusively on milk production maximization emerged. That ideal would become the dominant model from the 1970s onward, relegating the other two regimes to the realms of folklore, recreational farming, and the preservation of heritage breeds.

Although all three ideals exist next to each other, the Holstein model has become hegemonic up to the point that the whole infrastructure of dairy farming has adjusted itself to it. Above I have described the elaborate transport of food supplies across continents to feed the Holstein, or the lowering of groundwater levels in the rural regions of the country. Another example is technology. One of the latest innovations is the milking robot, generally considered a welcome improvement in dairy farming. Traditionally a cow is milked twice a day but for the cow's convenience it should be milked a bit more often, say every nine to ten hours. With a robot, a cow can decide itself when it is time for milking. The animal simply walks to the machine that will do the work. But the robot is designed for the Holstein. The funnels that close around the teats are usually not compatible with other breeds.[47] To break the monopoly of the Holstein regime, then, would mean to develop a new infrastructure for dairy farming or to restore obsolete ones.

It is because of this Holstein dominance that other regimes of perfection have lost pertinence. What I have tried to show is that the ideal of the "robust" cow is increasingly promoted as a more sustainable alternative to the Holstein regime. But while doing so, few advocates of the Blaarkop or other local breeds would make a claim for perfection. The dominance of the Holstein reveals itself in the general acceptance that the Holstein is the perfect or "top sport cow," a "marathon runner." What is contested, however, is the desirability of this perfection. Defenders of local breeds and of cows who fall short of perfect standards call for "more space for the imperfect cow"[48] and point out the price that is paid for perfection—from the self-destructing tendency of the Holstein that gives itself away while producing the desired quantity of milk to multiple environmental problems on both local and global scale. The imperfection of the local breeds—imperfect compared to the Holstein in terms of milk production—is presented as a solution to these problems.

Let me end by pointing out the difference between problematic perfection and the benefits of imperfection in terms of admiration and love. Talking with farmers about their cows, what struck me was a difference in the emotional

[47] Personal communication with one of the farmers I interviewed.
[48] Tom van Nespen, "Ruimte voor de imperfect koe," *Veeteelt.nl*, November 13, 2017. https://veeteelt.nl/gezondheid/blog/ruimte-voor-de-imperfecte-koe, accessed March 2, 2020.

relationship with the animals. Holsteins were mostly talked about in terms of admiration or a form of pity that complemented admiration. Its performance in terms of milk production was praised by everyone, although it was also seen as almost a form of sacrifice. Its self-destruction makes the Holstein an example of how humans have managed to master and control the animal up to its biology. In this hyper-hierarchical relationship, there is room for emotions like admiration and pity, but hardly for love. That is quite different in the case of the Polder Panda. Farmers who keep Blaarkoppen claim to love the animals for their friendly but stubborn character. They are not necessarily easy animals to handle. If they want to go left, it is difficult to convince them to go right. They have, in short, a mind of their own. There is a part of them that cannot be fully understood or controlled. They do not completely fit in the world that humans have designed for them.

This is, at least how farmers describe the Blaarkop cow. To what extent their claims are true or simply a reflection of how farmers want to see themselves is difficult to say. One of course needs to be a little stubborn oneself to go against the grain of industrial farming. What I do want to suggest, however, is that this obstinate remnant of autonomy that farmers attribute to their cows is also the reason why they love them so much.[49] There is a hint of equality in the relationship that makes it possible to love the animals, rather than merely admire them or feel pity for them. If Michael Sandel argues that imperfection is a condition for solidarity, I would go a step further and say that imperfection makes love a possibility.

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[49] On the nexus between love and autonomy/imperfection, see also Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), where he argues that "true love is precisely the opposite move of *forsaking the promise of Eternity itself for an imperfect individual*" (13).

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Afterthought

Joanna van der Zanden

According to the multidisciplinary range of voices in this book, expressed through careful research analyses, it is time that we give a more prominent and positive role to what is considered as imperfect. Each chapter can be read as a statement, a proclamation. It is therefore that I imagine what the result would be if all these voices would get together to write a manifesto.

Historically, manifestos have functioned as statements against the norm: to set new ideals, new focuses and beliefs. They play and have played a role in social, political, and cultural movements, and often they contain a concrete number of statements that together proclaim an agenda of actions, perspectives, and dos or don'ts.[1]

In this afterthought I will lead you through a possible outcome of such an imaginative gathering of all the voices represented in this book. It is an attempt, an exercise, and, in accordance with the central themes of this book, I ask you to please not count me on my mistakes.

The Ideal but Incomplete Manifesto on Imperfection

What would a manifesto envisioning an ideal world including imperfections state? We might start this manifesto with two words of caution. First, as more than one contributor to this volume has explained, it is important not to idealize imperfect looks, shapes, or stories when they reveal social ills, injustice, and poverty; and not to gloss over problems of privilege in thinking about imperfections. Second, the practice of imperfection deviates from

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[1] To avoid a manifesto being too rigid in its proclamations, some manifestos (a famous example is Marinetti's Manifesto of Futurism) are written on purpose in eleven statements, instead of ten, to underscore their incompleteness. The idea behind this practice is that the manifesto can grow, as more arguments can be added: these manifestos are open for adjustment and, in that sense, are imperfect.

given norms and standards, and these standards should be considered within their own context. As the authors of this book have shown in detail, one should always ask the question: who defines what is perfect or imperfect, and on the basis of which motivation, regulation, or system? This means that what is conceived as imperfect needs to occur within the context of the given times and places. This also means that our manifesto cannot become very specific. Our statements will need to aim to be universal. This manifesto should be a general plea for all sorts of objects, artifacts, human and nonhuman beings *to have the right to be its own shape and have its own appearance*. We will not make a mention of certain specific shapes, by claiming, for instance, that "crooked" cucumbers are perfectly imperfect and that they should not be discriminated over "straight" cucumbers. And our manifesto is written to reach out to as many people as possible.

Within this manifesto, we could consider giving room for different groups to speak out. Artists could declare that *making mistakes fuels creativity*. There is beauty to be found in failure and imperfections. Wilfully made or not, an artistic vocabulary is not complete without containing flaws, glitches, frictions, fragilities, errors and corrections, breaks, misfits, instabilities, and even finitude and death. All articulated in their own artistic medium: materialized, performed or expressed otherwise, imperfections reveal for many makers and their audiences a sense of authenticity. It is perceived as a token of the unexpected, which gives way for new creative possibilities. Some artists would claim that aesthetic modes of imperfection are the perfect way to critique the cultural or political establishment. They can function as an act of resistance and become change makers in restricted systems.

Farmers, biologists, and environmentalist may point out that *a sustainable future cannot be without "imperfect" animals and nature*. If we keep on "weeding out" nonhuman life in order to create a picture-perfect aesthetic garden or to develop the most profitable food production chain, we will damage more than what is good for us and for the planet. In other words, what is perceived as "perfect" is, in ecological terms, often very destructive. Sufficiency is just one side of the coin. Working with nature and tuning in to its unpredictability, its diverse shapes, colors, and characters helps us to understand and appreciate the unique qualities of "wild" nature, be it a cow or a carrot, a flower bed or an insect.

Psychologists, sociologists, and media researchers would promote the widespread acceptance and production of *true and imperfect images of ourselves as healing and liberating*. The digital revolution has brought a picture perfectness that is impossible to live up to. Pursuits of perfection can take a

heavy toll on one's mental health as well. This statement would be signed by large groups of citizens reclaiming the right to be authentic, to not fit in, and to be accepted for it. They would plea for societal ideals to shift from being a perfect insider to being a perfect outsider. Bodily appearance, language, beliefs, skills—they would argue that each individual should be esteemed for their uniqueness, making social injustice a societal illness of the past.

We might end the manifesto with a general mentioning of the future effects of imperfections as different modes to relate to the world. *The more we engage with all kinds of frictions and failures, the more we will care*. The peculiar evolution in contemporary consumerist cultures is that they have made perfection the standard and not the exception. Which makes up for a growing waste mountain. New forms of solidarity and empathy with nonliving beings, technology, objects, and the material world could lead to a more humble human–nonhuman relationship, challenging also the idea that only humans can become political actors.

This manifesto should then be translated in all languages possible, made available in text, speech, songs, images, performances, physical and virtual. Parts of the manifesto could be tailored to concrete groups and occasions. And it will adjust over time, as no manifesto is perfect, just as no archival list is perfect.

I can only imagine what such a manifesto could bring about.

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