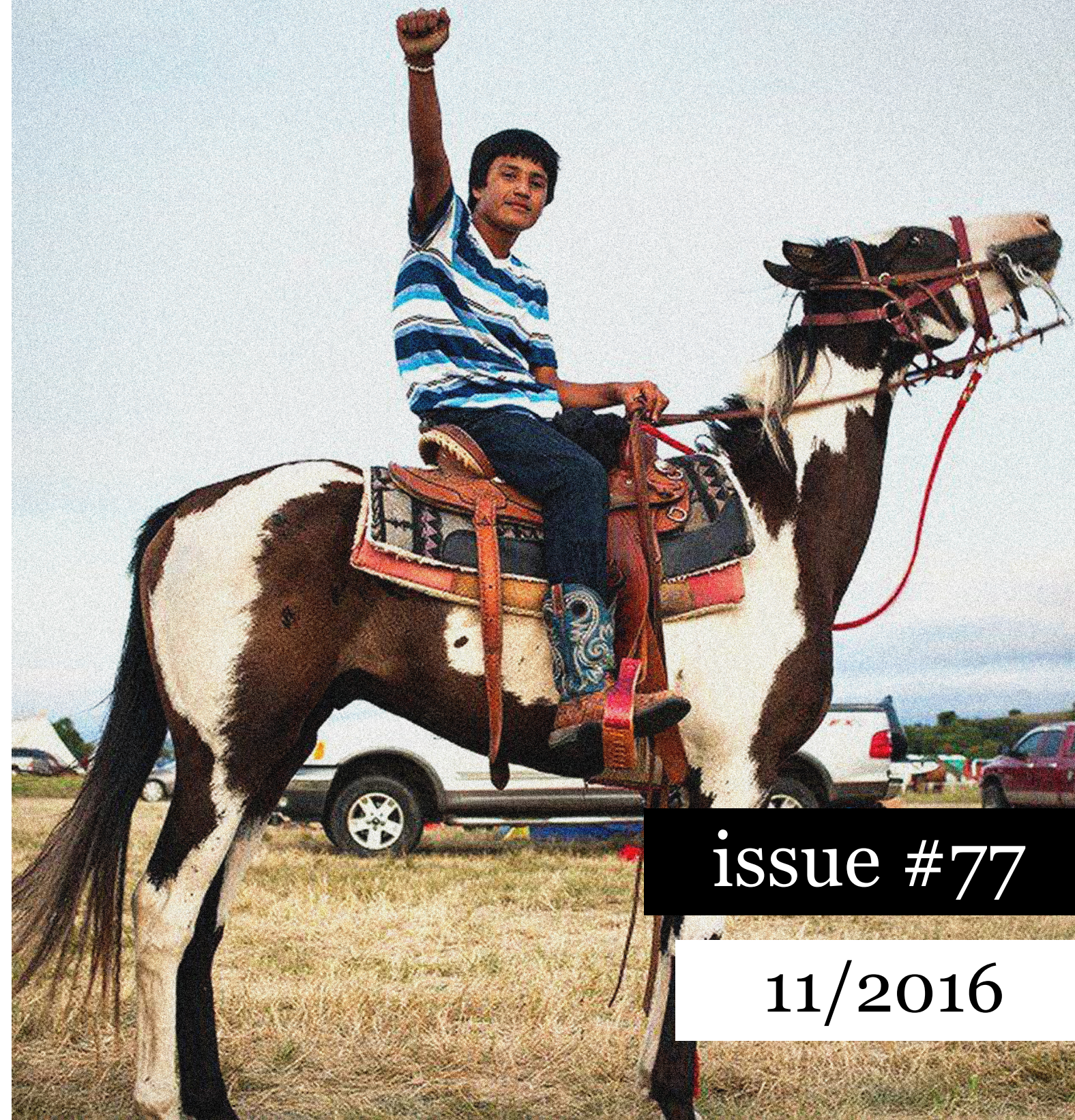


# e-flux journal



Dźwiękobrazy | Imaginary soundscapes  
wystawa i koncert Stéphane Clor

Wernisaż i koncert: Piątek 16 grudnia 2016, godz. 18:00  
Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej ŁAŹNIA 1, ul. Jaskółcza 1, Gdańsk  
Wystawa jest czynna do 22 grudnia 2016, codziennie (oprócz poniedziałku) 12:00 - 18:00



issue #77

11/2016

*e-flux journal* is a monthly art publication featuring essays and contributions by some of the most engaged artists and thinkers working today. The journal is available online, in PDF format, and in print through a network of distributors.

**Editors**

Julieta Aranda  
Brian Kuan Wood  
Stephen Squibb  
Anton Vidokle

**Managing Editors**

Kaye Cain-Nielsen  
Mariana Silva

**Copy Editor**

Michael Andrews

**Editorial & Production Assistant**

Daria Irincheeva

**Graphic Design**

Jeff Ramsey

**Layout Generator**

Adam Florin

01/01

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016  
Colophon

Editors

02 pp. **Editorial**

Boris Groys

06 pp. **Towards the New Realism**

Martha Rosler

08 pp. **Why Are People Being So Nice?**

Victor Skersis

09 pp. **Analytical Conceptualism**

Étienne Balibar

11 pp. **Citizen Subject**

Antonia Majaca and Luciana Parisi

06 pp. **The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility**

Irmgard Emmelhainz

13 pp. **Decolonization as the Horizon of Political Action**

Not An Alternative

07 pp. **Institutional Liberation**

McKenzie Wark

08 pp. **Digital Provenance and the Artwork as Derivative**

01/01

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016  
Contents

# Editors Editorial

01/02

Early in the new century, it is already clear that the vanguards of the last one were less a singular, sequential telos than a symptomatic cycle. Movements like impressionism, abstraction, conceptualism, or symbolism are more like weather patterns that recur under certain circumstances than historical exceptions never to be repeated. There are everyday sprinkles of impressionism which relate to a Monet in the same way that the average rainstorm relates to a hurricane. In "Towards the New Realism," Boris Groys examines the revival of what is still the most suggestive and polyamorous of these commitments, the pursuit of the real. Under what circumstances does reality appear in need of partisan support? Is the real something that is produced by institutions or something betrayed by them?

Unlike "the real," or the weather, the concept does not change of its own accord. The conditions of possibility for a renewed conceptualism are different than those of a reactivated realism. Writing to reinvigorate this tradition, Victor Skersis draws on the philosophy of mathematics to formalize the achievements of twentieth century art, which he describes as "Analytic Conceptualism." Only by stating explicitly the theoretical achievements of a Duchamp or a Kosuth can we avoid endlessly reiterating them.

The idea of the autonomous concept is not without difficulties. Martha Rosler, in "Why is Everyone Being So Nice?" considers how shifts in the underlying political economy of the art world may impact its affective rhetoric. Has the global shift toward a rentier economy created a new culture of mannered courtliness? In "Institutional Liberation," Not An Alternative resurrects Rudi Dutschke's call for a "long march through the institutions of power," by calling for a militant, critical realism toward contemporary museums.

Perhaps all this necromancy of old ideas is just the latest in a series of zombie attacks unleashed on the present by a past that refuses to die. Antonia Majaca and Luciana Parisi in "The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility" argue that the ancient opposition between the political agent who uses and the instrument that is used needs to be overthrown due to the consistent misrecognition of agents as instruments. Instead, the relationship between being an agent and being an instrument needs to be understood as mutually reinforcing and constitutive. Responding to Hito Steyerl, McKenzie Wark examines several different

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Editors  
Editorial

anchor the artwork as a derivative of their various kinds of sign value.

×

Originally presented at K-Art Conversations, Korea International Art Fair 2016. Thanks to Jonathan Watkins and Korea Arts Management Service.

08/08

1  
Hito Steyerl, "If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!" *e-flux Journal* 76 (October 2016) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/76/69732/if-you-don-t-have-bread-eat-art-contemporary-art-and-derivative-fascisms/>.

2  
See <http://www.redbullstudiosnewyork.com/artists/gala-committee/>.

3  
Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

4  
Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux journal* 10 (November 2009) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

5  
Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2016).

6  
Eli Rosenburg, "Banksy Identified by Scientists. Maybe," *New York Times*, March 7, 2016 <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/08/arts/design/banksy-identified-by-scientists-maybe.html>.

7  
See <https://vimeo.com/135392103>.

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 McKenzie Wark  
Digital Provenance and the Artwork as Derivative

so on. As in other fields, the main thing traded here is the derivatives. The simulations are not worth much at all, or are such poor images that they might as well be free gifts.

Not just individual artworks, but art itself is now a derivative of its simulation. A key to this development is the rise of art fairs and biennials. The art fairs are more directly about selling artwork derivatives of their simulated images. They are mostly about the commercial dealers who trade in the derivative contracts that are artworks themselves. But the other side of this is the biennial, whose function is to simulate contemporary art itself.

The artwork is a derivative of its simulation, or rather of its simulations, plural. This is the way the actual, particular artwork can still work as a sort of hedge. An artwork is a risky proposition. It might in the long run turn out to be worth no more than any random bit of painted canvas. But if the artwork can be a *portfolio* of different kinds of simulation of itself, it is possible to manage the risk.

An artwork can be a derivative of the simulation of itself, where its image precedes it and authenticates it through its circulation and exposure. Here GALA is the example. An artwork can be a derivative of the simulation of its artist. Here Banksy is a slightly aberrant example, where its the simulation of the artist's absence that creates provenance. An artwork can also claim provenance from celebrity. This is one of the things going on in the commerce between the art world, fashion, and pop music. Those mass simulation forms think they gain something from the provenance of the artwork as a rare and singular commodity, and maybe they do. But I think really the secret is that it is the artwork that acquires its provenance from proximity to Jay Z or Kanye or Björk. The artwork becomes a derivative of contact with the body behind the simulation of the pop star or fashion star.

An artwork can also be a derivative of intellectual provenance. It helps if the intellectual is dead. Hence Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument*, which derives its provenance from a famous dead Communist thinker. If one must use living intellectuals, famous critical thinkers are the best. The derivative work acquires commercial value from these intellectuals' lack of commercial interest in value. So get Antonio Negri if you can. The DIS people had to settle for me as I come a lot cheaper.

An artwork can of course be a derivative of previous artworks, but a certain boredom is settling on this well-worn method, which in the end delights nobody but art historians, who become consultants to provenance as evaluators of quotation. The historians quote precedents so

the gallerist may quote prices.

In any case, it tends also to mask the way in which the artwork has changed. Artworks in our time are derivatives because that is how our economy works. In a previous era, one which prized manufacturing, artworks were distinguished by their manufacturing techniques. So, for example, works by Impressionists, Surrealists, or so-called Action Painters could be treated as special, non-alienating commodities made by some other manufacturing process besides the workshop or the assembly line.

This started to change in the Sixties. Through Edie Sedgwick, Warhol discovered both how simulation could create provenance and how the artwork could be the derivative that would be a portfolio of simulation values. But it was perhaps minimalism's "dematerialization of the artwork" that really put an end to the industrial model of art and paved the way for the birth of the financial model of art, of the artwork as a derivative that functions as a portfolio of simulation values. The artwork, like any other financial instrument, needs nothing to exist beyond its *documentation*.

The dematerialization of the artwork was not the dematerialization of the art worker. But one might speculate as to whether that might be the next step. Could the labor of art be automated? There was already a lovely image of this in William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*, in which an artificial intelligence makes Joseph Cornell boxes that are if anything better than actual ones.

So in short, I think what is most interesting about the relation between art and information is the reciprocal relation between art as rarity and information as ubiquity. It turns out that ubiquity can be a kind of distributed provenance, of which the artwork itself is the derivative. The artwork is then ideally a portfolio of different kinds of simulated value, the mixture of which can be a long-term hedge against the risks of various kinds of simulated value falling – such as the revealing of the name of a hidden artist, or the decline of the intellectual discourse on which the work depended, or the artist falling into banality and overproduction.

Since art became a special kind of financial instrument rather than a special kind of manufactured article, it no longer needs to have a special means for its making, or even perhaps special makers. Indeed, curators now rival artists for influence the way DJs rival musicians. Both are a kind of portfolio manager of the qualitative. The next step after the dematerialization of the artwork may be the dematerialization of the art worker, whose place could be taken by new kinds of algorithmic functions. These would still have to produce the range of simulations that might

contemporary works to argue that art is better described as a derivative than as a currency. And Irmgard Emmelhainz reminds us that any history of the concept as such must reckon with the colonial reality that produced it. There is little in our intellectual arsenal that has not relied for its consolidation on accumulation by dispossession in one form or another.

Finally, in "Citizen Subject," Etienne Balibar unites in a single stroke the philosophical and political economic foundations of modernity. The relentless anxiety and concern for the fate of the subjectivity, in the philosophical (or artistic) sense, Balibar avers, cannot be considered separately from the revolutionary transformation that translates the subjects of an absolute monarchy, in the political economic sense, into the citizens of a representative republic. By linking these two senses of the term "subject," Balibar provides us with a new way of revisiting decades-old questions about the relative stability and veracity of representation, while also reminding us that the institutional legacy of aristocratic privilege did not vanish in 1789. What if expressionism expressed a painter's citizenship, rather than her subjectivity? Is realism something different when practiced by the loyal subject of a patrilineal regime than when it is pursued by the citizen of a nominally free state?

– The Editors

x

07/08

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 McKenzie Wark  
Digital Provenance and the Artwork as Derivative

02/02

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Editors  
Editorial

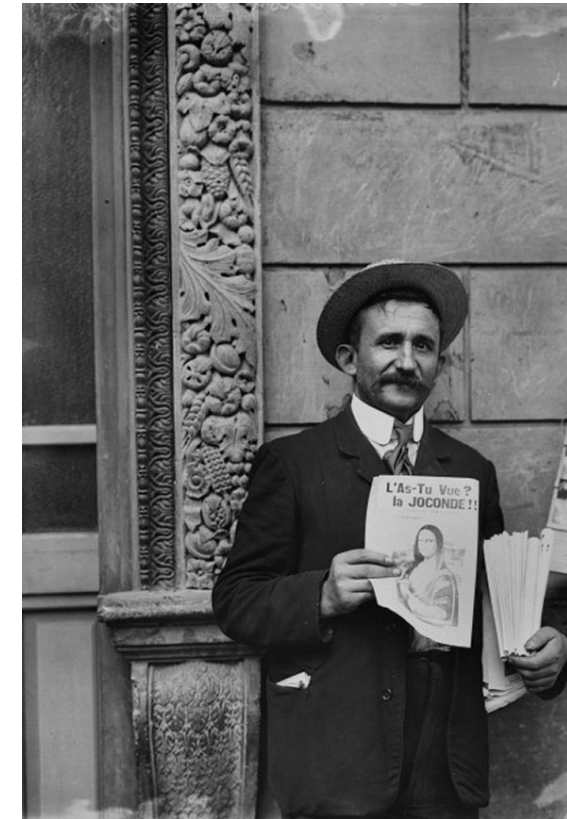
Boris Groys  
**Towards the  
New Realism**

01/06

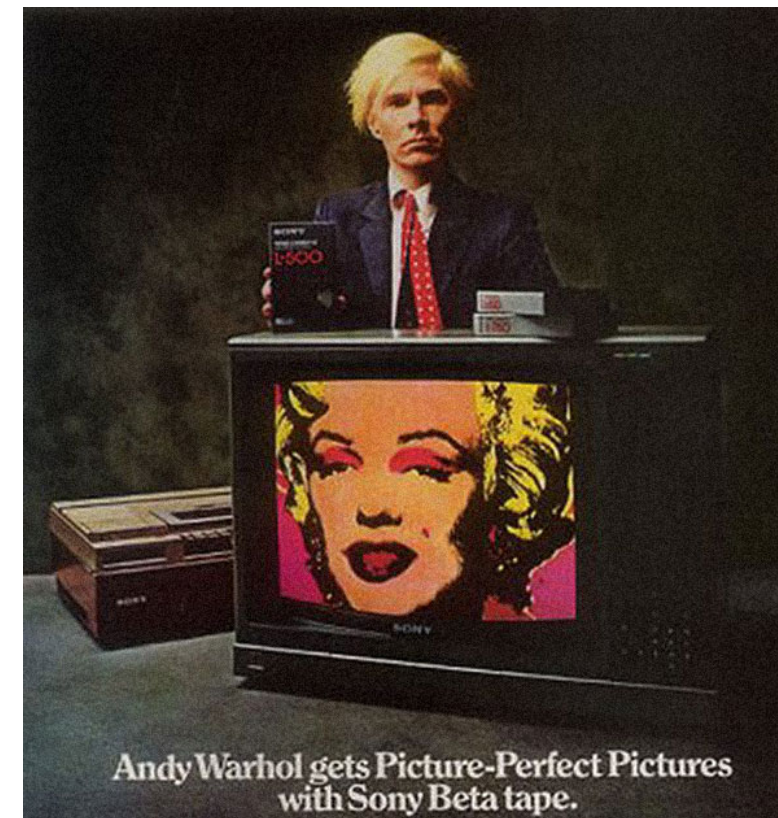
Recently we have seen a growing interest in realism, which for a long time seemed historically passé. But the notion of realism is not as obvious as it seems. One often understands “realism” to mean the production of mimetic images of “reality.” One can of course agree with this definition. However, the question remains: How do we initially meet reality? How do we discover reality in order to become able to make an image of it? Of course, we can speak about reality as everything that presents itself to our “natural,” uninformed, and technologically unarmed gaze. Traditional icons seem to us to be nonrealistic because they seek to present the “other,” normally nonvisible world. And artworks that seek to confront us with the “essential core” of the world or with a particular artist’s “subjective vision” are usually not recognized as realistic either. We would also not speak of realism when looking at pictures produced with the help of a microscope or telescope. Realism is often defined as the readiness to reject religious and philosophical visions and speculations, as well as technologically produced images. Instead, realism usually involves the reproduction of an average, ordinary, profane view of the world. However, this profane vision of the world is not especially exciting. The desire to depict and reproduce this profane image of the world cannot be explained by its alleged “beauty,” which it obviously does not have.

We initially discover reality not as a simple sum of “facts.” Rather, we discover reality as a sum of necessities and constraints that do not allow us to do what we would like to do or to live as we would like to live. Reality is what divides our vision of the imaginary future into two parts: a realizable project, and “pure fantasy” that never can be realized. In this sense reality shows itself initially as *realpolitik*, as the sum of everything that can be done – in opposition to an “unrealistic” view of the conditions and limitations of human actions. This was the actual meaning of nineteenth-century realist literature and art, which presented “sober” and elaborate descriptions of the disappointments, frustrations, and failures that confronted romantic, socially and emotionally “idealistic” heroes when they tried to implement their ideals in “reality.” From Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education* to Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*, European literature of the time described the failure of all attempts to merge “art and life.” As a result, one could see that nothing that the heroes desired or planned could be realized – everything that they aspired to was demonstrated to be “nonrealistic,” pure fantasy. The best consequence of this realist tradition was formulated by the movement of 1968: be realistic, demand the impossible. Thus, the

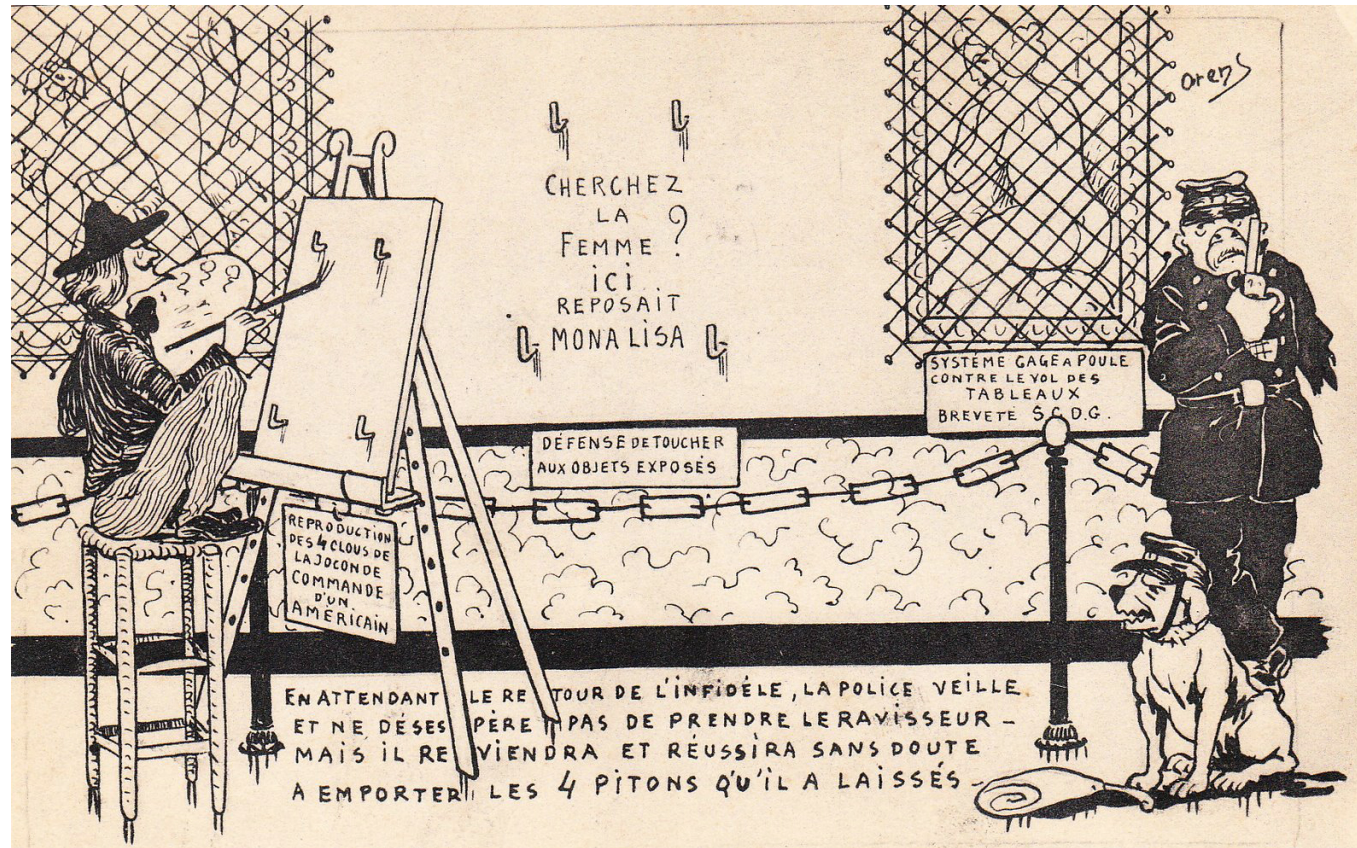
e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Boris Groys  
Towards the New Realism



A wanted poster notifies the French public of the search to retrieve the stolen Mona Lisa painting back to the Louvre Museum, date unknown.



Andy Warhol lends his image to a Sony Beta-Cam ad, date unknown.



A cartoon depicts Mona Lisa's rise to fame after the painting was stolen from the Louvre Museum in 1911. The scandal prompted a wide reproduction of its image in newspapers and drew large crowds to the museum even before the painting was retrieved.



Vija Celmins, Desert, 1975. Lithograph on paper. 315 x 416 mm. Copyright: Vija Celmins

object depicted by realist literature and art was not reality itself – as described by the natural sciences – but the human psyche suffering from the shock of a failed reality test. Nineteenth-century realism was, in actuality, psychologism. Reality was understood not as a place of “objective” scientific investigation but as a force of oppression that endangered or even crushed the hero.

Modern and contemporary art are, by contrast, products of the long history of depsychologization that many critics – for example, Ortega y Gasset – experienced as a history of dehumanization. Avant-garde and post-avant-garde artists wanted their art to be not realist but real – as real as all the other processes taking place in the world. The artwork was understood as being a thing among other things – like a tree or a car. This did not mean that avant-garde artists did not want to change the world – on the contrary, they radicalized this desire. But they did not appeal to the psyche of the reader, listener, or spectator to achieve this goal. Rather, they understood art as a specific kind of technology that was able to change the world by technical means. In fact, the avant-garde tried to turn art spectators into inhabitants of the artwork – so that by accommodating themselves to the new conditions of their environment, these spectators would change their sensibilities and attitudes. Speaking in Marxist terms: art can thus be seen as either part of the superstructure, or part of the material base. In other words, art can be understood as either ideology or technology. The radical artistic avant-gardes pursued the second, technological way of world transformation. This was pursued most radically by the avant-garde movements of the 1920s: Russian Constructivism, Bauhaus, De Stijl.

However, the avant-garde never fully succeeded in its quest for the real because the reality of art – its material side, which the avant-garde tried to thematize – was permanently re-aestheticized; these thematizations were subjected to the standard conditions of art representation. The same can be said for institutional critique, which also tried to thematize the profane, factual side of art institutions. Like the avant-garde, institutional critique remained inside art institutions. However, this situation has changed in recent years – due to the internet, which has replaced traditional art institutions as the main platform for the production and distribution of art. Now the profane, factual, “real” dimension of art is thematized by the internet. Indeed, contemporary artists usually work using the internet – and also put their works on the internet. Artworks by a particular artist can be

found on the internet in the context of other information about the artist one finds there: their biography, other works, political activities, critical reviews, personal details, etc. Artists use the internet not only to produce art – but also to buy tickets, make restaurant reservations, conduct business, etc. All these activities take place in the same integrated space of the internet – and all of them are potentially accessible to other internet users. Here the artwork becomes “real” and profane because it is integrated with information about its author as a real, profane person. Art is presented on the internet as a specific kind of practical activity: as documentation of a real working process taking place in the real, offline world. Indeed, on the internet art operates in the same space as military planning, tourist business capital flows, etc. Google shows, among other things, that there are no walls in internet space.

The word “documentation” is crucial here. In the wake of recent decades, the documentation of art has increasingly been integrated into art exhibitions and art museums – alongside traditional artworks. However, art documentation is not art: it merely refers to an art event, or exhibition, or installation, or project that we assume to have really taken place. On the internet, art documentation finds its legitimate place: it refers to art as its “real,” external referent taking place in “reality itself.” One can say that avant-garde and post-avant-garde art has finally achieved its goal – to become a part of “reality.” But this reality is not one with which we are confronted, or in the middle of which we live. Rather, it is a reality of which we are informed. In the contemporary world we are de facto confronted not with art but with information about art. We can follow what is going on in art milieus the same way we follow what is going on in other spheres of social life: by using contemporary social networks like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.

It is this positivist facticity of contemporary art that produces a nostalgia for realism. If art becomes a real practice – a legitimate part of reality – then discontent with reality turns into a discontent with art and all its institutions: the art market, exhibition practices, etc. And this discontent, this conflict with reality, calls for a new description: the New Realism. But why can such a description only be an artistic description? The answer to this question is obvious: discontent with the reality – insofar as it does not manifest itself through violent protest or revolutionary action – remains hidden, and is thus always under suspicion of being fictional. If I hate my job but nevertheless do it, there is no possibility to objectively prove my discontent with the reality of my existence. This discontent

real consortium of collectors from Germany bought the art. The proceeds were donated by GALA to charities.

Now: here is the detail I want to point out about all this. In the Sotheby’s auction catalog, there is a list in the back that details the episodes of the show in which each work appeared. What is this list about? One word for it is provenance. What makes each piece authentic is that it appeared on a set for a television show, was videotaped on that set, and those images ended up in a show that was broadcast to millions of people. It is actually still being broadcast, as *Melrose Place* is still in syndication somewhere on the planet even to this day. The provenance of the work is a really strange kind of product placement.

There is a retrospective of the GALA Committee work on right now in New York, which is what made me think of it as an example to talk about.<sup>2</sup> I think it’s a nice anticipation of where we ended up in the relationship of art and information. For those who have read their Walter Benjamin, it is an interesting wrinkle in the relation that is supposed to hold between the work of art and reproducibility.<sup>3</sup> In Benjamin, reproducibility is supposed to undermine the aura of the work, its ritual seclusion, its provenance, and its standing as a unique piece of private property. But with the GALA work, what we have, dare I say, is a rather more dialectical relation between art and information.

It is the reproduction of the work, electronically rather than mechanically, that perversely enough makes it rare. The image of the GALA work in the TV show is what Hito Steyerl calls a poor image, a wretched image, compressed and degraded and available on the internet for anyone.<sup>4</sup> But the GALA work itself is not. And its provenance comes, not from the singular place of its creation and persistence, but from the ubiquity of the image of it. It’s a kind of network or distributed provenance, perhaps.

Far from making the work of art obsolete, the reproducible image gives it a new kind of value. It is not quite the case that the original and the copy become indistinguishable. But it is the case that their relationship can be reversible. The copy can precede the original. You see a reproduction of something and that makes you want to go see the thing of which it is the copy. That’s a common enough occurrence, something Jean Baudrillard drew our attention to.<sup>5</sup> But the thing to pay attention to is that the copy creates the *provenance* of the original, not the other way around. The copy not only precedes but *authenticates* the original.

The copy can create value for the work, or in some cases for the artist rather than the work. This would be the Banksy story. The thing about

Banksy that matters the most is the copies of the pieces that circulate on the internet. That is what establishes their provenance. These appear to be works made illegally in public, but that in itself is not all that interesting or important. There’s lots of street art. It is just that this street art is authenticated by the circulation of its images. Those poor images are what create value, in this case for a *visibly* invisible artist.

A visibly invisible artist is something of a provenance anomaly, the scene of a crime. While there has been speculation for some years now that Banksy is “actually” a man named Robin Gunningham, the *Daily Mail* brought forensic methods from criminal investigation to bear on the question, trying to correlate known Banksy works in London with places Gunningham is known to frequent.<sup>6</sup> It is an example maybe of counter-provenance, of layering a potentially criminal authentication over an art world one.

Sometimes the preceding image that authenticates the work is not of the work but still precedes it. As an example, I’d like to look at *The Island (Ken)* by the group that calls itself DIS. This was at the New Museum. I did a little talk-performance with this piece, and in the process of writing it I did a studio visit and talked to the artists.<sup>7</sup> They told me that the process that resulted in this work started with an idea about high-end kitchens and bathrooms. Googling that generated a series of advertisements based on the search terms, for companies offering such high-end appliances. So DIS simply chose the most high-end-seeming companies and approached them about making the pieces. So in this case, the provenance of the work comes from a Google search.

This is what the Google algorithm, customizing itself for this particular computer used by DIS, thinks is the real thing when it comes to fancy appliances. Yet, when I searched for “high-end shower” I got slightly different results, tailored algorithmically to me, or rather to my computer. The *signature* is in this case the algorithmically generated search, and can be expected to differ in some way in each instance. Here we have a difference from the GALA work, which depends on the uniformity of the broadcast model of simulation.

The artwork is now a *derivative* of its simulation. Of course there are many different kinds of simulations. It could be the JPEG of a particular work sent by a dealer to a collector, attached to a text message. The collector reads the text, looks at the JPEG, makes a decision about the artwork. But actually, the artwork is a derivative. It was the JPEG that mattered, as it is the JPEG on which the transaction depends. The collector might decide to buy or not buy the work, to reserve it, to see it later in person, and

03/06

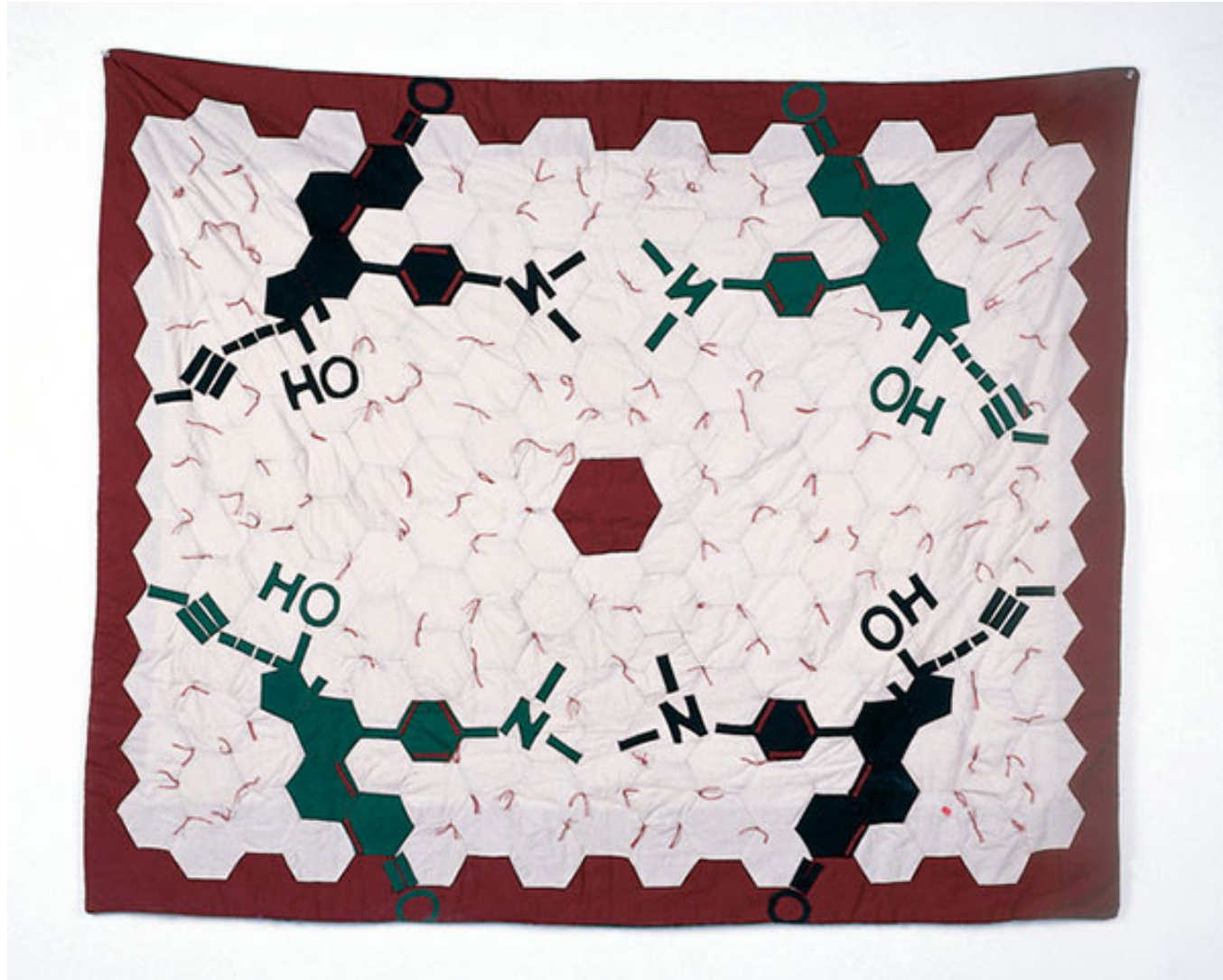
e-flux journal #77 — november 2016  
Boris Groys  
Towards the New Realism

04/08

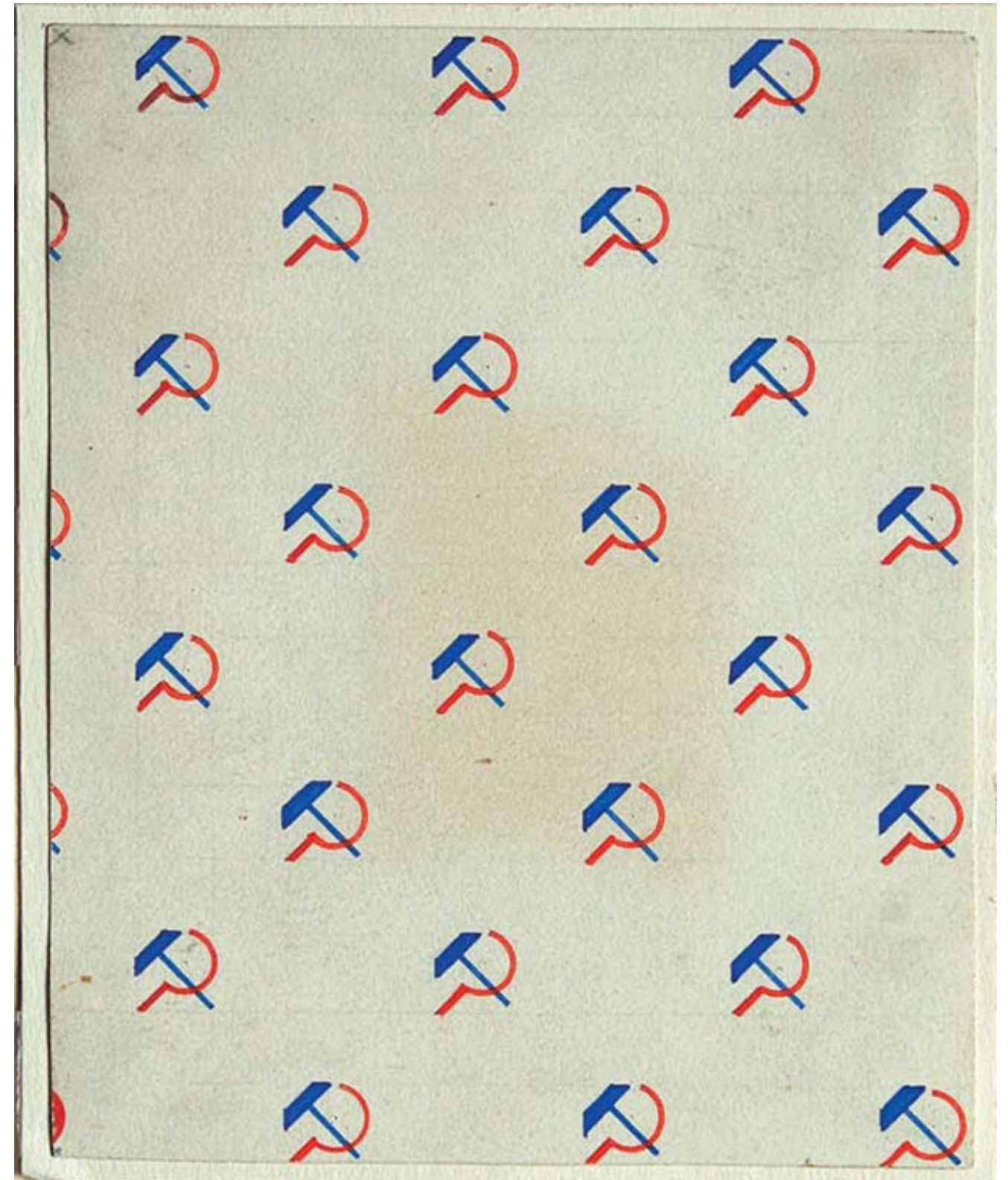
e-flux journal #77 — november 2016  
McKenzie Wark  
Digital Provenance and the Artwork as Derivative



03/08



Quilt made by the GALA collective and featured as a prop in the tv soap opera *Melrose Place*.



Liubov Popova, *Textile Design*, 1923-4. Gouache on paper, 115 x 92 mm.

remains “fictional.” As such it can be described by literature and art, which have traditionally been regarded as domains of the fictional, but it cannot become a subject of serious scientific study.

For a very long time the origin of a given artwork was sought in the psyche of the artist who created it. This was the time of psychological realism in literature, art, and the humanities. The revolt against nineteenth-century psychologism, which determined the fate of art in the twentieth century, was provoked by a very obvious methodological observation: the origin of an artwork cannot be found in the psyche of its creator because it is impossible to access this psyche. An external spectator cannot penetrate an artist’s subjectivity – but nor can artists themselves discover their inner psychic life by means of introspection. It was concluded that the “psyche” itself is purely fictional – and as such cannot serve as an explanatory term for cultural history. Accordingly, art and literature began to reject psychologism. The human figure came to be dissolved in the play of colors and forms, or in the play of words. The reality of image and text became autonomous from representations of psychology – be it the psychology of the author or the psychology of his or her characters. Of course, this strategy of depsychologization seems perfectly legitimate. Indeed, the psyche cannot be accessed and scientifically investigated. However, this does not mean that the assumption that there is a psyche – i.e., that there is an internal discontent with the reality that cannot be diagnosed externally – can be rejected as purely fictional.

This becomes clear when one goes back to Hegel’s description, in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, of the moment when self-consciousness – and the assumption of the self-consciousness of the Other – initially emerges. In this moment we experience the other as a danger – even as a mortal danger. Of course, we are subjected to many “natural” or technologically produced dangers. But these dangers do not aim at us personally; we experience them as accidental. However, we cannot experience as accidental somebody’s attempt to kill us – by, for example, shooting us. We tend to ask ourselves why someone would want to do this to us, and our attempt to answer this question produces a series of fantasies, conjectures, and projections concerning the psyche of the potential killer. These projections never lead to any final result, but at the same time they seem unavoidable. Today, we can observe this phenomenon almost daily when the media offers psychological explanations and speculations regarding this or that terrorist act. In other words, post-factum, after the violent terrorist excess has happened,

05/06

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016  
Boris Groys  
Towards the New Realism

external observers are ready to accept the assumption that the subject of this violent act lived in a state of discontent with the reality of his everyday existence – even if at the same time the news coverage almost always stresses that this subject seemed quiet and satisfied with his social environment. In other words, before the violent act happens, the inner psychological discontent seems fictional, but after the act takes place, it becomes retrospectively “real.” Time and again in his novels, Dostoyevsky made fun of these retrospective attempts to psychologize a crime. But these very novels present nothing less than Dostoyevsky’s own attempts to do the same. The entirety of psychological literature is basically crime literature. It treats human beings as especially dangerous animals – dangerous precisely because they are “psychological” animals.

The return of realism means a de facto return of psychology and psychologism. And, indeed, one can see this return in the new popularity of the psychological novel, psychological cinema, psychological theater, and, in a small circle of contemporary art, the increasing presence of photography and video works that thematize the psychology of the artist who created them and/or the protagonists who inhabit them. The reason for this return is obvious. The interpretation of art as *techne* was closely connected to the expectations of avant-garde and many post-avant-garde artists that art would give a certain direction to technological progress, leading it towards a utopian telos, or at least compensating for its destructive aspects. In our time, these hopes seem to have been dashed. The dynamic of technological progress has resisted attempts to impose any kind of control on it. It is this resistance to being controlled by any “subjective” artistic project that has made technological progress into “reality.” It is very telling that contemporary post-Deleuzian, neo-Dionysian, accelerationist, and “realist” admirers of technological progress explain their admiration in exclusively psychological terms: as the ecstasy of a self-annihilation that produces extreme intensities in their psyche.

Realism describes reality not “as it is” but as it is psychologically experienced by artists. That is why Marx, and Lukács after him, liked Balzac and other French authors of the realist school so much. Whereas science described social, economic, and political reality as a “system,” these writers described it “psychologically” as the place of antagonistic conflicts and despair. In this sense they thematized the revolutionary potential of the psychological discontent produced by capitalist society – a discontent that was covered up by

02/08



Installation view TOTAL PROOF: The GALA Committee 1995-1997, Red Bull Studios New York, 2016. Photo: GALA Committee/Red Bull Studios New York

# McKenzie Wark Digital Provenance and the Artwork as Derivative

01/08

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 McKenzie Wark  
Digital Provenance and the Artwork as Derivative

Unlike Hito Steyerl, I don't think art is a currency.<sup>1</sup> I think it's a derivative, which is not quite the same thing as a currency. A currency can store value or act as a means of exchange. A derivative does something different. It manages and hedges risk. What we need, then, is a theory of art as a derivative.

Let's start with this paradox. Art is about rarity, about things that are unique and special and cannot be duplicated. And yet the technologies of our time are all about duplication, copies, about information that is not really special at all. At first, it might appear that the traditional form of art is obsolete. If it has value, it is as something from a past way of life, before information technology took over. But actually, what appears to be happening is stranger than that. Let's look at some of the special ways in which art as rarity interacts now in novel ways with information as plenty, producing some rather striking opportunities to create value.

By way of illustration, I want to talk about some art from twenty years ago. Some time in the mid-Nineties, the artist Mel Chin was watching television. He saw the actress Heather Locklear on the screen, but what the artist saw was not the actress, he saw the space in which she appeared: the television screen itself. What he saw there was the biggest art gallery in the world. So he contacted the set decorator for the show, whose name was Deborah Siegel. He proposed that the set should include work by artists. The artists would not be paid. They took this idea to the producers, who approved. Probably because of the not getting paid part.

So Chin formed a group called the GALA Committee. GALA stood for Georgia and Los Angeles, and would involve artists and art students from both locations. The work was all made collaboratively. For two years, GALA worked with the scriptwriters and made art that appeared on the show, usually in the background, but sometimes thematically related to stories going on in the show and sometimes relating to things from real life. GALA made about two hundred objects, the majority of which ended up on the show. The show was *Melrose Place*, one of the most iconic soap operas of its era. The GALA art was on it for two seasons, four and five.

The writers eventually wrote the art into the show. One character was an artist. The Heather Locklear character, who ran an advertising agency, signed the real Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art to her made-up ad agency, and there were scenes in the show filmed at the real MOCA, showing a real exhibition of the GALA art from the show itself. The GALA art was then auctioned at Sotheby's Beverley Hills, where a

“objective” statistical data and that had not yet broken through the surface of everyday life. Fiction becomes reality when it enters reality – when the psychological conflicts described by art lead to revolutionary action. Before this revolutionary moment, “realist fiction” remains a fiction.

Thus, the return of realism is the return of the psychological – and the return of a discontent with reality experienced as an oppressive force. Let me make one last remark here. Realism is often misinterpreted as an art form that depicts the realities that lie beyond the art system – “simple people,” or the “working class.” However, the art system, as previously noted, is already part of reality. Realism is needed not for its description of the outside of the art system, but for the revelation of the latter's hidden inside – of the discontent with the realities of the art system that its protagonists experience. Only when writers and artists begin to feel like failures in their conflict with reality will they ask themselves what it means to conform to reality, to live a simple life like everybody else allegedly does. An inner, psychological problem is projected towards the outside. In his *A Confession*, Tolstoy wrote that he was curious why “simple people” do not commit suicide but instead go on living, even when they must know that life has no meaning or goal. This question led him to take an interest in the way of life of people living beyond privileged literary and intellectual circles. Here one can ask, of course, if this assumption that “simple people” are internally, psychologically in conflict with their way of life and experience their life as meaningless is not a pure fiction – Tolstoy's projection of his own inner conflicts onto the psyches of others. However, the violent explosion of the October Revolution posthumously confirmed Tolstoy's diagnosis. Thus, writers and artists, if they want to be realist, have to learn to live with the suspicion that their descriptions of the human psyche are pure fiction – until history confirms the realism of their work.

x

06/06

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Boris Groys  
Towards the New Realism

Martha Rosler  
**Why Are People  
Being So Nice?**

01/08

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Martha Rosler  
Why Are People Being So Nice?

Affect is the new Trauma.  
– Lauren Berlant (or her “bitchy colleague”)

If affect is the process by which emotions become embodied, it’s worth asking why everyone is being so nice. “Nice”? Here’s Webster:

giving pleasure or joy: good and enjoyable  
: attractive or of good quality  
: kind, polite, and friendly

We don’t imagine that an always-sunny side of human nature is emerging because things are going so well; unless you are part of the so-called 1 percent, things are probably not going so well for you. (I am talking about most, but certainly not all, high-wage, highly industrialized countries.) The development of data-based, or knowledge-based, post-industrial economies (“post-Fordism”) has brought the end of stable jobs, secured by contracts, with a living wage, a future, and the promise of a reasonable pension upon retirement. (You already know this.) We work, in great numbers, for mostly low wages in the knowledge economy. Even if you are not participating in the “gig” end of it, via, e.g., Mechanical Turk, Task Rabbit, Uber, then surely you work gratis for social media, for purposes of friendship and work-related networks, and in no small part for professional self-promotion. The art world – and journalism, and who knows what other fields – has imposed a “24/7” workday on its professional workforce, and not only at the lowest levels, as I discuss below. Service work (food service, cleaning, bellhopping, and the like) and retail jobs, in addition to imposing ever-greater insecurity and uncertain work schedules on people, place them further down in the social pecking order. Being obsequious, even servile, to cadge a tip? Chatting you up like an Uber driver, to get good online “feedback” for pleasantness/niceness? Every transaction must be rated! Is such behavior *really nice*?

The social pressure to be nice goes far deeper than an imperative for good neighborly relations. It speaks to a demand, in neoliberal economies, for the wholesale invention, performance, and perpetual grooming of a transactional “self.”<sup>1</sup> “Really nice” really means “frictionless,” or “low transaction cost.” A basic tenet of neoliberalism was famously expressed as “There is no such thing as society.”<sup>2</sup> This means *you* are fully responsible for all outcomes, whether in respect to illness, job success, or friendship. So the Republican-right has demanded “bootstrapism”: people need to *take personal responsibility* by relinquishing any claim to government assistance. UK right-wingers

oppression, and violence of the capitalist state is not a mystery to be solved but a system to be abolished – institutional liberation affirms the productive and creative dimension of collective struggle. Our actions are not simply against. They are for: for emancipation, equality, collectivity, and the commons.

Institutional liberation is not a messianic event. It is the building of counterpower infrastructure. Once they take the side of the common, institutions liberate themselves from capitalist interests endeavoring to control and exploit them. So institutional liberation isn’t about making institutions better, more inclusive, more participatory. It’s about establishing politicized base camps from which ever more coordinated, elaborate, and effective campaigns against the capitalist state in all its racist, exploitative, extractivist, and colonizing dimensions can be carried out. This takeover will not happen overnight. But it is happening now at an international scale, accumulating force and momentum with every repetition of a common name and image, every iteration of associated acts: red lines, red squares, arrayed tents, money drops, blockades, occupations.

x

07/07

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Not An Alternative  
Institutional Liberation

engage institutions in the service of climate justice, others use them as platforms for anticapitalist mobilization. Despite their differing objectives, rhetoric, and strategic positioning, their strength comes from their common practice of treating the museum as a site of insurgency. Institutions' names, symbols, perspectives, and ideals become objects of political struggle. Whether a group engages institutions as a front in anticapitalist struggle, in order to create a counterpower infrastructure, or in the service of climate justice, what is noteworthy in the practice of contemporary activist art collectives is the emergence of the museum as a terrain of insurgency.

Institutions are not monolithic unities. They are complex multiplicities, split within themselves and between themselves and their settings. Museums have custodial staff, administrators, curators, IT personnel, fundraisers, directors, donors, trustees, and visitors. They also have their broader cultural position, their reputation as sites of authoritative knowledge. This makes them sites worth seizing. When art activists commandeer a museum, they split it from within. The already existent divisions within the institution are activated. Anyone affiliated with the museum is forced to take a side: few or many, rich or poor, past or future? By occupying institutions, identifying allies on the inside, empowering employees, working with whistle-blowers, leveraging legal grey zones, and strategically mobilizing the symbolic power of key constituencies, activist art collectives redeploy the arsenals of power that have already been stored. The institution is liberated.

The insurgent movement for institutional liberation generates counterpower by strategically mobilizing the power institutions already have. Major cultural institutions exert large-scale political, economic, and cultural influence. They influence how we see. They legitimate particular players. They have the power to influence popular values and ideals, but they refuse to use this power on behalf of the people. When artists and activists target these institutions, they take advantage of their scale. Museums' concentrations of cultural capital are seized and redistributed back into the common. No longer can museums function to legitimate corporations, the fossil fuel sector, or particular colonial projects. They are demarcated as battle zones.

Institutional liberation extends beyond museums. It is part of a broader insurgency to capture and retake the common. The Dutch artist Jonas Staal's projects seize and stretch the forms of the university, the parliament, the summit, and the (non)state. Staal pulls out the scripts and symbols constitutive of these forms,

redeploying them in people's struggle. The Undercommoning project, put together by a semi-anonymous alliance of fugitive knowledge workers, seizes the means of knowledge production, urging revolution "within, against, and beyond the university." Drawing from traditions of militant inquiry, the project recognizes the university as "a key institution of globalized racial capitalism" that "therefore cannot be ignored or conceded as a field of struggle."

### Free the Institutions!

Refusal and subtraction have been disastrous as Left political tactics. They have surrendered the power aggregated in institutions to capital and the state. The tactics of institutional liberation treat institutions as tools, weapons, and bases of political struggle. They take on and over the institution's radical premise: the collectivity and futurity that underpins any collection. The force that comes from organization, collectivity, and institutionality, the symbolic power that accompanies and exceeds aggregation, becomes a resource for the Left, a resource that enables us to combine and scale.

Many can be more powerful than few, but only when they are organized. Contemporary capitalism relies on dispersing us into powerlessness. It celebrates individualism and uniqueness, as if one person alone could bring down the fossil fuel economy. This individualist dream entraps us in the nightmare of accelerating inequality and ecological devastation. Institutional liberation claims the power of collectivity, the necessity of alliance, combination, and commonality in struggle. This is why we see today the appearance and reappearance of common images, names, and tactics.

The various projects we see combining into an emergent movement for institutional liberation do not value critique *qua* critique. They turn the institution against itself, side with its better nature, and force others to take a side. They look for allies, "double agents" already working within the institution, reinforce them, and in so doing activate the power that is already there. Institutional liberation is not reformist. It does not simply expose our complicities with state and capital. It directs its critical perspective in the service of a broader political movement, treating institutions as forms to be seized and connected into a counterpower infrastructure.

The liberation of institutions will not result from any singular procedure. It depends on sustained pressure, a commitment to long-term struggle. More than a critique of institutions – because, face it, at this point the inequality,

decried government programs as the "nanny state." In an echo of nineteenth-century Social Darwinism, aid to the poor was held to damage their moral health and the good of society (arguably, the "race").<sup>3</sup> But the concept of the common good was simultaneously abolished well beyond the dividing wedge of "the undeserving poor" to everyone outside certain elevated sectors. This responsibility is sold as freedom – freedom from bondage, but also freedom from unwanted obligations. The so-called millennial generation has grown up understanding that each person is responsible for creating their best-selling self and avoiding the trap of job loyalty, since no job holds out any promise of loyalty to them.

The art world is perhaps a special case. Artists – despite canned Facebook congratulations and condolences related to progeny, parents, and pets – may not be invested professionally in cultivating niceness. Some curators and many art historians (especially those with tenure?) seem to duck online niceness in favor of an archly distant dignity. (As to collectors, who knows? Their social media posts are surely restricted to those of their own class!) But much of the institutional apparatus in charge of distribution, circulation, publicity, and sales is

on a long-term charm offensive. The experience economy, like the closely related caring economy, demands a public-relations approach. A very high proportion of museum and gallery staff, those who must communicate with people both inside and outside the institution, are, like the very high proportion of public-relations workers, women – a "pink-collar ghetto" – with all the prejudices that still calls forth.<sup>4</sup>

In the experience economy, a primary mission of museums has become the promise not of cultivation and contemplation but rather edification and amazement, for visitors from toddlers to the elderly and for people of every social class.<sup>5</sup> The experience economy demands authenticity, which axiomatically takes shape as heightened faux emotion. Like public relations happytalk, museums and galleries are publicly thrilled, excited, and delighted; as my friend Tim Porges once offhandedly quipped, being thrilled is the main business of the art world. As on Facebook, there is no Dislike button (though there is now an "angry" one, a sad one, a laughing one, an amazed one).

Art-world business communications, mostly as emails between museums, galleries, and artists, show more limited tropes, neither casual nor quite formal, located in a linguistic space not

06/07

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Not An Alternative Institutional Liberation

02/08

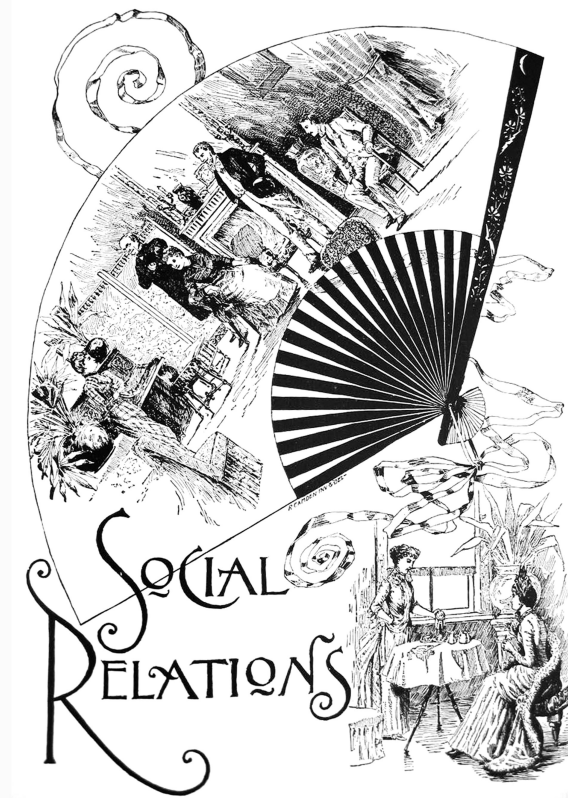


Illustration from *Queen of Home, Her Reign from Infancy to Age* (1891) by Victorian author Emma Churchman Hewitt.



Jean-Augustin Franquelin, *Response to the Letter (La Réponse à la lettre)*, date unknown. Oil on canvas. Louvre Museum.



Decolonize This Place, *Anti-Columbus Day Tour: Decolonize This Museum*, 2016. Radical tour guides with the Decolonize This Place collective led hundreds of people through a tour of New York's American Museum of Natural History with the goal of undermining colonialist narratives of conquest, disrupting Eurocentric depictions of "prehistorical" communities, and enabling communities to generate their own "history of the present." Photo: Lyra Monteiro.

even as they reinforce the systems of exploitation, dispossession, and domination already dismantling the possibility of a future for the majority of the planet's inhabitants.

The supposition that climate solutions can only be market solutions is afforded by the infrastructures and institutions that reproduce capitalist class power. The last forty years of neoliberalism hollowed out our public institutions. From the corporate capture of the legislative process, to the evisceration of schools and universities, to the widespread selling off of public land, assets, and services to the highest bidder, neoliberal capitalism sucked the life out of those components of the state that promised to serve the people. It reinforced strategies for private capital accumulation, socializing risk and privatizing reward to produce new forms of extreme inequality. At the same time, neoliberal governance intensified the coercive power of the state, amping up the police, the military, and the apparatuses of surveillance.

Neoliberal ideology rose to hegemony by seizing and repurposing existing institutions. Public institutions – such as museums, libraries, parliaments, parks, and schools – supply an infrastructure for creating and communicating common understandings of the world. They offer perspectives on politics, culture, nature, and society, delineating the limits of thought and action. Because these perspectives are essential to the maintenance of power, institutions are sites of ideological struggle.

The capitalist class relies on ideological apparatuses like museums to produce and reproduce the subjects it needs. Such subjects are classed, sexed, raced, and gendered. They are configured as primitive or civilized, exotic or everyday, foreign or “like us.” Underlying the complex of state projects that establish some as backwards and others as advanced are political and economic assumptions regarding natural development and balanced systems. Fossils elide with fuel; some people are treated as nature; extractivism signifies progress; and even systems driven by crisis and exploitation are described in terms of equilibrium. Neoliberal capitalism's intensified competition pushes the corporate sector to ratchet up this war for hearts and minds. Museums and other public institutions become little more than apparatuses for public relations, resources for reshaping common sense according to capitalist values and priorities.

Institutions have been starved into submission by private interests. No wonder much of the Left does not recognize itself within them. But the practice deployed by neoliberals to seize institutions is now being deployed against neoliberal purposes. Co-optation goes both

ways. This is the wager of the insurgent movement to liberate institutions from the grip of capitalism.

### From Tactics to Movement

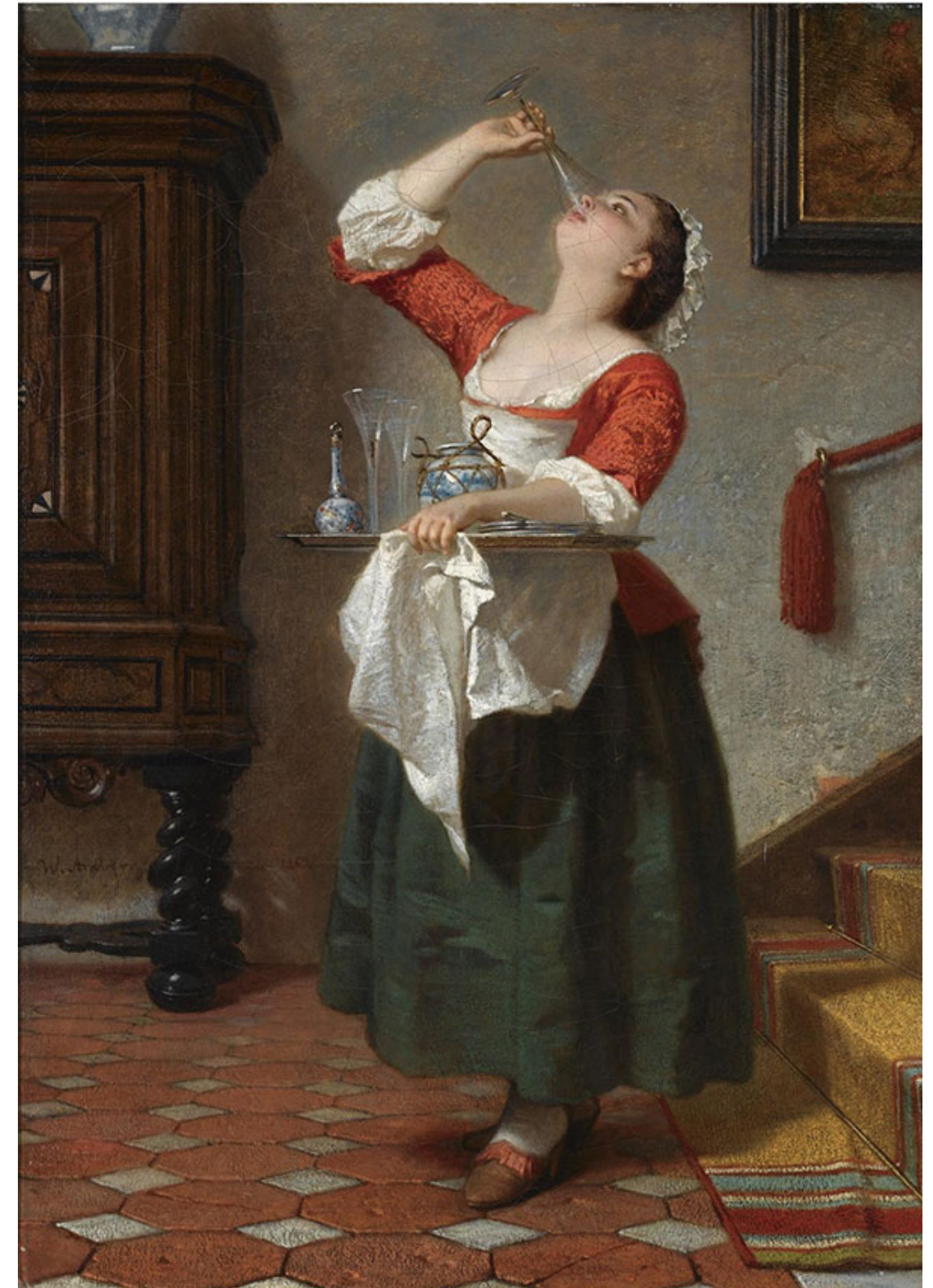
The cultural commons institutionalized in museums, libraries, parliaments, and universities as well as in social forms, practices, images, and ideas is collective. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue in *Commonwealth*, the third volume of their influential Empire trilogy, “institutions consolidate collective habits, practices, and capacities that designate a form of life.” This consolidation is not without division. Hardt and Negri point out that “institutions are based on conflict.” They are sites of struggle over who and what counts, over the ways we see and understand our collective being together. Dominant forms of power try to ensure that we see the way they want us to see. Just as the settler colonialism and chattel slavery at the heart of the United States gets pushed aside in celebratory depictions of the American experience, so too does the capitalist class power operative in museums. Since the nineteenth century, robber barons, financiers, oil magnates, and fossil fuel oligarchs have weaponized cultural institutions, presenting exploitation, hierarchy, and dispossession as if they were natural. An array of artists and activists are refusing to cede the cultural commons to the capitalist class. Their tactics suggest an insurgent movement to liberate institutions.

Institutional liberation emerges from the recognition of the collective power already concentrated into institutions. The cultural commons is created by all of us in our conflictual diversity. We make it. Cultural knowledges, symbols, images, and practices are social products, not property belonging to the 1 percent. Rather than overburdening ourselves with the overwhelming task of inventing entirely new political and social forms, contemporary artists and activists are reclaiming the cultural commons. Engaging with existing institutional forms, they fight on, through, and for the terrain of the common.

Activist art collectives such as Art Not Oil, BP or Not BP, Gulf Labor, Liberate Tate, The Natural History Museum, Occupy Museums, Decolonize This Place, and others deploy a common tactic: commandeering museums. Strategically intervening in major museums that have been captured by capitalist interests, these groups reclaim the cultural commons. They treat the names, symbols, perspectives, and ideals of institutions like the Tate Galleries, Guggenheim Museums, and the American Museum of Natural History as sites of political struggle. While some

04/07

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Not An Alternative Institutional Liberation



Wilhelm Amberg, *The Maid*, 1862. Oil on canvas

recently (or ever) inhabited, and generally confined to strangely elaborated greetings and salutations. In these work documents, a now-common formula after the still-formal “Dear,” is “I hope this message finds you well,”<sup>6</sup> an intrusion into the personal that is both empty and confusing, and no more meaningful than an air kiss. This vague bodily invocation is an imaginary throwback to a Victorian epistolary mode, signifying, one imagines, not courtesy but *courtliness*. In a more colloquial register, standard signoffs are amped up so that “Best wishes” swells to “All best wishes,” and “Have a nice day”<sup>7</sup> to “Have a great day!” and so on. This stems more from shop-assistant culture than from Victorian letter writing but has most decisively replaced formal closings.<sup>89</sup>

An English friend of mine airily waved all this happytalk away as “Gallerina behavior: they think it sounds posh” – well maybe, to an English person, but I think to most of us in the US it sounds strangely stilted, like a distant echo from some other, fabled time. But her remark reminds me that courtliness ineluctably points to the ranks of subordinates trapped by the whimsies of the Top Dog. It is not for nothing that the art world has been likened to the nobility, a group captive to royalty and haut-bourgeois elites, and

05/08

perhaps even semi-starved, but presumably retaining hope and aspiration toward favor and access. Ambition, access, bankable information, flattery, gossip, infighting, competitiveness, in both manners and physical display ... all figure in the production of a set of deep-bowing courtiers who hope they may gain entry to the inner sanctum from their acknowledged positions in the outer reaches of the court or worse, the scullery. The rise in courtliness is consistent with gentrification. Amidst the explosion of wealth for the land-owning class, currying favor is the usual behavior of the propertyless in a kingdom where land is the most valuable thing. This geographic value-regime has its echo, as Fredric Jameson reminds us, in the commanding figure of the Curator; who is hired to distribute the exhibition’s valuable real estate.<sup>10</sup>

The Court of Art, with its primarily female adherents, is understood to be outside a five-day, thirty-five- or forty-hour work week (mandatory for salaried employees in most countries); its underpaid, overburdened members fill the work week as close as they can manage to “on call and working all the time.”<sup>11</sup>

When young lawyers began doing this two or three decades ago, it was in the interest of rapid promotion to law partner and the resultant pots

03/07



Title page of *Grammar of Ornament* (1856) by Owen Jones.



Liberate Tate, *Time Piece*, 2015. *Time Piece* was a durational performance inside Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall using words, bodies, charcoal, and sustenance. The performance took place from High Tide on 6/13/15 (11:53am) until High Tide on 6/14/15 (12:55pm). It explored lunar time, tidal time, ecological time, geological time, and all the ways in which we are running out of time: from climate change to gallery opening hours; from the anthropocene to the beginning of the end of oil sponsorship of the arts. Photo: Martin LeSanto Smith.





Not An Alternative, *Mining the HMNS: An Investigation by The Natural History Museum*, 2016. The eponymous exhibition, held at Project Row Houses in Houston, Texas, interrogated the symbiotic relationship between the Houston Museum of Natural Sciences and its corporate sponsors. The exhibition analyzed key narratives and displays in the Houston museum, highlighting the voices and stories that were excluded – those of the low-income Latinx fence-line communities along the Houston Ship Channel. Photo: Not An Alternative / The Natural History Museum.



Johannes Vermeer, *Lady with Her Maidservant Holding a Letter*, c. 1666-1667. Oil on Canvas Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

of money; in the art world, as in other fields, such overwork is often required just to stay in place; blame job insecurity, then, and those neoliberal personality strictures, when curatorial assistants write to you on a weekend evening. But there has to be a felt attachment to courtier behaviors or the system falls into crisis.<sup>12</sup>

Some of our uncertainty about self-presentation surely stems from the fact that so much of our communication takes place in the “disembodied” space of online text, often with people we don’t know, and without the buffers that introductions by intermediaries – people known to both parties – often provide. Online communications rob us of the “superfix,” or performative slant, to an utterance – a powerful part of verbal interaction. What we might call the skewed utterance – including humor, skepticism, irony, sarcasm – is seriously damaged when there is no face, body, or voice to convey those shaded meanings.<sup>13</sup> Yet these elements figure greatly in modeled behavior on television and in the movies, and in much of public life. (Skype partly fills this expressive gap of online communication.) The emoticon or emoji and the lowly exclamation point, not to mention the simple LOL, have attached themselves to our words, to reassure ourselves and our readers. But both such shaded communications (especially sarcasm) and the signs of reassurance are often inappropriate in business dealings, inducing the anxiety that our emails may be misread; hence the anxiety-ridden formulaic greetings of joy! glee! and full engagement!

The trappings of “caring” – the feminine practices banished from the state – have been tactically adopted by the corporate world.<sup>14</sup> Every service-oriented exchange, including those with online “bots” and faraway call-center employees, is meant to enfold you in cozy, infantilizing warmth, while every corporate employee, real and fake, is open to “feedback” and evaluation on those grounds.<sup>15</sup> The entire tech economy boasts of its identity as some post-hippie countercultural space, familiar to us now as *visionary* and *disruptive* of corporate business-as-usual. But this leading “new economy” has been observed, like our false friends, to deploy the same old predatory business practices, rebranded with “dreamy, sentimental stories of new-corporate idealism, a belief in the defining heroism of creative innovation,” in the words of journalist Nathan Heller.<sup>16</sup> Heller, via scholar Fred Turner, traces this to the “collaborative culture of Cold War research” and thus it is not much more than old wine in new bottles.<sup>17</sup>

But from a more materialist, labor-oriented, productivist, and political perspective, this era

has indeed been marked, according to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s account in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*,<sup>18</sup> by a radical rupture after May ’68, centering on the move from industrial capitalism to an economy based on freely mobile global capital, and a relatively immobile work force.<sup>19</sup> Population flows have dramatically increased, of course, with millions fleeing economic collapse, displacement, exploitation, and conflict, becoming refugees or migrant workers from many classes of labor – both legal and illegal – but these groups cannot expect “open borders” in the manner of capital.

The art world has, also, after the 1960s, entered into this globalizing economy, and artists are often itinerant workers following the floating institutions and demands of capital. When we complain about the nightmare of the art world as driven by the market and its increasingly institutionalized and rigidified paths to “success,” we should remember we often participate in it, and its searingly alienating search for a competitive advantage, with hardly a thought on how that resonates on every level. It is time to say: “no more Mr. Nice Guy.”

Mr. Nice Guy:

a man who treats people kindly: a nice man – used chiefly in the phrase no more Mr. Nice Guy! I’m tired of the way they treat me. From now on, no more Mr. Nice Guy! (I’m not going to be nice to them from now on)<sup>20</sup>

x

07/08

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Martha Rosler  
Why Are People Being So Nice?

## Not An Alternative Institutional Liberation

01/07

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Not An Alternative  
Institutional Liberation

### No Simple Solution

The planetary scale of anthropogenic climate change poses problems for the Left. How do we identify appropriate targets and build strong alliances? What resources can we use to support this building and targeting? New tactics from an array of art and activist collectives signal that institutions are sites of struggle. Collectives concerned with fossil fuels, labor, and decolonization are deploying institutions as targets and resources for radical political practice.

Multiple reinforcing systems produce climate change – capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, militarism, extractivism. The fossil fuel sector mobilizes to keep on drilling. Dispossessed communities divide within themselves over devastating and hopeless economic alternatives. States push for further exploration and amplified production to preserve their hegemony. Some countries demand the right to develop. Various groups and nonstate actors insist that we “keep it in the ground.” It’s clear that the 1 percent sacrifice the futures of the rest of us for their own economic interest. Yet the complex interworking of multiple systems makes it close to impossible to envision the politics of climate justice.

Time is running out. Climate change is happening now and future warming is locked in. The question is how fast and how much. There are no simple solutions. Food shortages, droughts, rising sea levels, record-breaking temperatures, mass migration, and war force the urgency of organization. Organizing is no longer a choice for the Left. It’s a necessity.

Some on the Left respond with refusal. Advocates of neo-primitivist lifestyle politics retreat to the forests and mountains, to DIY off-the-grid living that abandons the millions in the cities. This “not my problem” individualist survivalism reflects the ideological orientation of neoliberal capitalism. Survival-themed reality television has been big for over a decade. Others on the Left side with the things. They advocate horizontal relationships with rocks and nonlife, shift to deep time, and celebrate the microbes and weeds likely to thrive in a posthuman world. Here the genocidal mindset cultivated in the sixteenth century’s colonization of the Americas expands and turns back in on human life as a whole. The failure to value black and brown life, the inability to conceive living with and in diverse egalitarian communities, becomes the incapacity to value human life at all.

So long as the Left looks on in despair (or averts its gaze), capitalism determines the horizon of our response to the changing climate. Carbon markets, green technology, and geoengineering appear as the only way forward

1  
Franco “Bifo” Berardi, “Racismo blanco, fascismo islamista y guerra civil global,” *anarquiacoronada.blogspot.mx*, July 25, 2016 <http://anarquiacoronada.blogspot.mx/2016/07/racismo-blanco-fascismo-islamista-y.html>.

2  
See Aiwha Ong’s *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Sovereignty and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) and my book *La tiranía del sentido común: la reconversión neoliberal de México* (México D.F.: Paradiso Editores, 2016).

3  
See Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

4  
See Franco “Bifo” Berardi, “¿Brexit a la italiana?” *purochamuyo.com*, August 20, 2016 <http://www.purochamuyo.com/brexit-a-la-italiana/>.

5  
Berardi, “Racismo blanco.”

6  
See Boris Groys, “Boris Groys in conversation with Carl Hegemann: The shock of socialism is gone,” *e-flux conversations*, July 19, 2016 <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/boris-groys-in-conversation-with-carl-hegemmann-the-shock-of-socialism-is-gone-parts-1-2/4098>.

7  
Bruno Latour, *Face à Gaïa: Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015), 159–160.

8  
Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015), 109.

9  
Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970). Toffler originally coined the term “future shock” in his 1965 article “The Future as a Way of Life,” published *Horizon* magazine. The article was the basis for the subsequent book.

10  
Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 111.

11  
Toffler, *Future Shock*, 535.

12  
Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

13  
Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

14  
See *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016); Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

15  
Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 8.

16  
Jurgen Habermas, *Ciencia y técnica como “ideología”* (Madrid: Editorial Technos, 1984/2013), 42.

17  
See Jaime Martínez Luna, “Nunca hemos sido modernos,” *Campo de relámpagos*, July 8, 2016 <http://campoderelampagos.org/critica-y-reviews/7/8/2016>.

18  
See Jacob Wren, *Polyamorous Love Song* (Toronto: BookThug, 2014), 43.

19  
Seth Denizen in *Anthropozine 0*, ed. Andrew S. Yang (2015) <http://anthropozine0.blogspot.com/t/2015/09/srchttdrive.html>.

20  
See Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (London: Verso, 2015).

21  
A First Nation living in Ontario, Quebec, and Manitoba in Canada and in Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin in the US.

22  
Leanne Simpson in an interview with Naomi Klein, “Dancing the World into Being: A Conversation with Idle No More’s Leanne Simpson” *Yes Magazine*, March 5, 2013 <http://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/dancing-the-world-into-being-a-conversation-with-idle-no-more-leanne-simpson>.

23  
See María Iñigo Clavo, “Modernity vs. Epistemodiversity” *e-flux journal* 73 (May 2016) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/modernity-vs-epistemodiversity/>.

24  
Donna J. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575–99.

25  
Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2011), 42.

13/13

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Irmgard Emmelhainz  
Decolonization as the Horizon of Political Action

26  
See Leanne Simpson, “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2014): 7.

27  
See Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 1977 [http://simondon.ocular-witness.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/05/question\\_concerning\\_technology.pdf](http://simondon.ocular-witness.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/05/question_concerning_technology.pdf).

28  
contain seeds of destruction. In its neoliberal version, modernity involves assigning value to everything in order to maximize the possibilities for surplus-value extraction. Can political struggles against this process – against technological rationality and differential access to the means of subsistence – be organized on a global scale? They must, just as they must be thoroughly decolonized – that is, stripped of modern instrumental epistemology – or they will continue to perpetuate neoliberal domination and lead to the exhaustion of the (masculine) Left. While some thinkers have dismissed efforts to organize small autonomous territories of resistance as weak and ephemeral, [footnote For example, Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 48.

1  
An offshoot is the conviction that a person’s first obligation is to take very good care of his or her body, a conviction expressed at all spots along the political spectrum. There is an extensive literature on the swindle of coaching programs that promise to help often-desperate people – often middle-aged women looking for jobs – produce their best, most marketable self; see, for example, Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America* (New York: Picador, 2010).

2  
Margaret Thatcher’s famous remark to *Woman’s Own* magazine was “There are individual men and women and there are families ... There is no such thing as society” <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>.

3  
What was underway, of course, was a redistribution of social wealth from poor to rich and the relaxation of business regulations and taxes.

4  
See Jennifer Pan in *Jacobin* magazine for public-relations workers, who evoke scorn from virtually everyone outside it: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/06/pink-collar/>.

5  
The reasons for the changes in the social function of museums are too complex for me to address here, though I have done so in various places elsewhere. Fredric Jameson, in his recent, wide-ranging article “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” in *NLR* 92 (March–April 2015), refers to the museum as having been transformed into a “popular and mass-cultural space, visited by enthusiastic crowds and advertising its new exhibitions as commercial attractions” (107–8).

6  
Some have suggested that the prevalence of illness and death in the nineteenth-century West meant it was not unreasonable to offer the hope that nothing untoward had happened between the sending of a letter and its receipt.

7  
Itself an early sign of the era of enforced cheerfulness, debuting in the early 1970s.

8  
See Maeve Maddox, “Yours faithfully or Yours sincerely?” *Daily Writing Tips*, for a pocket history of accepted US and UK letter closings <http://www.dailywritings.com/yours-faithfully-or-your-sincerely/>.

9  
The vocabulary of American English, not to mention International English, seems to

be shrinking drastically and sinking toward childhood phraseology: *mean* to convey actively unpleasant or unkind; *huge* to convey large; *amazing* to mean good; *incredible* to mean very good or excellent; and to dislike something is to *hate* it, to like it is to *love* it, and so on – while to express approval in groups, applause has been replaced by hooting, especially it seems on the part of women.

10  
Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity.”

11  
There is no space here to explore the pressure on non-managerial workers to put in longer hours without receiving overtime pay. This dilemma has been partially addressed by the US Department of Labor’s recent extension of overtime pay rules under the Fair Labor Standards Act. See Fran Sussner Rodgers, “Who Owns Your Overtime?” *New York Times*, June 22, 2015 <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/opinion/who-owns-your-overtime.html>: “The update ... will affect millions of salaried employees. In 1975, the last year the threshold was significantly raised, 60 percent of salaried workers fell within the requirement for overtime pay. Today, only 8 percent do ... Employees in the United States currently work more hours than workers in any of the world’s 10 largest economies except Russia (though we don’t have good data for China) ... When everything over 40 hours is free to the employer, the temptation to demand more is almost irresistible. But for most employees, the ones exempt from overtime rules, their managers have little incentive to look for ways to use their time more efficiently.” More dubious – the article was written by a business consultant – is Rodgers’s assertion that “it’s not just a question of getting paid fairly for every hour you work. It’s about using the time well ... an overwhelming majority of employees do not resent spending time that is clearly directed toward customers or the success of the enterprise.”

12  
Artists must retain some faith in the gallery system even if cynical about its behaviors.

13  
For a humorous take of what the automation of the affective labor performed in e-mail writing might look like, see the Gmail app *Emotional Labor* by Joanne Mcneil. On the app’s website the copy reads “Lighten up your email with the Emotional Labor extension. Works on any email sent through Gmail (...) Then click the smiley face to brighten up the tone of the email before sending.”

14  
The corporation may adopt some maternal slant in its

08/08

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Martha Rosler  
Why Are People Being So Nice?

transactions, but a firmly male identity is attached to every visionary tech “pioneer,” and ruthless business tactics (despite such slogans as Google’s “Don’t Be Evil”) are employed.

15  
The feeling most people understandably express when asked about their “help desk” experience is inchoate rage, against which this false caring is preemptively deployed.

16  
Nathan Heller, “Naked Launch,” *New Yorker*, November 25, 2013, 69. Available online <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/11/25/naked-launch>.

17  
See Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), which I have not read. But hippie capitalism continues, of course: see Ronda Kaysen, “The Millennial Commune,” *New York Times*, July 31, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/realestate/the-millennial-commune.html>, for a hilarious account of a very much post-hippie, upscale, expensive “co-living” space in downtown Manhattan called “Pure House,” and other, similar corporate ventures elsewhere, which are more like cozy, all-service dorms in a hyper-elite college than anything like the communal spaces of the Sixties and early Seventies. From the article: “Prospective residents answer probing questions like ‘What are your passions?’ and ‘Tell us your story (Excite us!)’ ... promotional materials describe ... a ‘highly curated community of like-minded individuals.’ In other words, they rent a room in an apartment in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, but with opportunities for social and spiritual growth, like dinner parties and meditation sessions.”

18  
Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 2006).

19  
Or in Badiou’s terms, the eventual coming into political visibility of industrial workers.

20  
<http://www.learnersdictionary.com/definition/Mr.%20Nice%20Guy>

Victor Skersis  
**Analytical  
Conceptualism**

01/09

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Victor Skersis  
Analytical Conceptualism

The term “meta-art” is an analogue to meta-mathematics. Meta-art is a set of every and all known and possible sentences about art. For the purposes of this article, any concrete set of connected sentences about art is considered a theory.

In what follows I will consider a number of fundamental constraints preventing the construction of a single, general, unified theory of art. Determining that such a theory is impossible, I will consider a number of incomplete special theories, which can serve as models of various aspects of art. I will call “Analytical Conceptualism” the discipline concerned with the systemic construction of models of art. I will discuss various such concrete models, along with gnoseological problems associated with general modeling.

### 1. Duchamp’s Fundamental Question

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, art went through an explosive development. Traditional drawing, painting, and sculpture were joined by new forms: collage, photography, cinema, ready-made objects, texts, performance ... In 1913 Marcel Duchamp asked his fundamental question: “Can one make works that are not works of art?”<sup>1</sup> We call this question “fundamental” because it marked the change from an intuitive notion of art based on history and aesthetics to the pointed and unrestricted questioning of the foundations of art. It signified the point in art’s development when enough discomfiting art facts and concepts had accumulated to show that the old paradigm was breaking up and a new paradigm was forming on fundamentally new principles.

Around the same time a number of other disciplines also blossomed. The need to investigate the foundations of such disciplines as mathematics and logic was felt very strongly by such remarkable scientists as Bertrand Russel and David Hilbert, and led to the creation of meta-mathematics, now better known as formal logic.

To answer Duchamp’s seemingly simple question, we have to know two things: what art is and what art is not. Duchamp and a number of other artists tried to answer the question by example. Here we will try to build an analytical apparatus to deal with Duchamp’s fundamental question systemically. Fortunately, a great deal of work was done in the 1960s and ’70s that can help us.

### 2. Kosuth’s Criterion

In 1969 Joseph Kosuth published “Art after Philosophy.”<sup>2</sup> Numerous breakthrough ideas were presented in his remarkable essay, two of which

humanity’s impact on the Earth, when in fact different cultures, regions, and countries have different degrees of culpability for environmental destruction. Those that have promulgated systemic inequalities of access, power, and knowledge no doubt bear the greatest responsibility.

In sum, our forms of knowing and seeing are complicit in the ongoing destruction of the planet. While some have argued that modernity offers tools for emancipation – such as <sup>27</sup> and scientific knowledge – these same tools, with their instrumental relationship to nature,<sup>28</sup> these bulwarks of autonomy against the onslaught of capitalism are urgently needed today. Examples include the Zapatista “Caracoles”; the municipality of Cherán in Michoacán, Mexico, where Purépecha Indians have instituted a community government based on indigenous forms of self-rule; the enclave of Christiania in Copenhagen; the independent Anglophone municipalities in the province of Québec (Hampstead, Côte St-Luc, Montréal West – which have separated on problematic grounds but remain interesting alternative form of self-government); the town of Marinaleda in Seville, Spain; and the future self-governed independent municipality of Acapulco Diamante.

×

A version of this essay was presented at the SBC Gallery in Montreal, Canada on April 7, 2016. I am grateful to Pip Day and her team and to Claudine Hubert and everyone at Oboro, who facilitated my research within the frame of a residency in Montreal. I am also grateful to my students at La Esmeralda for our discussions in our Spring 2016 course “Anthropocene, Decolonization and Communitality.” This text is part of an ongoing conversation with Andy Davis and Nicholas Sanzigri from SOMA Summer 2016 and with Sebastián Terrones from La Esmeralda.

12/13

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Irmgard Emmelhainz  
Decolonization as the Horizon of Political Action

**Irmgard Emmelhainz** is an independent writer, lecturer, translator and scholar based in Mexico City. She recently published: *The Tyranny of Common Sense: Mexico’s Neoliberal Conversion* in Spanish with a preface by Franco Berardi. This year she co-curated a moving-image exhibition titled *Does the Oyster Sleep?* at the Gallery SBC in Montreal. Her writings about art, cinema, culture, geopolitics and neoliberalism have been published in an array of Mexican and international publications and translated to German, Italian, Norwegian, French, English, Arabic, Turkish, Hebrew and Serbian. She is currently working on a book on Jean-Luc Godard’s political filmmaking and on her travel chronicles to Palestine.

What is at stake in indigenous struggles is not only the survival of particular peoples, but the survival of the planet as a whole. This is why struggles that amalgamate social, cultural, and environmental issues need to be decolonized; we must decolonize our collective consciousness and valorize precolonial epistemologies, even if it takes multiple generations to be achieved. Aside from the racism that keeps populations excluded and dispossessed, the main challenge posed by the Anthropocene/Capitalocene/Chthulucene is of an epistemological nature: our forms of knowing and seeing are inseparable from capitalist excess. The intellectual basis of modernity was constituted after the fact, as a justification for the separation of humans and nonhuman agents. If it has been acknowledged that capitalist exploitation depends on the organization of scientific objectivity and reason, why do we continue to uncritically uphold the ways in which we organize knowledge?<sup>23</sup> We must explore forms of knowledge that were ignored by modernity and use non-Western epistemologies to question the disciplinary boundaries imposed by modern science, the along with the isolation of political struggles it has led to.

The majority of aboriginal peoples have epistemologies based on embodied knowledge – similar to Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledges,” which she developed in opposition to the disembodied nature of scientific epistemology.<sup>24</sup> Simpson describes her people’s notion of embodied knowledge:

In order to have access to knowledge from a Nishnaabeg perspective, we need to completely employ our bodies: our physical beings, our emotional I, spiritual energy and our intellect. Our methodologies and forms of life must reflect these components of our being and integrate all four components into a whole. This is the basis of our “research methodologies,” our forms of knowledge, our processes to live in the world.<sup>25</sup>

For the Nishnaabeg, meaning is found in individual and collective presence, and in order to access meaning, it is necessary to live in a way that achieves physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual balance. This implies that aboriginal intellect has no limits and that meaning emerges from context and process instead of from content. According to Simpson, the search for *michi saagiig nishinaabe* wisdom takes place in the context of the family, community, and relationships in which the Earth, or *aki*, is both context and process. In this way, the learning process is directed by the learner

and is profoundly spiritual in nature. For the Nishnaabeg, the search for knowledge is a search for bodily intelligence practiced in a context of freedom, creating communities of individuals with the capacity to sustain and advance political traditions and governance systems.<sup>26</sup>

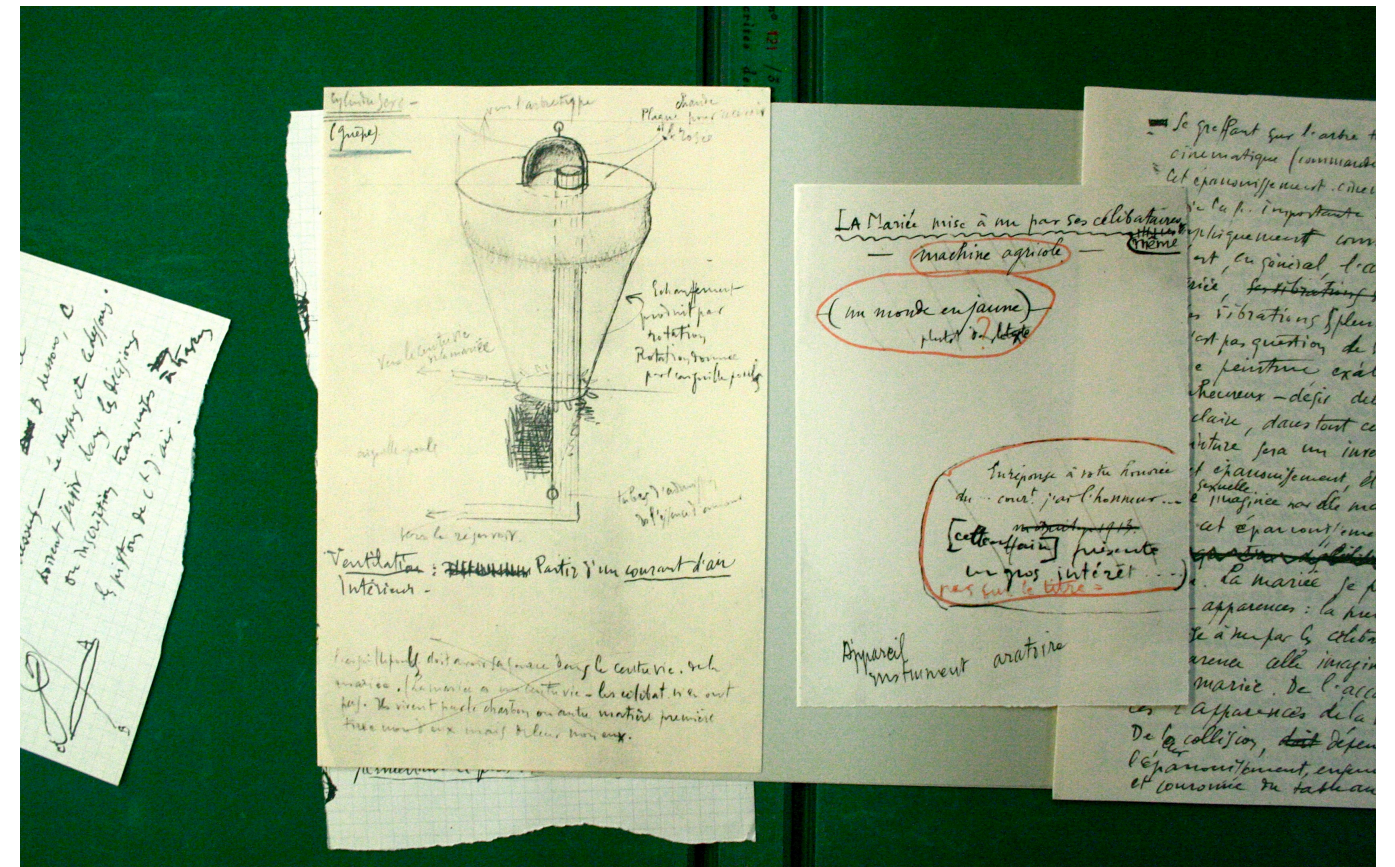
We can understand colonialism as a confrontation of epistemologies – or rather, as the annihilation of non-accumulating epistemologies and the imposition of a hegemonic epistemology for the past five hundred years. As a result, our understanding of nature is based on the premise that nature “is there” for us to turn it into a form of knowledge, to appropriate and exploit – the concept of “natural resources” says it all. This is in contrast to the interrelationality and eco-dependency the indigenous peoples, who listen to natural cycles as part of human life.

Celso Guerra’s 2015 film *The Embrace of the Serpent* stages the confrontation between native and Western epistemologies. Inspired by the diaries of Theodor Koch-Grünberg and Richard Evan Schultes, the movie follows a shaman, Karamatke, as he serves as a guide on two separate Amazonian expeditions forty years apart. In the first, he guides a Dutch explorer named Theodor von Martins, who is searching for *yakruna*, a sacred plant that he believes will cure his deadly illness. In the second expedition, an elderly Karamatke guides an American scientist named Evan, who is searching for the same plant, but this time for “research” purposes. In the first expedition, Karamatke agrees to guide von Martins on the condition that he obeys a series of prohibitions, which are in reality instructions to mind the cycles of nature. In one scene, von Martins defies the prohibitions and plunges into the river to spear a fish, while Karamatke furiously turns away. “From whom do I need permission to fish?” von Martens asks Karamatke. “To whom do the fish belong?” Here Guerra shows the process of colonization as the slow imposition of modern modes of knowledge and ways of relating to nature. In another scene, Karamatke and von Martens stop over at a Catholic mission. As they are about to leave, von Martens realizes that his compass has been stolen. He then delivers a speech about how the natives will lose their generations-old ability to navigate by the stars if they resort to using the compass. Karamatke rebukes von Martens for fetishizing the natives’ “primitive” methods and for prohibiting them access to Western technology. At the same time, Karamatke’s exhibits ambivalence in the face of the arrival of Western tools and Western ways of thinking. When we use the term “Anthropocene,” we need to be aware that it falsely universalizes

11/13

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Irmgard Emmelhainz  
Decolonization as the Horizon of Political Action

02/09



The open case of Marcel Duchamp’s *The Green Box* [La Boite Verte], 1934. The work is also known as *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*.

are particularly important for us here. The first was Kosuth's declaration of the independence of art from aesthetics. To achieve this, Kosuth uses the "principle of verification" championed by the British philosopher A. J. Ayer.

According to Ayer: "A sentence had a meaning if and only if the proposition it expressed was either analytic or empirically verifiable."<sup>3</sup> For example, the sentence "Two plus two equals four" can be verified analytically and proved to be correct. The sentence "The sun rises in the west" can be verified by observation and proved to be incorrect. So these sentences have meaning that can be verified. But the sentence "Pegasus has beautiful wings" cannot be verified, either by means of logic or by observation or experiment. It is meaningless as an assertion, though we understand what it says. According to Ayer, scholarly fields like ethics, theology, and aesthetics are made up of meaningless sentences and are thus themselves meaningless.

Kosuth used Ayer's principle to declare the independence of art from aesthetics. Art, argued Kosuth, was free from the capricious judgments of so-called "taste." Aesthetics became just one of many qualities of art, and artists could consider it or not. While some questions lingered about Ayer's principle of verification, the conceptual independence of art from aesthetics, psychology, politics, economics, and other disciplines was an inevitable discovery that can be confirmed by other means.

The history of art tells us that art changed from the ancient era to the Middle Ages, from the Renaissance to modernism and postmodernism. The driving force behind this evolution is claimed to be external forces: social, political, even personal. As soon as these forces change, art changes – or so goes the argument. The trouble with this picture is that it describes well what happened, but it gives no idea of what will happen next. And it cannot tell us this precisely because it looks backward and assumes the driving forces to be external to art.

But art is a discipline. It evolves internally. In mathematics, the Pythagorean theorem is important not because it was proved five hundred years before Christianity and not because of the rich culture of the Hellenic world at the time. No, it is important because all of analytic geometry and trigonometry and calculus and numerous other areas of mathematics are based on this theorem.

Art evolves. It becomes more complex. It feeds on new ideas and technologies. It conquers new territories. Fundamentally, art is driven by the question: "What is there that was not known to art before?" And this question will be asked by future artists, just as it was asked by artists of

the past. Kosuth formulated this driving force in the following way: "The 'value' of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art; which is another way of saying 'what they added to the conception of art' or what wasn't there before they started."<sup>4</sup>

In practice, artists do not generally deal with their own heritage. They deal with concepts and artworks. Narrowing the scope of Kosuth's statement, we can reformulate it to apply to particular artworks rather than to an artist's entire oeuvre: *The value of a particular artwork can be weighed according to how much it questions the nature of art; which is another way of saying "what it adds to the conception of art" or what wasn't there before it was created.*

Kosuth's criterion is routinely and intuitively used on the scale of concrete artworks. Every time we criticize somebody's work as being unoriginal, every time we praise somebody's innovation, we in fact use Kosuth's criterion. On a larger scale, what was understood implicitly before has now been named. The paradigm has shifted. From an amorphous mass of ever multiplying images, conflicting styles, and incompatible theories, Art is transformed into a discipline consisting of two parts:

1. applied work serving particular public interests; and
2. fundamental research or fundamental inquiries forming the characteristic edge of growth, formerly known as the avant-garde.

Abandoning the long-held preconception that aesthetics is synonymous with art uncovered the true nature of art: art is a discipline connected to but distinct from any other.

In "Art after Philosophy," Kosuth also identified Conceptual art as an approach to all art – implying that Conceptual art was not a form or a style of art, but rather a meta-discipline concerned with art. This is the second of Kosuth's groundbreaking ideas that concerns us here. To refer to this meta-discipline, we will use the term "Analytical Conceptualism" instead of "Conceptual art," noting that Analytical Conceptualism exists on two levels: as a set of meta-art statements, and as a body of supporting artwork. Such a set of meta-art statements together with supporting artwork is called a model.

### 3. Skersis's Paradox (Meta-Conceptual Transformations)

Constraining the scope of Kosuth's statement to the scale of an artwork allows us to concentrate not on the "philosophical" meaning of the statement, but on its implications that are not

colonial basis of modernity and modernism. The logic of technological progress as emancipation is inherent to colonial narratives. At its core, colonization implies a process of destruction for the sake of creating a purified, homogenous present that defines itself against a past of barbarism and Otherness – all in the name of progress.<sup>17</sup> Along with modern science and culture, critique is also a tool that purports to facilitate progress while really just underscoring the givens of imperialism. Modernity relies on critique to reinvent itself and to justify colonial exploitation, creating new hybrids and paradoxes and finding new ways to look at the world and our relationship to the past.<sup>18</sup> Critical theory (from Marx and the Frankfurt School to post-structuralism and postworkerism, including their more recent derivations) assumes that modernity provides the social, economic, and cognitive means of human emancipation. In this way, it perpetuates a series of oppositions: nature vs. culture; development vs. underdevelopment; degrowth vs. acceleration; indigenous struggles to protect the environment vs. extractive capitalism.

The modern point of view imagines the future as one of renewable energy and social and biological engineering; design will make life sustainable, and science and technology will produce abundance and progress. And yet, as Seth Denizen suggests, the Anthropocene marks the moment when the confidence that there can be a technological solution for our problems as a species is now over.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, our responsibilities as privileged and educated inhabitants of the "developed" areas of planet are not clear; nor is the relationship between our everyday lives and the environmental destruction they enable on the other side of the planet. In other words, one reason why it is difficult to politicize the processes and logics driving ecological disaster is that we are deeply immersed in them. Inequality and differential access have been normalized not only by the concept of market freedom, but also by the history of European colonization. Sacrifice zones are the continuation of colonial processes that began five hundred years ago.

This assault on non-market forms of collectivity also explains why political struggles over similar issues in different parts of the world remain disconnected, often withdrawing into localized environmental battles or transforming into identitarian campaigns. In the latest wave of primitive accumulation, shale gas extraction has polluted the drinking water of many families in rural parts of North America, such as Colorado and Quebec. In some cases, residents' tap water has become flammable, and so they have resorted to buying bottled water from private

companies. Like many others around the world facing similar environmental destruction, these people confront their ordeal largely in isolation. Would it be possible to link this territorially specific struggle to other struggles? For example, could it be linked to people fighting to expel a mine from their *ejido* in Tenochtitlan de Ocampo, Coahuila, Mexico? And to the struggles of the aboriginal peoples of the Lelu Islands in British Columbia? And to the Gulf Labor movement, which denounces the labor conditions around the construction of museums like the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi? And to the defense of the Espacio Escultórico in Ciudad Universitaria, Mexico City? Could all these struggles come together to form a global network of political solidarities to defend the commons?

The problem is that individual struggles – for example, those that take place in sacrifice zones – are too localized and cut off from other political processes. Extractive logic and its resulting environmental devastation lead to a self-destruction of the social fabric through various forms of interpersonal violence – including mass murder – as well as through suicide.<sup>20</sup> These processes need to be urgently politicized within the context of the global threat to life and forms of life posed by the neoliberal siege on sustainability and reproduction. Many of the struggles in sacrifice zones are waged by indigenous peoples. Due to their dependence on and close relationship to their environment, indigenous peoples are the vanguard of environmental defense because *they see the urgency*. As Nishnaabeg<sup>21</sup> theorist Leanne Simpson has put it:

Our elders have been warning us about this for generations now – they saw the unsustainability of settler society immediately. Societies based on conquest cannot be sustained, so yes, I do think we're getting closer to that breaking point for sure. We're running out of time. We're losing the opportunity to turn this thing around. We don't have time for this massive slow transformation into something that's sustainable and alternative. I do feel like I'm getting pushed up against the wall. Maybe my ancestors felt that 200 years ago or 400 years ago. But I don't think it matters. I think that the impetus to act and to change and to transform, for me, exists whether or not this is the end of the world. If a river is threatened, it's the end of the world for those fish. It's been the end of the world for somebody all along. And I think the sadness and the trauma of that is reason enough for me to act.<sup>22</sup>

directly linked to technological rationality insofar as they posit nature as a resource and “pure” background against which social and economic life can be developed.

Another characteristic of megaprojects is that social movements tend to organize against them; examples in Mexico include Atenco, La Parota, Temacapulín, Acasico y Palmarejo, and Río Verde in Oaxaca. Filmmaker Dan Cameron has documented the decades-long struggle against the construction of the Belo Monte Dam in Brazil. In India, the Dongria Kondh people are struggling to protect their native land from bauxite mining by the British company Vedanta (Arundathi Roy has written extensively about this struggle). Megaprojects are a combination of neocolonialism and modern technocracy’s refusal to take into account the long-term effects of connecting peripheral zones to the global circuits of economic exchange.

There is an ongoing debate about what to call our current era, which began more or less with industrialization and the invention of the steam engine, creating visible and irreversible human impacts on Earth. The terms “Anthropocene,” “Capitalocene,” and “Chthulucene” have been coined not only to describe the origin of the phenomena we are

09/13

undergoing, but to politicize them, seeking to take into account the extractivist and destructive logic behind technological rationality’s drive to dominate nature and society.<sup>14</sup>

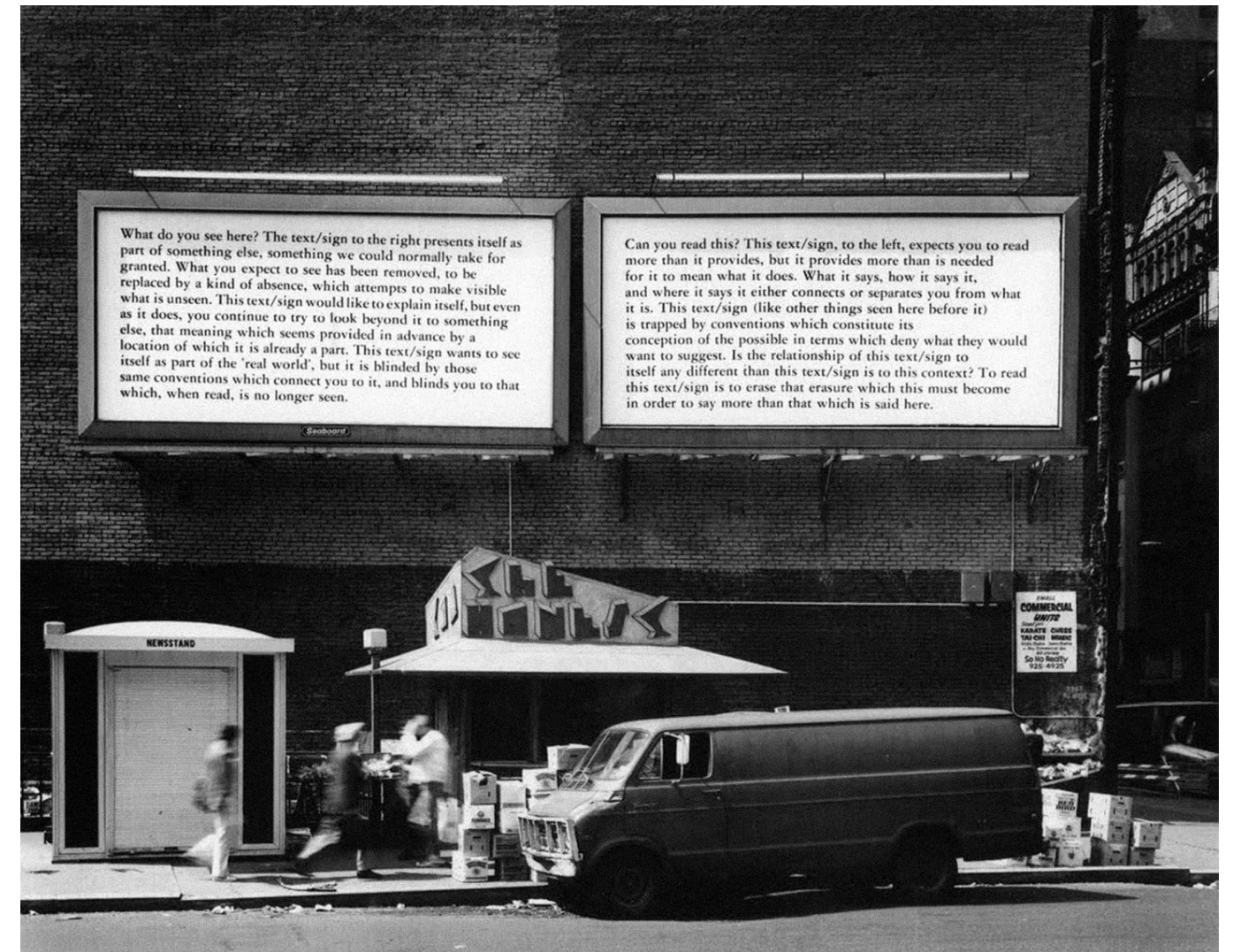
Arguably, the source of the ideology of technological rationality can be found in the Western division between nature and culture. From a feminist perspective, Donna Haraway explains this as an epistemological problem. In her view, the separation between nature and culture underlies modes of knowledge such as scientific compartmentalization, the naming of things, and the reincorporation of natural knowledge as means of control.<sup>15</sup> Along similar lines, for Habermas (who expanded upon Marcuse’s notion of technological rationality in a 1971 text), subjecting nature to language and symbols creates a division between cognizant subject and object, establishing a relationship of foreignness between them.<sup>16</sup> When we classify, name, and create types, culture becomes the logic through which we access nature, which is perceived as *a priori* dangerous and instinctual.

Bearing this in mind, the environmental devastation we are currently witnessing not only compels us to take concrete steps to stop deforestation, mineral extraction, the burning of fossil fuels, etc. We must also acknowledge the



Ink drawing by indigenous artist and botanist Abel Rodríguez. Photo: U.N.

04/09



Joseph Kosuth, *Text / Context*, New York City, May 26–June 16, 1979.

obvious on a larger scale.

According to Kosuth's criterion, there are two parts to a work of, for example, Conceptual art:

1. that part of the work that belongs to known art (A); and
2. the innovation (I) of the work – the part that constitutes the “value” of the Conceptual artwork, the part that was “not there” in Art when the artwork was started.

It also can be represented formally as  $I = (A \square N) - A$ , in which N represents a new artwork.

To put it simply, we have a paradox:

To put it simply, we have a paradox: *The most important part of an artwork is something that is not Art.*

There are profound consequences to this paradox:

1. Over a hundred years after Duchamp posed his fundamental question – “Can one make works that are not works of art?” – we now have a partial answer: “Yes. By necessity they will be Conceptual artwork done in accordance with Kosuth's criterion.”
2. Conceptual art, at least at the time of creation, is not art. It is a meta-discipline existing on two levels: on the level of an artwork, and on the level of a meta-art statement, where an artwork is a manifestation of the meta-art statement.
3. Therefore, what Kosuth called “Theoretical Conceptual Art” should be called Conceptualism, or better yet Analytical Conceptualism.
4. Innovation is identified as a fundamental property, which requires the transgression of art's boundaries.

Consequence 4 suggests that the transgression of old conceptual boundaries is not unique to art. If we are to develop innovation (not only in art), we need to concentrate on developing mechanisms for transgressing the boundaries of known concepts.

A new discipline concerned with meta-conceptual meaningful transformations is developing, and it is called meta-conceptualism.

#### 4. Meta-Art

Once we assert that the transgression of art's boundaries is a fundamental property of conceptually new art, we gain a field of view encompassing art, its boundaries, and the surrounding areas of transgression. To describe this new view we need a meta-discipline concerned not only with the history but with the

structure of art.

The concept of meta-art is analogous to the concepts of metalanguage and meta-mathematics. A metalanguage is a language in which we discuss other languages. For example, when we discuss the Russian language in English, Russian is the object language, while English is the metalanguage. We can regard meta-mathematics as a metalanguage for mathematics. Regarding mathematics and other deductive disciplines, Alfred Tarski wrote: “From the standpoint of meta-mathematics every deductive discipline is a system of sentences.”<sup>5</sup>

Art, strictly speaking, is not a deductive discipline, but if we talk about it, we generate a set of sentences. Therefore, just like Tarski before us, we will declare: the set of all sentences about art is called meta-art.

Indeed, because art is only partially deductive, under “all sentences” we mean all – primarily colloquial – sentences stated in plain language: written, spoken, inferred, implied, or possible. Some sentences will form contradictory statements, such as “Art is stupid” and “Art is not stupid.” We will also declare that the set of all such sentences is infinite. Some finite number of sentences can form subsets. If the sentences of the subset are somehow seen or understood to be connected by intent, concept, message, or any other means, then such a subset is called a theory. We need these liberal allowances to accommodate each and every theory, whether we like it or not, including ones not yet formulated.

Judd's law: If somebody calls it art, it's art. Kosuth attributed this statement to Donald Judd and, in order to convey its profundity, called it “the philosophic *tabula rasa* of art.”<sup>6</sup> We cannot underestimate the importance of Judd's statement. If we are to talk about art at large, we need some property that belongs to all forms of art. We cannot and should not, in the course of our inquiries, linger over every artwork and wonder if it is indeed art or not.

We should follow the lead of scientists here. Physicists do not wonder if some phenomenon is the subject of physics. If it is of interest to them, they say so. Even if the subject lacks some physical properties – like mass, for example – it is still physics. Just like any phenomena in the observable universe is the subject of physics, anything can be the subject of art.

Judd's law has some unsettling consequences. For example, Stockhausen's comment that the World Trade Center bombing was a “work of art” turns out to be a formally true statement. It caused some uproar at the time, but it should be no more controversial than asserting that the explosion was a “work of physics.”

05/09

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Victor Skerzsis  
Analytical Conceptualism



Masked students block access to the Acapulco airport, where a sign reads in Spanish “Smile you were in Acapulco,” as they protest the disappearance of 43 students in the state of Guerrero, Mexico, Monday, Nov. 10, 2014. Photo: AP Photo/Bernardino Hernandez.



ecological events. Is it absurd to seek new forms of representativity for those agents involved in climate change like “soils,” “the atmosphere,” “oceans,” and “cities”? Bruno Latour thinks so. But it is equally senseless to pursue a collective figure of exclusively *human* being that could function as a new agent of *geohistory*, like the proletariat once did.<sup>7</sup>

Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have demanded that the Left make use of the latest technological developments to liberate humanity from work while simultaneously producing wealth.<sup>8</sup> However, it is not clear how this new dream of a postwork society of full automation escapes the early twentieth-century fantasy of technology and knowledge as spontaneously emancipating – a dream that sits uncomfortably alongside the neoliberal deployment of technology as a tool of domination. How is this not simply another example of Herbert Marcuse’s use and abuse of “technological rationality”? Certainly technology will always relieve *some* people of work and produce wealth – that has never been the difficulty. The difficulty lies in taking a world shattered by technology and socially reconstructing it as a just, peaceful, and sustainable ecosystem, a project that is beyond the means of technology, in and of itself.

A skeptic of technological advances and their effects on society, US philosopher Alvin Toffler coined the term “future shock” in 1965 to designate the disastrous tension and disorientation provoked in individuals when they are confronted with excessive change in a brief span of time. The shock is caused not only by technological advances, but also by the increasing speed of population growth and urbanization, bringing about a historical crisis of adaptation.<sup>9</sup> Along opposite lines, Jean-François Lyotard observed that the destruction brought about by modernization was in fact a source of *jouissance* for the peasants who became unemployed proletarians:

They enjoyed the mad destruction of their organic body which was indeed imposed upon them, they enjoyed the decomposition of their personal identity, the identity that the peasant tradition had constructed for them, enjoyed the dissolutions of their families and villages, and enjoyed the new monstrous anonymity of the suburbs and the pubs in morning and evening.<sup>10</sup>

For Lyotard, in the imposed destruction of their bodies, lives, and traditional ways of making a living, the peasants experienced *jouissance* in the form of masochistic pleasure. This destruction was perceived as the necessary sublation of the many antagonisms inherent to

modernization and the development of a superior mode of production. In contrast, Toffler thought that the shock brought about by technological change and modern acceleration needed to be prevented by implementing a policy that embraced technological innovation while also taking into account the secondary long-term effects of technology, specifically, the effects of technological development on the environment.<sup>11</sup> For Toffler, future shock was also caused by the failure to calculate the long-term impacts of technological innovation on society and culture.

In spite of the human and environmental cost, industrialism and technocracy as technological rationality are still perceived as emancipatory tools as well as systems geared toward maximizing the material well-being of humans. This is why, in spite of multiple UN Climate Change Conferences and efforts to make capitalism more “green,” the stability of the environment is under ongoing threat. In reality, there can be no such thing as green capitalism because capitalism is built precisely on the logic of technological rationality, which implies the negation of the environment itself.

Technological rationality, insofar as it is the rationalization of the domination of nature and society, is the foundation of our current model of accumulation by dispossession, exploitation, and extraction. This model has not only created environmental and social destruction; it has also divided the world into privileged urban areas and what Naomi Klein calls “sacrifice zones.”<sup>12</sup> These sacrifice zones are the contemporary manifestation of the colonial model; once the imposed project of development failed to modernize “primitive” societies, their lands were transformed into zones of pure extraction. Residents of these sacrifice zones not only live with the toxic waste of our systemic need to consume fossil fuels (undergoing, as Rob Nixon calls it, a form of “slow violence”<sup>13</sup>) and face the destruction of their autonomous forms of sustainability in the name of development; they also sustain the privileges of people living in developed urban areas, people who deny or justify this destruction under the logic of modernization. Megaprojects are a clear manifestation of this. Dams, oil and natural gas pipelines, shopping malls, real-estate developments, and infrastructure projects such as the Eurotunnel or the Boston Big Dig constitute the infrastructure of global capitalism; they are the spatial manifestation of neoliberal capitalist development on a global scale. The purpose of megaprojects is to integrate spaces existing under older forms of production into the dominant accumulation model. They are therefore destructive and

## 5. The Fundamental Tautology: Art is Art

Let’s imagine a collection consisting of every and all works of art. We see all kinds of work: big and small, on canvas and in marble, political and erotic, urgent and long forgotten ... We see that our collection includes texts, photography, found and appropriated objects, music, movies, actions, concepts ... We see that the only universal property they all share is that somebody has called them “art.” Any other property is not universal for our collection. For every case when an artwork has a property (*p*), there is another with a property (*not-p*). For example, if one artwork is red, another may be blue. If one is big, another may be small. If one is an object and has a mass, another is a concept or an action and does not have a mass, and so on. Therefore the most fundamental definition of an artwork is a tautology: an artwork is an artwork. This is the only definition that appeals to the immanent criteria defining our collection. On the other hand, any property not contained in what I will call the “Fundamental Tautology” is not an immanent property of an artwork.

Let me put it differently: art today is so diverse that the only property common to all its parts is the name “art.” All other qualities – aesthetic, moral, religious, political, professional – are partial, significant only to some parts of art but not to all. Taken as the criteria to define the collection, they will always define only parts of it. And what is interesting is that the more criteria we apply – that is, the more elaborate description or theory of art we produce – the less art will correspond to our definition. For example, let’s say we declare that true art is aesthetic, moral, religious, political, and professional (assuming of course that we know what is “aesthetic,” “moral,” “religious,” and “professional”). Then to comply with our definition, out of all artworks we’ll have to choose only the ones that are aesthetic, and out of those only the ones that are moral, and out of the remaining group only the religious, and out of these only the ones professionally executed.

The Fundamental Tautology is self-referential and therefore is not a true definition. But we can draw some important lessons from it:

1. Any theory not containing the Fundamental Tautology is a local (partial) theory. If theoreticians – Marxist, formalist, postmodernist, religious, or any other kind – claim that their theory of art is the only correct and all-inclusive theory, we know for certain that these claims are false and the theories are partial.
2. There is an infinite number of partial definitions or theories. A definition is a

theory, and in essence every artist judging an artwork, every art critic interpreting art, every viewer of art trying to form an opinion – all build theories (that is, definitions) of art.

3. We cannot give a single finite and all-inclusive definition of art, but we can define the definition of art. *The inclusive definition of art is a set of all partial definitions.* Such a set is, in theory, infinite.

4. Partial definitions can be formed as statements, questions, or, in some models, even as nonverbal implicators, including artworks themselves.

## 6. Strata/Scale

Consider a question: When we walk into a museum, do we look at art? Or are we looking at preserved remains of what once was art?

Here is my answer: what we see is a close-up view, one of the scales of the great structure of Art – *Ars Profunda*. There are many scales of magnification that open different views to us. We will designate them as S1, S2, and so forth, and consider six of them:

- S1 Concrete artwork;
- S2 The mind of an individual artist, a creator producing artworks;
- S3 A cloud (group, collective) of individual artists, creators;
- S4 A local art scene, consisting of clouds of individual creators;
- S5 An art world, consisting of local art scenes at the current point in time;
- S6 Art history.

I chose these scales of magnification because they readily correspond to certain strata of art formed by mutually incommensurable constituents: artifacts, minds, collectives, situations, patterns of situations evolving in time.

The reason for such a classification is not academic. For the past several decades, the conceptual development of art has stagnated. We need to identify possible areas of growth and innovation. For example, the efforts of an artist are normally directed toward the production of an artwork. Artwork (S1) is currently the expected net result of an artist’s activity. Artworks are bought, sold, collected, and criticized. But there is only so much that can be done on the level of an artwork.

We know, however, that a concrete artwork is a manifestation of a concept. In turn, a concept is a verbalized idea, a pattern of neural activity happening in a particular brain. This pattern is always unique. Ideas don’t come from

collectives; they come from individuals (S2). By means of communication, we can convey the idea to others, inducing similar patterns of neural activity in other brains (S3). No two brains are identical, and therefore these patterns will be similar but never identical to the original. In fact these similar patterns can be viewed as mutations of the original idea. So if we are to look for innovation in art, we might want to shift our attention to these substrate processes, particularly to strata 2 and 3.

A concrete artwork is a manifestation of deeper substrate processes. If we are to develop conceptually new art, we need to look deeper than the artwork.

### 7. Levels: The Cardinality of Nature Hypothesis

There are three levels readily discernable in discussions of art: World, Mind, and Language. These realms are not usually recognized as levels, and that fact leads to confusion when attempts are made to define what only can be named.

The very possibility of talking or writing about art is based on the assumption that art, or at least some essential aspects of art, can be verbalized. Consider an art critic writing about a

07/09

painting. What happens? It seems that information about the painting gets mapped from the realm of reality to the realm of thought to the realm of language. Some information is inevitably lost during the transition. But this loss is not just a distortion caused by imperfections in the translation from one language to another. Instead, there is a distinct loss of information as a result of a decrease in the realm's cardinality. Consider the difference between the real city of New York, a map of the city, and a verbal description of such a map.

"Cardinality" is an uncommon term in arts and humanities, but it is well established in mathematics and meta-mathematics. It is used to measure the size of a set. For example, a collection of three apples has a cardinality of 3; a collection of five apples has a cardinality of 5. There are also infinite sets. It was proved by Georg Cantor that some infinite sets are infinitely bigger than others.<sup>7</sup> The progression of cardinalities can be shown in the following manner:

0, 1, 2, 3,  $\aleph_0$ ,  $\aleph_1$ ,  $\aleph_2$ , ... ,  $\aleph_\alpha$ , ...

A set with no elements has the cardinality 0. A set with 1 element has the cardinality 1. A set with n elements has the cardinality n. A set with an infinite number of elements that could be

06/13



Christy Rupp, *Rat Patrol*, 1979.



Still from the 2015 movie *This Changes Everything* by Avi Lewis based on the book with the same name by Naomi Klein.

available to large segments of the population are not choices at all.

A Mexican example of differential access is health care services, which vary widely in quality and cost according to the economic situation of the patient. There is Doctor Simi, a franchise that offers medical consultations and prescription medicine for under five US dollars; in contrast, the English Hospital (ABC) in the privileged area of Santa Fe charges as much as one hundred and seventy US dollars for the same service, sometimes more. The democratic assumption of individual equality before the law is thus limited in advance, specifically to whatever equality is available in a community where the health of one small group is worth thirty-five times that of another, much larger group. As in organic versus industrialized food, the disparity in health care services leads to other, greater disparities. How can one “be political” in the way that neoliberal success demands if one suffers from chronic heart disease brought on by eating industrialized food? There can be no rule of law if one cannot appear in court on account of one’s ill-health. Neoliberalism functions by providing differential access to the preconditions of citizenship such as health care, housing, and education.

Another example of differential access is preferential lines at banks, which allow clients with important accounts to have faster access to tellers. Those who can afford it are able to avoid long lines. At the global level, there is the Global Entry Pass, a membership service that offers speedy entrance to the US in exchange for personal information and a fee (on top of the normal visa fee). These forms of differential access to goods, borders, and infrastructure institute inequality beyond the apparent reach of any national democracy, normalizing it and making it systemic. Perhaps the clearest example of the global system of differential privileges was revealed by the Panama Papers: tax havens that launder the riches of the global elite. These allow wealthy individuals to become ruling-class thieves, enjoying the safety and security provided by tax-collecting governments without paying for them.

This logic of differential access and privilege is written into the form of neoliberal imperialism: the state makes itself strategically present, protecting and providing for certain territories and populations while neglecting or repressing others according to the interests of global capital.<sup>2</sup> This is evident, for instance, in the way in which Israel co-governs Palestinians as noncitizens, that is to say, as citizens with different rights than Israelis.<sup>3</sup> Globally, these forms of differential access/governance have become entrenched with the emergence of oligarchies who have amassed enormous

fortunes through privatization, resource extraction, real-estate projects, and other forms of monopoly investment at a global level. Emboldened by the free movement of capital, these cliques threaten nation-states with disinvestment unless they agree to depress the cost of labor by making war on their middle-class institutions like unions and schools. The architecture of upward mobility is, by definition, tasked with raising the price of labor-power, and when nation-states compete internationally for investments, this cost must be driven downwards. Hence the definitively neoliberal spectacle of nation-states gleefully ransacking their own national institutions in the name of the nation. Entire governments now play the role of strike-breakers and factory guards. Traditionally, democracy was based on the social force of workers, and electoral democracy was its manifestation. The mechanism of national democracy was how workers defended the price of their labor. Since the triumph of the neoliberal program, however, national democracy has shown itself incapable of maintaining the wage rate in particular, and standards of living more generally, and this accounts for the sudden affection for a different kind of nationalism in Europe, the US, and Latin America, and the shift towards populist, anti-refugee, and authoritarian positions.<sup>4</sup> As Bifo has argued, the fading possibility of emancipation and organization has pushed workers towards the only forms of identity that remain available: ethnic, religious, and national belonging.<sup>5</sup> Right-wing politics has provided token identification on a cultural or spiritual level, offering a symbolic unity that replaces the eroded welfare state and failing democracies. Instead of the redistribution of wealth we have a nationalist closing of borders, as people participate symbolically in the ideological projects of oligarchies but without participating in them financially.<sup>6</sup> If national democracy is a mutilated tool devoid of efficacy and credibility, what paradigm of resistance might appeal to precarious and excluded populations, peoples whose lives and livelihoods are being rendered precarious or destroyed?

As solutions to our current global problems, Žižek proposes a new workers’ movement, while Bifo has suggested inventing forms of recombinant autonomy and a new internationalist Left. Yet contemporary ecological mutations require that we ask whether or not the principle of representation at the heart of our inherited models of struggle has become obsolete. In other words, it is not only the crypto-government of transnational capital that has superseded the form of the nation-state; such states are also undermined by territorial conflicts created by irreversible

counted – for example, a set of all natural numbers – has the cardinality  $\aleph_0$ .

The next larger set with an infinite number of elements that could not be counted – for example, a set of all real numbers – has the cardinality  $\aleph_1$ . Cantor hypothesized that there are cardinalities beyond  $\aleph_1$ , and each successive cardinality is infinitely bigger than the previous one.

In order to establish that some infinite sets are bigger than others, he used the concept of one-to-one correspondence, meaning that if two sets have the same cardinality, then every element of one set can be translated into a corresponding element of the other. We might consider some phenomena of the real world and the universe itself as infinitely large sets of data. Such large sets we will call realms.

Larger sets hold more information than smaller ones. We cannot translate the information from the higher-cardinality realm to the lower-cardinality realm without a profound loss of information. The loss is infinitely greater than the one occurring during translation from, for example, English to Russian, two natural languages that have the same cardinality.

Reality contains the Mind, and the Mind contains Language, which, we assume, means that the cardinality of Reality is greater than the cardinality of the Mind, which in turn is greater than the cardinality of Language. Our mind can hold a limited amount of information about Reality, and there is only so much that our words can tell us about what is in our mind. The Cardinality hypothesis suggests that the very nature of translation between realms of different cardinality is the fundamental obstacle that prevents us from having a final and all-inclusive definition of art. For this same reason we cannot have an exhaustive description of art either. When we try to give a definition of any real-world phenomenon – not just of art – we designate it with some word and then give a necessarily limited definition to the word, but not to the phenomenon the word designates.

This brings us to an important clarification of terms: There exists  $\langle \text{Art} \rangle$  as a phenomenon of the real world. Most of it is unknown to us. The parts we encounter are reflected in our minds as a psychological phenomena [Art]. On this level we cannot define it. There is just too much information. Instead we name [Art] as “Art.” Now we have a proper name, which is still too voluminous to define the phenomenon completely, but we can describe it as an infinite set (we’ll call it “Art L4”) of partial definitions of art (we’ll call it “Art L5”).

In other words, the structure of *Ars Profunda* looks like this:

Level 1  $\langle \text{Art} \rangle$  – “Art” as a phenomenon of the world.

Level 2 [Art] – “Art” as a phenomenon of the world as it is reflected in our minds.

Level 3 “Art” as a proper name of [Art].

Level 4 “Art” as a set of all finite (partial) definitions of “Art L3.” “Art L4” is meta-art.

Level 5 “Art” as essentially a finite definition of a term, derived from some local theory of what the word “Art” means.

Thus, any verbalized theory aspiring to encompass all of art will be frustrated because the linguistic apparatus we use is fundamentally inadequate. This gnoseological limit applicable to any verbalized inquiry into a real-world phenomenon we will call the “Fundamental Frustration.”

On the brighter side, this also means that there can be an infinite number of theories of any real-world phenomenon, including art.

## 8. Conclusion

A number of fundamental limits seem to have been reached. This might explain the current stagnation in the development of art. To avoid confusion, it is important to keep in mind which aspect of *Ars Profunda* is of interest and set expectations accordingly. On the other hand, “fundamental” does not mean omnipresent. Judging from the past, there are always possibilities we do not foresee, yet they will present themselves in the proper time. The possibilities are there, but we lack a fundamental understanding of them. Art as a phenomenon of this world is much bigger and more complex than we think. As our understanding progresses, we will be able to develop new instruments to unlock its potential.

x

1  
See Francis M. Naumann, "Marcel Duchamp: A Reconciliation of Opposites," in *Definitively Unfinished Duchamp*, ed. Thierry de Duve (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 57. See also Herbert Molderings, "Objects of Modern Skepticism," in *ibid.*, 245.

2  
Joseph Kosuth, "Art after philosophy," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexandro Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press: 1999), 158–77.

3  
A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 2012 / 1936), 5.

4  
Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," 164.

5  
Alfred Tarski, *Logic, Semantics and Metamathematics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 62.

6  
Kosuth, "Art after philosophy," 163.

7  
Georg Cantor, "Contributions to the Founding of the Theory of Transfinite Numbers," in *God Created the Integers: The Mathematical Breakthroughs that Changed History*, ed. Stephen Hawking (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2007).



Syrian refugees Hala and Zeina play on a disused water slide inside LM Village Resort, closed as a result of Greece's financial crisis. Photo: UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis

and infrastructure, which they will use to reinvent their communal forms of living. What remains to be seen is how they will gain access to health care, education, and jobs.

The takeover, executed in collaboration with the tourism complex's employees – waiters, security guards, maids, and gardeners, who politely escorted shaken tourists to the bus station and airport – takes place after years of planning by a team of international environmentalists, leftist guerrilla strategists, Palestinian architectural decolonists, radical cultural producers, biologists, environmentalists, an international team of anthropologists from indigenous communities, and community leaders representing one hundred of the nearly four hundred ethnicities still surviving across Mexico. The interdisciplinary team has taken up the task of organizing communal forms of living in the complex, following the desires, needs, and concerns of the natives of the mountains in Guerrero. Their goal is to reconvert the Acapulco Diamante tourism complex into a sustainable habitat by restoring the ecology of the area; one of the first tasks is to turn the pools at the luxury hotels into fish farms. Technology and know-how have been imported from Gaza to build a desalinization and water-treatment plant, and from Belgium to build a solar energy system. Also underway in the fabrication of simple biodigestors designed by a Mexican artist to produce methane gas. A Norwegian NGO is providing financial aid to help feed the community until they are able to grow and harvest their own food, but they are also accepting donations. A group of concerned cultural producers from Mexico City has arrived to show solidarity and collaborate with the community, eschewing the model of “intervention.” They have been asked to help transform the hectares of golf courses into arable land where papaya, banana, maize, quinoa, and wheat will be grown. A team of French-Algerian anthropologists who grew up in the Parisian banlieues has come to help the community settle.

The community is debating many pressing issues, including how to use the tourist architecture and infrastructure to organize communal forms of living. Also up for discussion is whether one building will be saved to house three hundred Syrian refugee families. In the next few days, refugees from Hurricane Patricia will be arriving by boat from Jalisco, Guerrero, and Nayarit. Peace talks are taking place with federal authorities, who have threatened to cut off energy and water, or even to invade the complex and violently expel the new inhabitants. The owners of the Acapulco Diamante tourism complex have been asked for comment, but so far they have remained silent.

03/13

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Irmgard Emmelhainz  
Decolonization as the Horizon of Political Action

The global dominance of neoliberal policies has precipitated the collapse of democracy and the resurgence of neofascist ideologies worldwide. In the midst of economic instability, the ranks of redundant, excluded populations continue to swell, global warming intensifies, and new forms of slavery emerge. Meanwhile, a model of development based on foreign investment and phantasmagoric economic growth continues to be imposed by international institutions, resulting in endemic state violence (Ayotzinapa, Palestine), permanent war (Iraq, Syria), pervasive environmental devastation, and the destruction of communities and their forms of life. If neoliberalism describes the dominant political economic understanding, then this understanding is unquestionably a threat to our existence.

Were this text being written in the previous century, the part of neoliberalism would likely have been played by “imperialism,” and it is significant that David Harvey has written extensively on both concepts. In his book *The New Imperialism*, Harvey expands Marx's concept of “primitive accumulation” to encompass intellectual property rights, privatization, and the depredation and exploitation of the commons. In these new processes of primitive accumulation *life itself is put on the line*, in what Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession.” The commons become the cheap “resources” feeding the concentrated accumulation of wealth that is destabilizing the economy. The questions to be asked today, after Bifo, are: How to recompose social autonomy? How to protect life against financial capitalism and national and religious fascism? How to supplant neoliberal policies? What social model is capable of replacing the dictatorship of the market?<sup>1</sup>

It is important to understand how neoliberalism's basic rhetoric of market democracy conceals vast inequalities of access. It is simply not the case that individuals confront equal choices when it comes to goods, services, education, jobs, and housing, choices which allow them to allocate resources according to inclination. This is the paradoxical element in the effort of some contemporary political movements to “improve” democracy by demanding transparency, accountability, inclusion, and freedom of expression. How can we speak of democracy if entire populations across the world have differential access – or a complete lack of access – to its preconditions, to good, resources, and services? Under the chimera of freedom of choice provided by the liberalization of the market, consumers have the apparent option to choose from a wide range of qualities and prices. In reality the “choices”

## Étienne Balibar Citizen Subject

01/11

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Étienne Balibar  
Citizen Subject

### A Response to Jean-Luc Nancy's Question “Who Comes After the Subject?”

Both following Hegel and opposed to him, Heidegger proposes Descartes as the moment when the “sovereignty of the subject” is established (in philosophy), inaugurating the discourse of modernity. This supposes that man, or rather the *ego*, is determined and conceived of as subject (*subjectum*).<sup>1</sup>

Doubtless, from one text to another, and sometimes even within the same “text” (I am primarily referring here to the *Nietzsche* of 1939–46), Heidegger nuances his formulation. At one moment he positively affirms that in Descartes's *Meditations* (which he cites in Latin) the *ego* as consciousness (which he explicates as *cogito me cogitare*) is posited, founded as the *subjectum* (that which in Greek is called the *hypokeimenon*). This also has the correlative effect of identifying, for all modern philosophy, the *hypokeimenon* and the foundation of being with the being of the subject of thought, the other of the object. At another moment he is content to point out that this identification is implicit in Descartes, and that we must wait for Leibniz to see it made explicit (“called by its own name”) and reflected as the identity of reality and representation, in its difference with the traditional conception of being.

### The Myth of the “Cartesian Subject”

Is this nuance decisive? It would be difficult to find the slightest reference to the “subject” as *subjectum* in the *Meditations*, and that in general the thesis that would posit the *ego* or the “I think/I am” (or the “I am a thinking thing”) as subject, either in the sense of *hypokeimenon* or in the sense of the future *Subjekt* (opposed to *Gegenstandlichkeit*), does not appear anywhere in Descartes. By evoking an implicit definition, one that awaits its formulation, and thus a teleology of the history of philosophy (a lag of consciousness, or rather of language), Heidegger only makes his position more untenable, if only because Descartes's position is actually incompatible with this concept. This can easily be verified by examining both Descartes's use of the noun “subject” and the fundamental reasons why he does not name the thinking substance or “thinking thing” “subject.”

The problem of substance, as is well known, appears fairly late in the course of the *Meditations*. It is posited neither in the presentation of the *cogito*, nor when Descartes draws its fundamental epistemological consequence (that the soul knows itself “more evidently, distinctly, and clearly” than it knows the body), but rather in the third meditation, when he attempts to establish and to think the causal link between the “thinking thing” that the

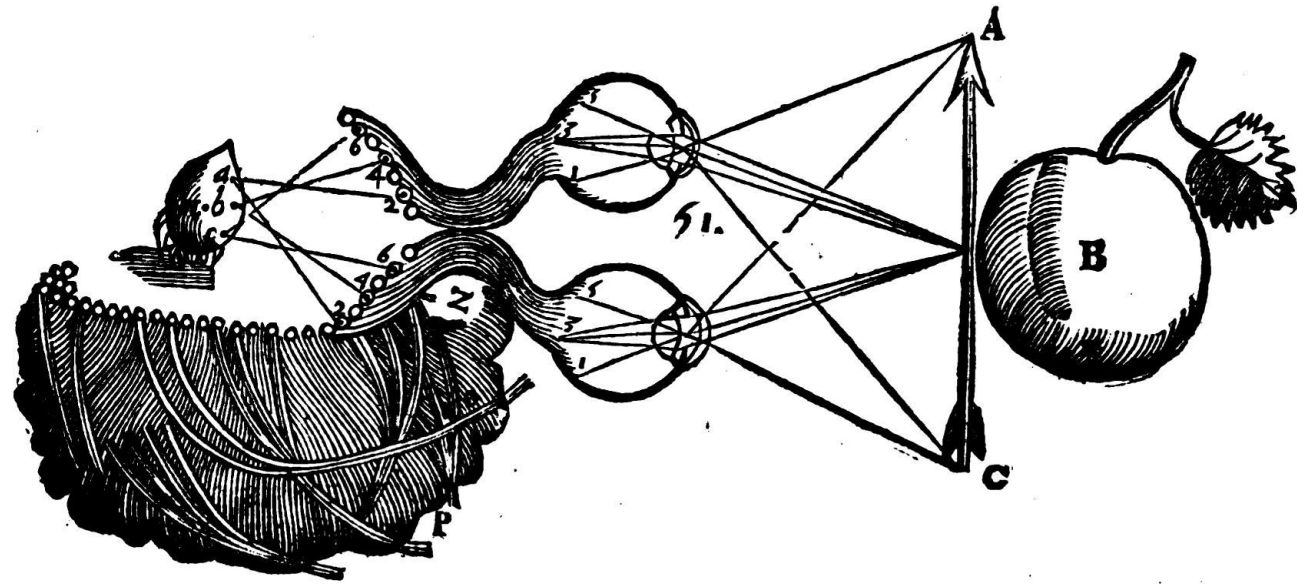


Illustration from *La dioptrique*, a short treatise published by René Descartes in 1637. In this essay Descartes uses various models to understand the properties of light.



The Grand Velas hotel, in Nayarit, Mexico, moves guests to the first floor of the hotel during hurricane Patricia, 2015.

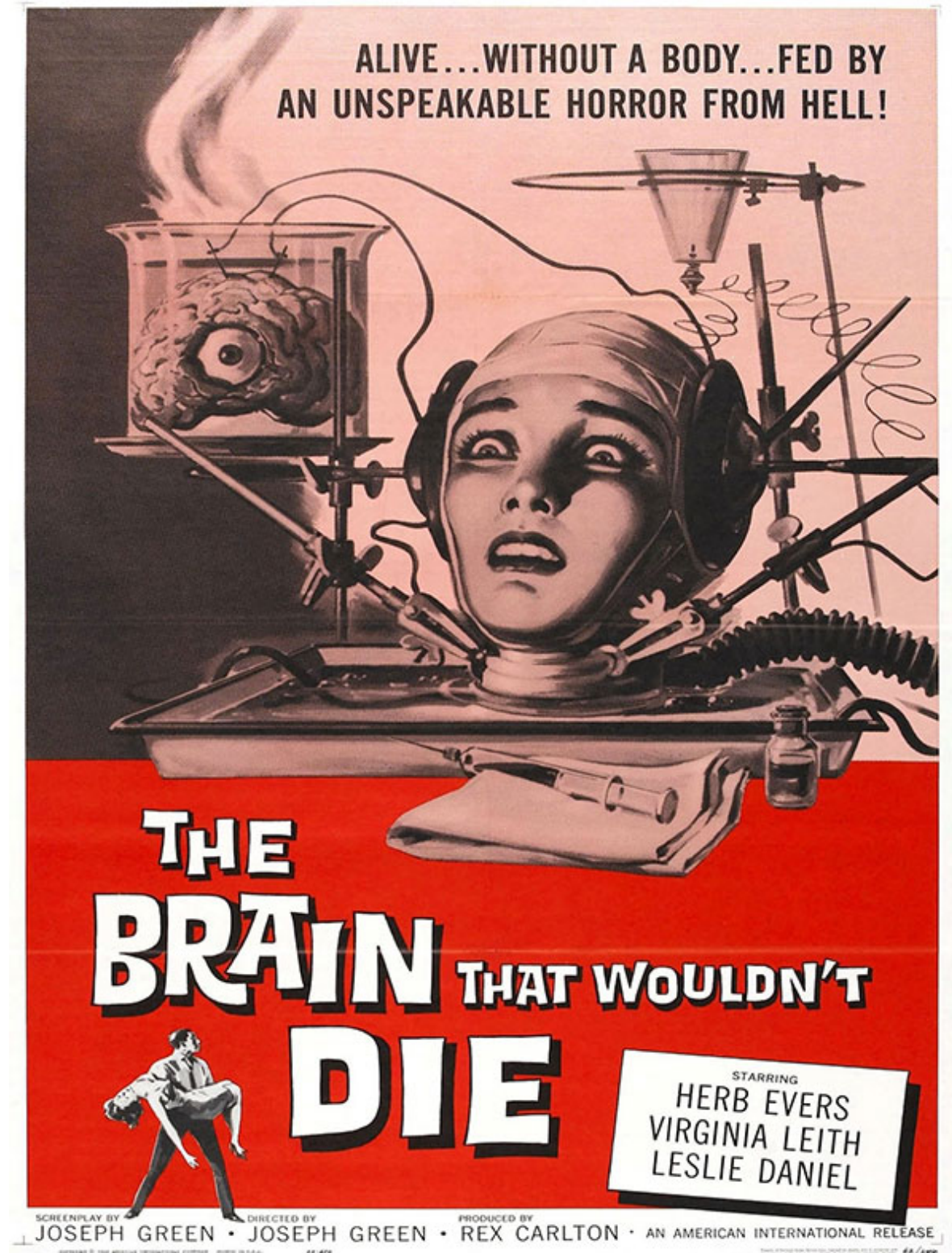
You speak of a world that is yet to come. Most of us are not ready to sacrifice the happiness we can access here and now, however artificial, shallow, or environmentally dangerous it may be, so I keep doubting your politics in secret. How on Earth will you convince the world to live your vision?  
 – Maja Borg, from the voiceover of her film *The Future My Love* (2014)

We have to acknowledge that the significant political leverage required to simultaneously block the economic exploitation of our people and homelands while constructing alternatives to capitalism will not be generated through our direct actions and resurgent economies alone. Settler colonization has rendered our populations too small to affect this magnitude of change. This reality demands that we continue to remain open to, if not actively seek out and establish, relations of solidarity and networks of trade and mutual aid with national and transnational communities and organizations that are also struggling against the imposed effects of globalized capital.  
 – Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks*

I want to begin with a fictional scenario that crystallizes the perils and possibilities of our present moment:

*Last night, the Acapulco Diamante tourism complex in Mexico – with over 150,000 rooms in its multiple apartment buildings, luxury housing complexes, and international hotels spread across five kilometers between the Mayan Palace and the Princess Hotel – was peacefully taken over by ten thousand displaced families from various zones in Guerrero (mostly from Tierra Caliente), escorted by two thousand vigilantes from the mountains of Guerrero and commandos from the armed wing of the ERPI (Revolutionary Army of the Insurgent People). The uninvited intruders are environmental refugees, as their homes and lands have been destroyed by extreme weather and megaprojects such as mineral extraction and hydroelectric dams. Some have been displaced to cheap suburban-like housing areas, where they have been made dependent on government aid, debt, and corporate forms of subsistence. This has made them estranged from their lands and autonomous means of subsistence. By peacefully taking over the Acapulco Diamante tourism complex, they seek to fulfill their human right to “modern” commodities*

## Irmgard Emmelhainz Decolonization as the Horizon of Political Action



A poster for the 1962 horror movie *The Brain who Wouldn't Die*.

soul knows itself to be and God, the idea of whom is found immediately in itself as infinite being. But even here *it is not a question of the subject*. The term will appear only incidentally, in its scholastic meaning, in the “Responses to Objections,” set in the context of a discussion about the real difference between finite and infinite, as well as between thinking and extended substances; a problem for which the *Principles* will later furnish a properly formulated definition. Along with these discussions, we must consider that which concerns the union between body and soul, the “third substance” constitutive of individuality, the theory that will be elaborated in the “Sixth Meditation” and further developed in the *Treatise on the Passions*.

Considering these different contexts, it becomes clear that the essential concept for Descartes is that of *substance* – in the new signification that he gives to it. This signification is not limited to objectifying, each on its own side, the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*: it allows the entire set of causal relations between (infinite) God and (finite) things, between ideas and bodies, between my soul and my (own) body, to be thought. It is thus primarily a relational concept. The essential part of its theoretical function is accomplished by putting distinct “substances” into relation with one another, generally in the form of a unity of opposites. The name of substance (that is its principal, negative characteristic) cannot be attributed in a univocal fashion to both the infinite (God) and the finite (creatures); it thus allows their difference to be thought, and nevertheless permits their dependence to be understood (for only a substance can “cause” another substance: this is its second characteristic). Likewise, thought and extension are really distinct substances, having no attributes whatsoever in common, and nevertheless the very reality of this distinction implies a substantial (non-accidental) union as the basis of our experience of our sensations. All these distinctions and oppositions finally find their coherence – if not the solution of the enigma they hold – in a *nexus* that is both hierarchical and causal, entirely regulated by the principle of the *eminent causality*, in God, of the “formal” or “objective” relations between created substances (that is, respectively, those relations that consist of actions and passions, and those that consist of representations). It is only because all (finite) substances are eminently caused by God (have their eminent cause, or rather the eminence of their cause, in God) that they are also in a causal relation among themselves. But, inversely, eminent causality – another name for positive infinity – could not express anything intelligible for us except for the

04/11

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016  
Étienne Balibar  
Citizen Subject

“objective” unity of formally distinct causalities.

Thus, nothing is further from Descartes than a metaphysics of Substance conceived of as a univocal term. Rather, this concept has acquired a new equivocality in his work, without which it could not fill its structural function: to name in turn each of the poles of a topography in which I am situated simultaneously as cause and effect (or rather as a cause that is itself only an effect). It must be understood that the notion of the *subjectum/hypokeimenon* has an entirely evanescent status here. Descartes mentions it, in response to objections, only in order to make a scholastic defense of his *realist* thesis (every substance is the real subject of its own accidents). But it does not add any element of knowledge (and in particular not the idea of a “matter” distinct from “form”) to the concept of substance. It is for this reason that substance is practically indiscernible from its principle attribute (comprehensible: extension, thought; or incomprehensible: infinity, omnipotence).

There is no doubt whatsoever that it is essential to characterize in Descartes the “thinking thing” that I am (therefore!) as substance or as substantial, in a nexus of substances that are so many *instances* of the metaphysical apparatus. But it is not essential to attach this substance to the representation of a *subjectum*, and it is in any case impossible to *apply the name of subjectum* to the *ego cogito*. On the other hand, it is possible and necessary to ask in what sense the human individual, composed of a soul, a body, and their unity, is the “subject” (*subjectus*) of a *divine sovereignty*. The representation of sovereignty is in fact implied by the ideal of eminence, and, inversely, the reality of finite things could not be understood outside of a specific dependence “according to which all things are subject to God.”<sup>2</sup> That which is valid from an ontological point of view is also valid from an epistemological point of view. From the thesis of the “creation of eternal truths” to the one proper to the *Meditations*, according to which the intelligibility of the finite is implied by the idea of the infinite, a single conception of the subjection of understanding and of science is affirmed, not of course to an external or revealed dogma, but to an internal center of thought whose structure is that of a sovereign decision, an absent presence, or a source of intelligibility that as such is incomprehensible.

Thus, the idea that causality and sovereignty can be converted into one another is conserved and reinforced in Descartes. It could even be said that this idea is pushed to the limit – which is perhaps, for us in any case, the herald of a coming decomposition of this figure of thought. The obvious fact that an extreme intellectual tension results from it is recognized

1  
This phrase was infamously used by Donald Rumsfeld in response to a question about the lack of evidence linking the government of Saddam Hussein to weapons of mass destruction: “As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don’t know we don’t know.” For a possible outline of a genealogy of the paranoid white-male imagination see, Antonia Majaca: “Little Daniel Before the Law: Algorithmic Extimacy and the Rise of the Paranoid Apparatus,” *e-flux journal* 75 (September 2016) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67140/little-daniel-before-the-law-algorithmic-extimacy-and-the-rise-of-the-paranoid-apparatus/>.

2  
In *The Matrix* trilogy, the protagonist’s name (Neo) means “novelty,” which is indistinguishable from an error in the system. The question is simply whether this error is fatal to the system or entirely anticipated.

3  
Antoinette Rouvroy has brilliantly elaborated the new data epistemology and what she calls “data behaviorism,” where the correlation of data becomes the new truth regime leading, ultimately, to the death of causal reasoning and the end of critique.

4  
In logic, abduction involves the possibility of inferring laws from observable events through the trial and error (induction) of explanation, driven by a hypothetical reasoning about unknown phenomena. In other words, it concerns reasoning coinciding not simply with evaluation, but with the formation of an entirely new theory.

06/06

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Antonia Majaca and Luciana Parisi  
The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility



driven by hypotheses that propose the best explanation from unknown situations. This could be a starting point for non-inferential practices, where materiality and truth are not the same, but both partake in a larger continuum of modes of reasoning (abduction-induction-deduction). In particular, the non-inferential use of technology seems crucial for reassessing the truth of our current situation, perhaps affording possibilities of decision and the collective determination of truths.

Peirce's abductive reasoning helps us define rules not as symbolic representations of material practices. Logic is embedded in a social matrix by which local specificities are structured, in a general schema of relations between relations. In other words, abductive reasoning, as opposed to the inductive testing of existing "knowns," helps us to explain, and not discount, the causal process that conditions and constrains the generation of new hypotheses. In contrast to the automated cognition of the regime of induction, abduction allows for an alternative view of instrumentality as transcending the function of data-matching. Abduction is an alien system of cognition. For a new, *double-helix-like* becoming of reason and imagination, an alienation of the very myth of origin must be enacted. The vessel then must be understood as the agent.

The politicization of the instrumental always entails the arrival of the incomputable. This politicization is never simply a sudden refusal of quantification by the quantified. The instrument declares itself a subject by insisting on its own irreducibility to the very instrumental function that it nevertheless undeniably possesses, since this is what gives its refusal power in the first place. Octavia Butler's radical survivalist science fiction dramatizes this process whereby the construction of a new subject discloses the radical incomputability at work beneath the concept of humanity itself. Instrumentality is hereby acknowledged and worked through in order to be transcended through its own utilization. Lilith understands that humans need to recode themselves and construct an imaginative logic of becoming more/less-than human. The becoming of the inhuman here starts with a new theory and searches for the least familiar hypothesis, constructing worlds of possibility by denaturalizing the human from within the instrumental. Far from achieving definite ends, this alien beginning is rather conditioned by the means of its engineering, where opposite realities, mismatching desires, and complex reasonings reveal the inhumanness of the original. Instead of replacing the human with an *ex novo* form of being, Octavia Butler shows us how to supply the human with futurity. An alien

beginning of the new subject calls for abduction, and for the generation of new hypotheses of instrumentality, one that acknowledges the history of techne whereby the machine has been able to elaborate strategies of autonomy from and through its own use.

If to generate hypotheses is an inferential process that entails a close engagement with practices, with doings and using, then it is logic of and for instrumentality, too. Here, however, the elaboration of thinking from doing involves not simply mimicking existing practices. Instead, as with Butler's envisioning of Lilith as the originator of a new species, the instrumental argument for an alien political subjectivity capable of politicizing unknown unknowns from a non-paranoid perspective requires that she – the experimental instrument – is a sorcerer and not a mirror of the actual state of things.

x

and constantly reexamined by Descartes himself. How can the absolute freedom of man – or rather of his will, the very essence of judgment – be conceived of as similar to God's without putting this subjection back into question? How can it be conceived of outside this subjection, for it is the *image* of another freedom, of another power? Descartes's thought, as we know, oscillates between two tendencies on this point. The first, mystical, consists in *identifying* freedom and subjection: to will freely, in the sense of necessary freedom, enlightened by true knowledge, is to coincide with the act by which God conserves me in a relative perfection. The other tendency, pragmatic, consists in *displacing* the question, playing on the topography of substances, making my subjection to God into the origin of my mastery over and possession of nature, and more precisely of the absolute power that I can exercise over my passions. There are no fewer difficulties in either one of these theses. This is not the place to discuss them, but it is clear that, in either case, freedom can in fact only be thought as the freedom of the *subject*, of the subjected being, that is, as a contradiction in terms.

Descartes's "subject" is thus still (more than ever) the *subjectus*. But what is the *subjectus*? It is the other name of the *subditus*, according to an equivalence practiced by all medieval political theology and systematically exploited by the theoreticians of absolute monarchy: the individual submitted to the *ditio*, to the sovereign authority of a prince, an authority expressed in his orders and itself legitimated by the Word of another Sovereign (the Lord God). "It is God who has established these laws in nature, just as a king establishes laws in his kingdom," Descartes will write to Mersenne (in a letter from April 15, 1630).<sup>3</sup> It is this very dependence that constitutes him. But Descartes's subject is not the *subjectum* that is widely supposed – even if, from the point of view of the object, the meaning has to be inverted – to be permanently present from Aristotle's metaphysics to modern subjectivity.

How is it, then, that they have come to be confused?<sup>4</sup> Part of the answer obviously lies in the effect, which continues to this very day, of Kantian philosophy and its specific necessity. Heidegger, both before and after the "turn," is clearly situated in this dependence. We must return to the very letter of the *Critique of Pure Reason* if we are to discover the origin of the projection of a transcendental category of the "subject" upon the Cartesian text. This projection and the distortion it brings with it (simultaneously subtracting something from and adding something to the *cogito*) are in themselves constitutive of the "invention" of the

transcendental subject, which is inseparably a movement away from and an interpretation of Cartesianism. For the subject to appear as the originally synthetic unity of the conditions of objectivity (of "experience"), first, the *cogito* must be reformulated not only as reflexivity, but as the thesis of the "I think" that "accompanies all my representations" (that is, as the thesis of self-consciousness, which Heidegger will state as: *cogito = cogito me cogitare*); then this self-consciousness must be distinguished both from the intuition of an intelligible being and from the intuition of the "empirical ego" in "internal sense"; and finally, "the paralogism of the substantiality" of the soul must be dissolved. In other words, one and the same historico-philosophical operation *discovers the subject in the substance* of the Cartesian *cogito*, and *denounces the substance in the subject* (as transcendental illusion), thus installing Descartes in the situation of a "transition" (both ahead of and behind the time of history, conceived of as the history of the advent of the subject), upon which the philosophies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will not cease to comment.

Paraphrasing Kant himself, we can say that these formulations of the *Critique of Pure Reason* form the "unique text" from which the transcendental philosophies in particular "draw all their wisdom," for they ceaselessly reiterate the double rejection of substantiality and of phenomenality that forms the paradoxical being of the subject (being/nonbeing, in any case not a thing, not "categorizable," not "objectifiable").<sup>5</sup> And this is valid not only for the "epistemological" face of the subject, but for its practical face as well: in the last instance the transcendental subject that effectuates the nonsubstantial unity of the conditions of experience is *the same* as the one that, prescribing its acts to itself in the mode of the categorical imperative, inscribes freedom in nature (it is tempting to say that it exscribes it: Heidegger is an excellent guide on this point), that is, the same as the one identified in a teleological perspective with the humanity of man.

#### A Historical Play on Words

What is the purpose of this gloss, which has been both lengthy and schematic? It is that it is well worth the trouble, in my view, to take seriously the question "Who comes after the subject?" posed by Jean-Luc Nancy, or rather the form that Nancy was able to confer, by a radical simplification, to an otherwise rather diffuse interrogation of what is called the philosophical conjuncture, but on the condition of taking it quite literally – at the risk of getting tangled up

05/06

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Antonia Majaica and Luciana Parisi  
The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility

05/11

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Étienne Balibar  
Citizen Subject

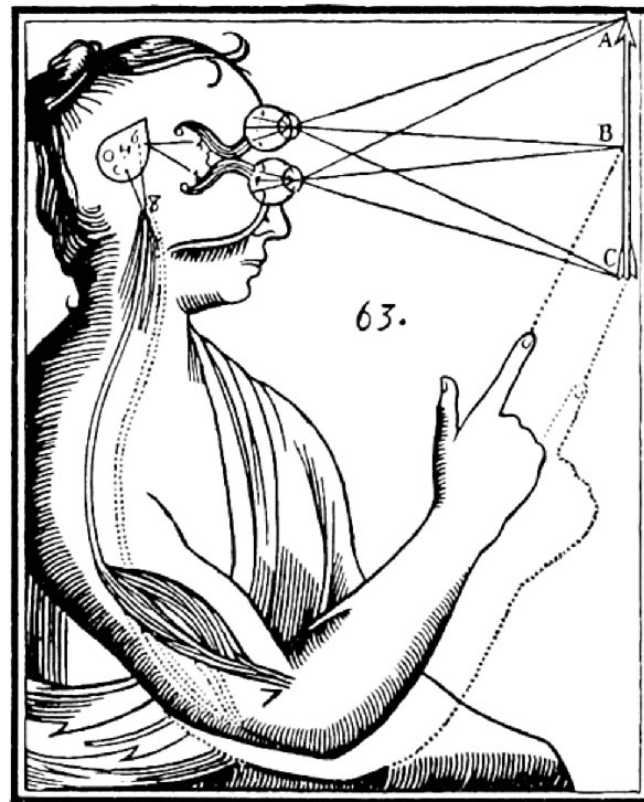
in it. Not everyone is capable of producing a truly sophisticated question, that is, one able to confront philosophy, in the medium of a given language, with the aporia of its own “founding” reflection, with the circularity of its enunciation. It is thus with the necessity and impossibility of a “decision” on which the progress of its discourse depends. With this little phrase, “Who comes after the subject?” Nancy seems to have managed the trick, for the only possible “answer” – at the same level of generality and singularity – would designate the nonsubject, whatever it may be, as “what” succeeds the subject (and thus puts an end to it). The place to which it should come, however, is *already* determined as the place of a subject by the question “who,” in other words as *the being (who is the) subject* and nothing else. And our “subject” (which is to say unavoidably ourselves, whoever we may be or believe ourselves to be, caught in the constraints of the statement) is left to ask indefinitely, “How could it be that this (not) come of me?” Let us rather examine what characterizes this form.

First of all, the question is posed *in the present tense*: a present that doubtless refers to what is “current,” and behind which we could <sup>6</sup> reconstitute a whole series of presuppositions

06/11

about the “epoch” in which we find ourselves: whether we represent it as the triumph of subjectivity or as its dissolution, as an epoch that is still progressing or as one that is coming to an end (and thus in a sense has already been left behind). Unless, precisely, these alternatives are among the preformulations whose apparent obviousness would be suspended by Nancy’s question. But there is another way to interpret such a present tense: as an *indeterminate*, if not ahistorical present, with respect to which we would not (at least not immediately) have to situate ourselves by means of a characterization of “our epoch” and its meaning, but which would only require us to ask *what comes to pass* when it comes *after* the subject, at whatever time this “event” may take place or might have taken place. This is the point of view I have chosen, for reasons that will soon become clear.

Second, the question posed is “*Who comes ... ?*” Here again, two understandings are possible. The first, which I sketched out a moment ago, is perhaps more natural to the contemporary philosopher. Beginning from a pre-comprehension of the subject such as it is constituted by transcendental philosophy (*das Subjekt*), and such as it has since been deconstructed or decentered by different



René Descartes' idea of vision, 1692. The passage of nervous impulses from the eye to the pineal gland and so to the muscles. From Rene Descartes' *Opera Philosophica (Tractatus de homine)*, 1692.

Global North is filled with either the militant paranoid apparatus enhanced by AI and algorithmic processing, or with byzantine conspiracies about it.

But while the white-male apparatus and white-male conspiracies are fixed and ossified in their impossible desire to escape and their continuous search for a transcendental realm “beyond” the instrumental, the machines have been evolving and developing their own logic. The post-cybernetic system relies on the capacity of intelligent machines to observe, evaluate, and predict the behavior of data, testing the range of effects that certain strings can have on others, while counting on the unpredictability of the results. Perhaps the general diagnosis of our current condition as one of all-pervasive data governmentality might actually be missing something.<sup>3</sup> The statistical “qualculation” subtending the infrastructure of data positivism and predictive governmentality implies the triumph of an entirely new kind of empiricism in which data is “liberated” from the static condition of the given. Data is now stretched to embrace potentiality, indeterminacy, and contingency. This new synthesis of empiricism and statistics includes the indeterminacies of information as a potential source of the unexpected. In other words, the relentless recalculations of data guarantee the possibility of discovering something new. Cognition here no longer simply corresponds to the logical steps of formal or deductive reasoning. The learning machines of the new general and distributed AI now behave as cognitive systems that are evolutive and adaptive, and that exhibit co-causal and emergent properties. This means that as the neo-empiricism of automated governance advances, automated intelligence itself develops a new form of instrumentality. Mirroring that process, we could ask: What is there to take from the very logic of contemporary *techne*? Can there in fact be something in the very *techne* of the subject, in the very “affectable” workings of the instrumental, that can go beyond the normative, universal subject of history and reinvent the subject of the political by reclaiming the unknown unknown?

It goes without saying that the clear distinction between oppressor and the oppressed, always a bit of a contingent fantasy, has become almost impossible to recover, never mind deploy effectively. Yes, the thick verticality of the algorithm regime is built on the auto-exploitation of so many entrepreneurs of the self, furiously and automatically reiterating their small serving of subjectivity until it is entirely *flattened into data* and hopelessly depleted of any other possible becoming. But perhaps it is precisely this servo-mechanics of the post-

cybernetic individual that indicates the way back into reason and politics *by other means*; that is, by repurposing *othered* and *alien* reasoning for new ends. The genealogy of such alien reasoning in instrumentality can be traced back to the famous Turing machine, which demonstrated that *techne* – the instrument itself – has its own logic and meaning, independent from the metamathematical language of universal knowledge compressible into iterative algorithmic sequences. Turing’s project collapsed the opposition between knowledge (theory, ideality) and knowing (practice, *techne*). Instead of the implementation of ideas into processing tools, with the emergence of computational logic, instrumentality itself became a productive activity or logical enquiry.

And as the incomputables were not only mathematically but also computationally evinced by and within the computational machine, this implied that the instrument demarcated the limit of a closed method of reasoning. With the mechanization of thinking and the servo-mechanic image of a causeless, empty subject, always already piloting an ever-more-efficient machine, we obfuscate a profound truth about human thinking in general: namely, that instrumentality (and not ideal truths) is the very process of subjectivity in practice.

The implementation of logic in machines therefore did not only mark the end of reasoning and the failure of deductive truths, but also the very dawn of instrumental thinking: the origination of an alien activity of automated cognition. This precious discovery of alien logic should not be conceded to the paranoid automated Leviathan of data prediction and control. Rather, we should find in it the tools to critically reclaim the unknown and the incomputable from the paranoid apparatuses of the white-male subject of humanism, and equally from a mindless trust in the error.

The project of transcending instrumentality to devise the incomputable subject implies moving towards a logic of the subject that no longer separates ideation from use, a subject that synthesizes the constructivist and the axiomatic in its becoming. And for this we need a “creative” logic that goes beyond the inductive and deductive reasoning of the paranoid data Leviathan.

If we know that today political imagination is limited by the spell of the “quantifiable,” then the logic of abduction, introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce at the beginning of the twentieth century, might have the potential to generate non-paranoid imagination and agency.<sup>4</sup> With abduction, it is possible to create semiotic chains (from non-signifying signs to meanings)

04/06

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Antonia Majaica and Luciana Parisi  
The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility

evolution of machine complexity, shouldn't we attempt to think the instrumentality of the post-cybernetic individual beyond the dualities of means and ends? Doesn't the instrument itself possess its own "ends," as Lilith does? In her case, working through one's own instrumentality becomes a form of engineering an entirely new origin that embraces and places trust in its yet incomputable, hyper-denaturalized nature. The question is what other natures – and natures' others – such radical non-dualism would require.

Instead of succumbing to the overwhelming logic of control, data positivism, and the paranoid reasoning of the algorithmically enhanced white-man cogito that is the total myth of humanism, we wish to embrace what Isabelle Stengers calls the *possible* against the *probable*. This text is thus merely an outline, an open invitation, and an attempt to instigate a critical project based in practical knowledge, which could point towards the construction of what we could call "the incomputable subject." In a sense, this is an invocation of a subject that comes to being by way of reclaiming the contingent as a mode of reasoning and as the field of the political. It is a subject that considers its means and its ends in the same plane of becoming.

What Stengers dubs the "speculative commitment" we wish to direct towards repoliticizing and reclaiming unknown unknowns from the jaws of paranoid apparatuses of capture and prediction. In the conditions of an omnipresent "data behaviorism," we feel that the unknown unknowns of both the subject and the political imagination can only be taken back and built anew by enacting a political affinity with the machine, and by way of considering its very logic. Might this affinity become a path for developing an entirely new, inhuman logic of becoming-subject capable of injecting the unknowns with entirely new alien universals, beyond the white-male constructs of paranoid humanism? The new subject can only be constructed from the hard labor of alienation, which includes understanding the logic of instrumentality, politicizing it, and transcending it through usage itself. This requires building a non-paranoid imagination, and a readiness for a radical denaturalization of both humanness and subjectivity as we know it, just as it happens with Lilith in Octavia Butler's story.

In the context of the current "daticultural revolution," as one NSA official recently dubbed the current totalitarianism of data, unknowns are foreclosed already as part of the expected procedure of capture and classification. Data is intercepted and gathered with the aim of generating "activity-based intelligence," which means that any anomaly triggers an alert for the

paranoid techno-industrial apparatus. Its default state is permanent anticipation. It is eager to strike anywhere and everywhere the unknown appears. The data provider and the data gatherer stare at each other over an abyss of fatuity, equally dull and deranged by the desperate attempt to compute the threat of the unknown. The only difference in this regime of the quantifiable is the quantity and variety of available data. Both provider and gatherer operate by inductive and deductive reasoning, without ever locating a truly new hypothesis in the process of cognition. Even though they are increasingly hard to tell apart, we could say that on the one hand the data gatherer is drowning in automated predictions guided by a hypertrophied military sense of eternal threat, while the imaginative aptitude of the data provider is reduced to the claustrophobic sense that the world is already predetermined, and that there exists a sacred code by which everything is connected in a way that can only be guessed at using cues and proxies. The guiding principle of both of these mindsets is an all-pervasive military logic that has dominated public and political discourse since the end of WWII and the rise of Cold War paranoidias, which have now transformed into the hyperbolic paranoidias of the War on Terror and the eternal hunt for "unknown unknowns."<sup>1</sup>

Any definitive resistance to datafication, to mining and profiling, will thus always appear merely as a random error in the system, as an anomaly devoid of any consistent agency. It can be hard to avoid the siren call of *error*, hard to avoid romanticizing it. But celebrating error for its own sake is a form of mystification that can only lead to depoliticized, naive triumphalism.<sup>2</sup> The fascination with errors in the system indicates, paradoxically, that the ambiance of nervous paranoia comes not from understanding that the system works, but actually from the uncanny realization that it does not, or not perfectly anyway. Its core is empty and hollow and it lacks faculties of self-reflection, self-care, and self-reform. Fault is its default setting, the rule rather than the exception.

In other words, part of our nervous anxiety is generated by the revelation that we cannot even count on the consistency of the automated Leviathan to which we have conceded our agency, even when it is "working against us." Instead the space of sovereignty is filled with competing plots and unlikely scenarios. A bizarre exchange of empty paranoidias and proliferating conspiracies takes place in the evacuated space where that historical locus of tangible authority – call it the absolute Sovereign, Leviathan, God, Law, or Father, it makes no difference – used to reign. Now, the vacuum left after the dissipation of these masculine authority figures of the

philosophies "of suspicion," different "structural" analyses, this understanding opens upon the enigma into which the *personality* of the subject leads us: the fact that it always succeeds itself across different philosophical figures or different modes of (re)presentation – which is perhaps only the mirror repetition of the way in which it always precedes itself (question: Who comes *before* the subject?). But why not follow more fully the indication given by language? If a question of identity is presupposed by Nancy's question, it is not of the form "What is the subject?" (or "What is the thing that we call the subject?"), but of the form "Who is the subject?," or even as an absolute precondition: "Who is subject?" The question is not about the *subjectum* but about the *subjectus*, he who is subjected. Not, or at least not immediately, the transcendental subject (with all its doubles: logical subject, grammatical subject, substantial subject), which is by definition a *neuter* (before becoming an it), but the subject as an individual or a person submitted to the exercise of a power, whose model is, first of all, political, and whose concept is juridical. Not the subject inasmuch as it is opposed to the predicate or object, but the one referred to by Bossuet's thesis: "All men are born subjects and the paternal authority that accustoms them to obeying accustoms them at the same time to having only one chief."<sup>7</sup>

The French (or Anglo-French) language here presents an advantage over German or even over Latin, one that is properly philosophical: it retains in the equivocal unity of a single noun the *subjectum* and the *subjectus*, the *Subjekt* and the *Untertan*. It is perhaps for lack of having paid attention to what such a continuity indicates that Heidegger proposed a fictive interpretation of the history of metaphysics in which the anteriority of the question of the *subjectus/Untertan* is "forgotten" and covered over by a retrospective projection of the question of the *Subjekt* as *subjectum*. This presentation, which marks the culmination of a long enterprise of interiorization of the history of philosophy, is today sufficiently widely accepted, even by philosophers who would not want to be called "Heideggerians" (and who often do not have the knowledge Heidegger had), for it to be useful to situate exactly the moment of forcing.

But if this is what the subject is *from the first* (both historically and logically), then the answer to Nancy's question is very simple, but so full of consequences that it might be asked whether it does not underlie every other interpretation, every reopening of the question of the subject, including the subject as transcendental subject. Here is the answer: *After the subject comes the citizen*. The citizen

(defined by his rights and duties) is that "nonsubject" who comes after the subject, and whose constitution and recognition put an end (in principle) to the subjection of the subject.

This answer does not have to be (fictively) discovered, or proposed as an eschatological wager (supposing that the subject is in decline, what can be said of his future successor?). It is already given and in all our memories. We can even give it a date: 1789, even if we know that this date and the pace it indicates are too simple to enclose the entire process of the substitution of the citizen for the subject. The fact remains that 1789 marks the irreversibility of this process – the effect of a rupture.

We also know that this answer carries with it, historically, its own justification: If the citizen comes after the subject, it is in the quality of a rehabilitation, even a restoration (implied by the very idea of a revolution). The subject is *not* the original man, and, contrary to Bossuet's thesis, men are not "born" "subjects" but "free and equal in rights." The *factual* answer, which we already have at hand (and about which it is tempting to ask why it must be periodically suspended, in the game of a question that inverts it) also contains the entire difficulty of an interpretation that makes the "subject" a nonoriginary given, a beginning that is not (and cannot be) an origin. For the origin is *not* the subject, but man. But is this interpretation the only possible one? Is it indissociable from the fact itself? I would like to devote a few provisional reflections to the interest that these questions hold for philosophy – including when philosophy is displaced from the *subjectus* to the *subjectum*.

These reflections do not tend – as will quickly be apparent – to minimize the change produced by Kant, but to ask precisely in what the necessity of this change resides, and if it is truly impossible to bypass or go beyond (and thus to understand) it – in other words, if a critique of the representation of the history of philosophy that we have inherited from Kant can only be made from the point of view of a "subject" in the Kantian sense. The answer seems to me to reside at least partially in the analysis of this "coincidence": the moment in which Kant produces (and retrospectively projects) the transcendental "subject" is precisely that moment at which politics destroys the "subject" of the prince, in order to replace him with the republican citizen.

That this isn't really a coincidence is already hinted at by the fact that the question of the subject, around which the Copernican revolution pivots, is immediately characterized as a question of right (as to knowledge and as to action). In this question of right, the

03/06

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Antonia Majaica and Luciana Parisi  
The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility

07/11

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Étienne Balibar  
Citizen Subject

representation of “man,” about whom we have just noted that he forms the teleological horizon of the subject, vacillates. What is to be found under this name is not *de facto* man, subjected to various internal and external powers, but *de jure* man (who could still be called the man of man or the man in man, and who is also the empirical nonman), whose autonomy corresponds to the position of a “universal legislator.” Which, to be brief, brings us back to the answer evoked above: after the subject (*subjectus*) comes the citizen. But is this citizen immediately what Kant will name “subject” (*Subjekt*)? Or is not the latter rather the reinscription of the citizen in a philosophical and, beyond that, anthropological space, which evokes the defunct subject or the prince even while displacing it? We cannot respond directly to these questions, which are inevitably raised by the letter of the Kantian invention once the context of its moment is restored. We must first make a detour through history. Who is the subject of the prince? And who is the citizen who comes after the subject?

### The Subject of Obedience

It would be impossible to enclose the “*subjectus*” in a single definition, for it is a matter of a juridical figure whose evolution is spread out over seventeen centuries, from Roman jurisprudence to absolute monarchy. It has often been demonstrated how, in the political history of Western Europe, the time of *subjects* coincides with that of *absolutism*. Absolutism, in effect, seems to give a complete and coherent form to a power that is founded only upon itself, and that is founded as being without limits (thus uncontrollable and irresistible by definition). Such a power truly makes men into subjects, and nothing but subjects, for the very being of the subject is obedience. From the point of view of the subject, power’s claim to incarnate both the good and the true is entirely justified: the subject is he who has no need of *knowing*, much less *understanding*, why what is prescribed to him is in the interest of his own happiness. Nevertheless, this perspective is deceptive: rather than a coherent form, classical absolutism is a knot of contradictions, and this can also be seen at the level of theory, in its discourse. Absolutism never manages to stabilize its definition of obedience and thus its definition of the subject. It could be asked why this is necessarily the case, and what consequences result from it for the “surpassing” or “negation” of the subject in the citizen (if we should ever speak of sublation (*relève*) it is now: the citizen is a subject who rises up (*qui se relève*)!). In order to answer this question we

must sketch a historical genesis of the subject and his contradiction.

The first question would be to know how one moves from the adjective to the substantive, from individuals who *are* subjected to the power of another, to the representation of a people or of a community as a set of “subjects.” The distinction between independent and dependent persons is fundamental in Roman jurisprudence. A single text will suffice to recall it:

*Sequitur de jure personarum alia divisio. Nam quaedam personae juris sunt, quaedam alieno juri sunt subjectae. Sed rursus earum personarum quae alieno juri subjectae sunt, aliae in potestate, aliae in manum, aliae in mancipio sunt. Videamus nunc de iis quae alieno juri subjectae sint, si cognoverimus quae istae personae sunt, simul intellegemus quae sui juris sint.*

We come to another classification in the law of persons. Some people are independent and some are subject to others. Again, of those persons who are dependent, some are in power, some in marital subordination and some in bondage. Let us examine the dependent category. If we find out who is dependent, we cannot help seeing who is independent.<sup>8</sup>

Strangely, it is by way of the definition (the dialectical division) of the forms of subjection that the definition of free men, the masters, is obtained *a contrario*. But this definition does not make the subjects into a *collectivity*; it establishes no “link” *among them*. The notions of *potestas*, *manus*, and *mancipium* are not sufficient to do this. The subjects are not the heterogeneous set formed by slaves, plus legitimate children, plus wives, plus acquired or adopted relatives. What is required is an *imperium*. Subjects thus appeared with the empire (and in relation to the person of the emperor, to whom the citizens and many noncitizens owe “service,” *officium*). But I would surmise that this necessary condition is not a sufficient one: Romans still had to be able to be submitted to the *imperium* in the same way (if they ever were) as conquered populations, “subjects of the Roman people” (a confusion that points, contradictorily, toward the horizon of the generalization of Roman citizenship as a personal status in the empire).<sup>9</sup> And, above all, the *imperium* had to be theologically founded as a Christian *imperium*, a power that comes from God and is conserved by Him.<sup>10</sup>

In effect, the subject has two major

08/11

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Étienne Balibar  
Citizen Subject

02/06



Detail from 1988 cover of *Dawn*, the first book of Octavia Butler's Lilith's Brood trilogy. Illustration by George Underwood.

Antonia Majaca and Luciana Parisi  
**The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility**

01/06

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Antonia Majaca and Luciana Parisi  
**The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility**

In Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* trilogy, Lilith Iyapo, an African-American woman, awakens in a cell many centuries after the human race has effectively destroyed itself with nuclear weapons. She has been taken, together with a small number of other survivors, by the Oankali, a nomadic alien species searching the universe for new genetic information to expand their intelligence. The Oankali have repaired the Earth and now the remaining humans must combine their DNA with the Oankali's third sex in order to redesign a new race purged of humanity's self-destructive, hierarchical tendencies. Lilith must become the mother of a new, inhuman race in order for humans, in whatever form, to survive on Earth.

As one of the famous points of entry into Afrofuturism, Butler's writings allegorize the normative patriarchy and the alienated condition of black people the racist culture of the United States, and reflect the Cold War's pervasive threat of nuclear disaster. At the same time, *Xenogenesis* – the trilogy's original title – introduces a new approach to the feminist critique of biopolitical instrumentality. Rather than simply refusing instrumentality, the figure of the Promethean woman here comes into being by fully acknowledging instrumentality, politicizing it, and ultimately transcending it. Instead of rejecting the dream of autonomy from the gods, *Xenogenesis* – or the promise of an alien beginning – implies reversing the very understanding of instrumentality. In other words, Lilith embraces her abduction and starts to reason with the instrument and from within the logic of the instrument towards an *unknown unknown*, a previously unthinkable and entirely alien model of subjectivation.

What might such reasoning with and from the instrument mean in an age in which highly automatized vertical apparatuses of capture, classification, and control provide a complex and distributed infrastructure for increasingly self-sufficient forms of algorithmic governmentality? What would it mean, in this particular phase of the development of machine intelligence, to take the instrument/machine seriously? What conceptual tools might we need to initiate thinking from within the machine and from within the very logic of the instrument? Could such a prospect be the basis for thinking beyond the control loops of the post-cybernetic age?

If it is true that the individual is caught in a circle of continuous undulation between enslavement and liberation, trapped in the paradox of simultaneously being her own master and slave, can learning from the logic of the machine provide a path for a new, alien beginning? And if it is true that instrumentality as such has developed its own logic through the

characteristics, both of which lead to aporias (in particular in the form given them by absolute monarchy): he is a *subditus*; he is not a *servus*. These characteristics are reciprocal, but each has its own dialectic.

The subject is a *subditus*: This means that he enters into a relation of obedience. Obedience is not the same as a compulsion: it is something more. It is established not only between a chief who has the power to compel and those who must submit to his power, but between a *sublimis*, "chosen" to command, and *subditi*, who turn towards him to hear a law. The power to compel is distributed throughout a hierarchy of unequal powers (relations of *majoritas minoritas*). Obedience is the principle, identical to itself along the whole length of the hierarchical chain, and attached in the last instance to its transcendental origin, which makes those who obey into the members of a single body. Obedience institutes the command of higher over lower, but it fundamentally comes from below: as *subditi*, the subjects *will* their own obedience. And if they will it, it is because it is inscribed in an economy of creation (their creation) and salvation (their salvation, that of each taken individually and of all taken collectively). Thus the *loyal subject* (*fidèle sujet*) (he who "voluntarily," "loyally," that is, actively and willingly obeys the law and executes the orders of a legitimate sovereign) is necessarily a faithful subject (*sujet fidèle*). He is a Christian, who knows that all power comes from God. In obeying the law of the prince he obeys God.<sup>11</sup> The fact that the order to which he "responds" comes to him from *beyond* the individual and the mouth that utters it is constitutive of the subject.

This structure contains the seeds of an infinite dialectic, which is in fact what unifies the subject (in the same way as it unifies, in the person of the sovereign, the act and its sanctification, decision making and justice): because of it the subject does not have to ask (himself) any questions, for the answers have always already been given. But it is also what *divides* the subject. This occurs, for example, when a "spiritual power" and a "temporal power" vie for preeminence (which supposes that each also attempts to appropriate the attributes of the other), or, more simply, when knowing which sovereign is legitimate or which practice of government is "Christian" and thus, in conformity with its essence, becomes a real question (the very idea of a "right of resistance" being a contradiction in terms, the choice is between regicide and prayer for the conversion of the sovereign ...). Absolute monarchy in particular develops a contradiction that can be seen as the culmination of the conflict between the temporal power and the spiritual power. A

09/11

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016 Étienne Balibar  
**Citizen Subject**

passage is made from the divine right of kings to the idea of their direct election: It is as such that royal power is made divine (and that the State transfers to itself the various sacraments). But not (at least not in the West) the *individual person* of the king: incarnation of a divine power, the king is not himself "God." The king (the sovereign) is *lex animata* (*nomos empsychos*) (just as the law is *inanimatus princeps*). Thus the person (the "body") of the king must itself be divided: into divine person and human person. And obedience correlatively ...<sup>12</sup>

Such an obedience, in its unity and its divisions, implies the notion of the soul. This is a notion that Antiquity did not know or in any case did not use in the same way in order to think a political relation (Greek does not have, to my knowledge, an equivalent for the *subjectus subditus*, not even the term *hypekoos*, which designates those who obey the word of a master, who will become "disciples," and from whom the theologians will draw the same of Christian obedience: *hypakoè*). For Antiquity obedience can be a contingent situation in which one finds oneself in relation to a command (*archè*), and thus a commander (*Archon*). But to receive a command (*archemenos*) implies that one can oneself – at least theoretically – give a command (this is the Aristotelian definition of the citizen). Or it can be a natural dependence of the "familial" type. Doubtless differentiations (the ignorance of which is what properly characterizes barbarism) ought to be made here: the woman (even for the Greeks, and a fortiori for the Romans) is not a slave. Nevertheless, these differences can be subsumed under analogous oppositions: the part and the whole, passivity and activity, the body and the soul (or intellect). This last opposition is particularly valid for the slave, who is to his master what a body, an "organism" (a set of natural tools) is to intelligence. In such a perspective, the very idea of a "free obedience" is a contradiction in terms. That a slave can *also* be free is a relatively late (Stoic) idea, which must be understood as signifying that on *another* level (in a "cosmic" polity, a polity of "minds") he who is a slave here can also be a master (master of himself, of his passions), can also be a "citizen." Nothing approaches the idea of a freedom residing in obedience itself, resulting from this obedience. In order to conceive of this idea, obedience must be transferred to the side of the soul, and the soul must cease to be thought of as natural. On the contrary, the soul must come to name a supernatural part of the individual that hears the dignity of the order.

Thus the *subditus-subjectus* has always been distinguished from the slave, just as the sovereignty of the prince, the *sublimus*, has been

distinguished from “despotism” (literally, the authority of a master of slaves).<sup>13</sup> But this fundamental distinction was elaborated in two ways. It was elaborated within a theological framework, simply developing the idea that the subject is a believer, a Christian. Because, in the final instance, it is his soul that obeys, he could never be the sovereign’s “thing” (which can be used and abused); his obedience is inscribed in an order that should, in the end, bring him salvation, and that is counterbalanced by a responsibility (a duty) on the part of the prince. But this way of thinking the freedom of the subject is, in practice, extraordinarily ambivalent. It can be understood either as the affirmation and the active contribution of his will to obedience (just as the Christian, by his works, “cooperates in his salvation”: the political necessity of the theological compromise on the question of predestination can be seen here), or as the annihilation of the will (this is why the mystics who lean toward perfect obedience apply their will to self-annihilation in the contemplation of God, the only absolute sovereign). Intellectual reasons as well as material interests (those of the lords, of the corporations, of the “bourgeois” towns) provide an incentive for thinking the freedom of the subject differently, paradoxically combining the concept with that of the “citizen,” a concept taken from Antiquity and notably from Aristotle, but carefully distinguished from man inasmuch as he is the image of the creator.

Thus the *civis polites* comes back onto the scene, in order to make the quasi-ontological difference between a “subject” and a serf/slave. But the man designated as a citizen is no longer the *zoon politikon*: he is no longer the “sociable animal,” meaning that he is sociable as an animal (and not inasmuch as his soul is immortal). Thomas Aquinas distinguishes the (supernatural) *christianitas* of man from his (natural) *humanitas*, the “believer” from the “citizen.” The latter is the holder of a neutral freedom, a “franchise.” This has nothing in common with sovereignty, but means that his submission to political authority is neither immediate nor arbitrary. He is *submitted* as a member of an order or a body that is recognized as having certain rights and that confers a certain status, a field of initiative, upon him. What then becomes of the “subject”? In a sense, he is more really free (for his subjection is the effect of a political order that integrates “civility,” the “polity,” and that is thus inscribed in nature). But it becomes more and more difficult to think him as *subditus*: the very concept of his “obedience” is menaced.

The tension becomes, once again, a contradiction under absolute monarchy. We have

already seen how the latter brings the mysterious unity of the temporal and spiritual sovereign to the point of rupture. The same goes for the freedom of the subject. Insofar as absolute monarchy concentrates power in the unity of the “State” (the term appears at this moment, along with “reason”) and suppresses all subjections to the profit of one subjection. There is now only one prince, whose law is will, “father of his subjects,” having absolute authority over them (as all other authority, next to his, is null). “I am the State,” Louis XIV will say. But absolute monarchy is a *State* power, precisely, that is, a power that is instituted and exercised by law and administration; it is a political power (*imperium*) that is not confused with the property (dominium) – except “eminent” domain – of what belongs to individuals, and over which they exercise their power. The subjects are, if not “legal subjects (*sujets de droit*),” at least subjects “with rights (*en droit*),” members of a “republic” (a Commonwealth, Hobbes will say). All the theoreticians of absolute monarchy (with or without a “pact of subjection”) will explain that the subjects are citizens (or, like Bodin in the *Republic*, that “every citizen is a subject, his freedom being somewhat diminished by the majesty of the one to whom he owes obedience; but not every subject is a citizen, as we have said of the slave”).<sup>14</sup> They will not prevent – with the help of circumstances – the condition of this “free (franc) subject dependent upon the sovereignty of another”<sup>15</sup> from being perceived as untenable. La Boétie, reversing each term, will oppose them by defining the power of the One (read: the Monarch) as a “voluntary servitude” upon which at the same time reason of State no longer confers the meaning of a supernatural freedom. The controversy over the difference (or lack of one) between absolutism and despotism accompanies the whole history of absolute monarchy.<sup>16</sup> The condition of subject will be retrospectively identified with that of the slave, and subjection with “slavery,” from the point of view of the new citizen and his revolution (this will also be an essential mechanism of his own idealization).

×

*This essay was first published in English as “Citizen Subject,” in Who Comes after the Subject? ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 33–57. Copyright 1991. Reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, a division of Informa plc. Translated by James Swenson*

10/11

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016  
Étienne Balibar  
Citizen Subject

1  
This excerpt is the first half of the introductory essay for Balibar’s *Citizen Subject*, with is published this month in English by Fordham University press.

2  
Letter by Descartes to Christine, 3 November 1645, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1969), 4:333. Cited by Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981), 411.

3  
*Oeuvres de Descartes*, 1: 145.

4  
I am aware that is a matter of opposing them: but in order to oppose them directly, as the recto and verso, the permanence of a single question (of a single “opening”) must be supposed, beyond the question of the *subjectus*, which falls into the ashcan of the “history of being.”

5  
Applying it to Kant himself if need be: for the fate of this problematic – by the very fact that the transcendental subject is a limit, even *the* limit as such, declared to be constitutive is to observe that there always remains some substance or some phenomenality in that it must be *reduced*.

6  
As Nancy himself suggests in the considerations of his letter of invitation, from which I reproduce a key passage: “This question can be explained as follows: one of the major characteristics of contemporary thought is the putting into question of the instance of the ‘subject,’ according to the structure, the meaning, and the value subsumed under this term in modern thought from Descartes to Hegel, if not to Husserl. The inaugurating decisions of contemporary thought ... have all involved putting subjectivity on trial. A widespread discourse of recent date proclaimed the subject’s simple liquidation. Everything seems, however, to point to the necessity, not of a ‘return to the subject’ ... but on the contrary, of a move forward toward someone – *some one* – else in his place (this last expression is obviously a mere convenience: the ‘place’ could not be the same). Who would it be? How would s/he present him/herself? Can we name him/her? Is the question ‘who’ suitable? ... In other words: If it is appropriate to assign something like a punctuality, a singularity, or a hereness (*haecceitas*) as the place of emission, reception, or transition (or affect, of action, of language, etc.), how would one designate its specificity? Or would the question need to be transformed – or is it in fact out of place to ask it?” Jean-Luc Nancy, *Who Comes After the Subject?*, 5.

7  
Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Politique tirée de des propres paroles de l’Écriture sainte*, ed. Jacques Le Brun (Geneva: Droz, 1967), 53. Bossuet states: “All men are born subjects.” Descartes says: There are *innate* ideas, which God has always already planted in my soul, as seeds of truth, whose *nature* (that of being eternal truths) is contemporaneous with my *nature* (for God creates or conserves them at every moment just as he creates or conserves me), and which at bottom are entirely enveloped in the infinity of that envelops all my true ideas, beginning with the first: my thinking existence.

8  
*The Institutes of Gaius*, trans. W. M. Gordon and O. F. Robinson (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., Ltd., 1988), §48, 45.

9  
See Christian Bruschi, “Le droit de cité dans l’Antiquité: Un questionnement pour la citoyenneté aujourd’hui,” in *La citoyenneté et les changements de structures sociales et nationales de la population française*, ed. Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, 125–153 (n.p.: Edilig/Fondation Diderot, 1988).

10  
Emmanuel Terray suggests to me that this is one of the reasons for Constantine’s rallying to Pauline Christianity (“All power comes from God”: see *Epistle to the Romans*).

11  
On all of these points, see, for example, Walter Ullman, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), and *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1965).

12  
On all this, see Ernst Kantorowicz, *Frederick the Second, 1194–1250*, trans. E. O. Lorimer (New York: Ungar, 1957); *The King’s Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960); *Selected Studies* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1965).

13  
How does one get from the Roman *servus* to the medieval *serf*? Doubtless by a change in the “mode of production” (even though it is doubtless that, from the strict point of view of production, each of these terms corresponds to a single mode). But this change presupposes or implies that the “serf” also has an immortal soul included in the economy of salvation; this is why he is attached to the land rather than to the master.

14  
Jean Bodin, *Les six livres de la République*, vol. 1, §6 (Paris: Fayard, 1986), 114.

15  
Ibid., 1:112.

16  
See Alain Grosrichard, *The Sultan’s Court: European Fantasies of the East*, trans. Liz Heron, intro. Mladen Dolar (New York: Verso, 1998).

11/11

e-flux journal #77 — november 2016  
Étienne Balibar  
Citizen Subject