



Duty Free Art  
Hito Steyerl  
Art in the Age  
of Planetary  
Civil War

## Duty Free Art

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Hito Steyerl

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*Acknowledgments*  
*Notes*

## A Tank on a Pedestal

*I love history.  
But history doesn't love me back,  
Whenever I call her I get her answering machine.  
She says: "Insert logo here."*

A tank on a pedestal. Fumes are rising from the engine. A Soviet battle tank—called IS3 for Iosip Stalin—is being repurposed by a group of pro-Russian separatists in Konstantinovka, Eastern Ukraine. It is driven off a World War II memorial pedestal and promptly goes to war. According to a local militia, it “attacked a checkpoint in Ulyanovka, Krasnoarmeysk district, resulting in three dead and three wounded on the Ukrainian side, and no losses on our side.”<sup>1</sup>

One might think that the active historical role of a tank would be over once it became part of a historical display. But this pedestal seems to have acted as temporary storage from which the tank could be redeployed directly into battle. Apparently, the way into the museum—or even into history itself—is not a one-way street. Is the museum a garage? An arsenal? Is a monument pedestal a military base?

But this opens up more general questions. How can one think of art institutions in an age that is defined by planetary civil war, growing inequality, and proprietary digital technology? The boundaries of the institution have become fuzzy. They extend



from pumping the audience for tweets, to a future of “neurocurating” in which paintings will surveil their audience via facial recognition and eye tracking to check whether the paintings are popular enough or whether anyone is behaving suspiciously.

Is it possible, in this situation, to update the twentieth-century terminology of institutional critique? Or does one need to look for different models and prototypes? What is a model anyway, under such conditions? How does it link on-and off-screen realities, mathematics and aesthetics, future and past, reason and treason? And what is its role in a global chain of projection as production?

In the example of the kidnapped tank, history invades the hypercontemporary. It is not an account of events post factum. It acts, it feigns, it keeps on changing. History is a shape-shifting player, if not an irregular combatant. It keeps attacking from behind. It blocks off any future. Frankly, this kind of history sucks.

This history is not a noble endeavor, something to be studied in the name of humankind so as to avoid being repeated. On the contrary, this kind of history is partial, partisan, and privatized, a self-interested enterprise, a means to feel entitled, an objective obstacle to coexistence, and a temporal fog detaining people in the stranglehold of imaginary origins.<sup>2</sup> The tradition of the oppressed turns into a phalanx of oppressive traditions.<sup>3</sup>

Does time itself run backwards nowadays? Did someone remove its forward gear and force it to drive around in circles? History seems to have morphed into a loop.

In such a situation, one might be tempted to rehash Marx’s idea of historical repetition as farce. Marx thought that historical repetition—let alone reenactments—produces ludicrous results.

However, quoting Marx, or indeed any historical figure, would itself constitute repetition, if not farce.

So let's turn to Tom Cruise and Emily Blunt instead, which is more helpful. In the blockbuster *Edge of Tomorrow*, the Earth has been invaded by a savage alien species known as Mimics. While trying to get rid of them, Blunt and Cruise get stuck in a time-looped battle; they get killed over and over again, only to respawn with sunrise. They have to find a way out of the loop. Where does the Mimic-in-chief live? Underneath the Louvre's pyramid! This is where Blunt and Cruise go to destroy him.

The enemy is inside the museum, or more accurately, underneath it. The Mimics have hijacked the place and turned time into a loop. But what does the form of the loop mean, and how is it linked to warfare? Giorgio Agamben has recently analyzed the Greek term *stasis*, which means both civil war and immutability: something potentially very dynamic, but also its absolute opposite.<sup>4</sup> Today, multiple conflicts seem to be mired in stasis, in both senses of the term. Stasis describes a civil war that is unresolved and drags on. Conflict is not a means to force a resolution of a disputed situation, but a tool to sustain it. A stagnant crisis is the point. It needs to be indefinite because it is an abundant source of profit: instability is a gold mine without bottom.<sup>5</sup>

Stasis happens as a perpetual transition between the private and public spheres. It is a very useful mechanism for a one-way redistribution of assets. What was public is privatized by violence, while formerly private hatreds become the new public spirit.

The current version of stasis is set in an age of cutting-edge nonconventional warfare. Contemporary conflicts are fought by Uber-militias, bank-sponsored bot armies, and Kickstarter-

funded toy drones. Their protagonists wear game gear and extreme sports gadgets, and they coordinate with *Vice* reporters via WhatsApp. The result is a patchwork form of conflict that uses pipelines and 3G as weapons within widespread proxy stalemates. The present permawar is fought by historical battle reenactors (in the Ukrainian example, on both sides of the conflict), who one could well call real-life Mimics.<sup>6</sup> Stasis is the curving back of time into itself, in the context of permanent war and privatization. The museum leaks the past into the present, and history becomes severely corrupted and limited.

Alfonso Cuarón's brilliant film *Children of Men* presents another way that art institutions might respond to planetary civil war.<sup>7</sup> It depicts a bleak near-future where humanity has become sterile. A planetary civil war has engulfed Britain, dividing the island into segregated zones, one for refugees and undocumented persons—a total dystopia—and another for citizens. Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern has become the home of the Ministry of the Arts; here, precious artworks are given a safe haven: an Ark of the Arts. In one scene set in Turbine Hall, Michelangelo's *David* is shown with a broken leg, perhaps damaged during the conflict.

The destruction of antiquities by Daesh (also known as ISIS or Islamic State), which was preceded by major destruction and the looting of cultural objects during the US invasion in Iraq, raises the question: Wouldn't it be great to have an Ark of the Arts that could rescue the antiquities of Palmyra or Nineveh and safeguard cultural treasures from violence?

However, the Ark of the Arts is a quite ambivalent institution. One is never quite sure what its function really is. In another scene, Picasso's *Guernica* is used as a decoration for a private dinner.<sup>8</sup> The Ark of the Arts might be an institution that has

become so secure that the only people permitted to see the artworks are the Ark's directors, their children, and their servants. But it could also be an evolution of international freeport art storage, where artworks disappear into the invisibility of tax-free storage cubes.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the international biennial, duty free art storage is probably the most important contemporary active form for art. It's like the dystopian backside of the biennial, at a time when liberal dreams of globalization and cosmopolitanism have been realized as a multipolar mess peopled with oligarchs, warlords, too-big-to-fail corporations, dictators, and lots of newly stateless people.<sup>10</sup>

In the late twentieth century, globalization was described as a formula: the value of civil society multiplied by the internet divided by migration, metropolitan urbanism, the power of NGOs, and other forms of transnational political organization.<sup>11</sup> Saskia Sassen characterized those activities as "citizen practices that go beyond the nation."<sup>12</sup> The internet was still full of hope and people believed in it. This was long ago.

The organizational forms pioneered by human rights NGOs and liberal women's rights campaigns are now deployed by oligarch-funded fascist battalions, GoPro jihadi units, displaced dudes playing Forex exchanges, and internet trolls posing as feng shui Eurasians.<sup>13</sup> In their wake, para-statelets and anti-"terrorist" operation zones emerge alongside duty free zones, offshore entities, and corporate proxy concessions.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, horizontal networks are turned into global fiber-optic surveillance: the planetary civil war is fought by engaging with the logistic disruptions of planetary computerization. Contemporary cosmopolitans do not fail to promptly engage in civil warfare whenever the chance presents itself. Every digital

tool imaginable is put to work: bot armies, Western Union, Telegram,<sup>15</sup> PowerPoint presentations, jihadi forum gamification<sup>16</sup>—whatever works. Stasis acts as a mechanism that converts the “cosmo” of “cosmopolitan” into “corporate” and the polis into property.

The corresponding institutional model for art is freeport art storage, built on tax-exempt status and tactical extraterritoriality. *Children of Men* shows how this model could become a template for public institutions amid the effects of planetary civil war, securing artworks to the point of withdrawal. While the international biennial was the active form of art for late twentieth-century ideas of globalization, duty free art storage and the terror-proof hypersecure bunker are its equivalent in the age of globalizing stasis and pop-up NATO fence borders. But this is not a necessary or inevitable outcome.



Consider how *Guernica* was hung during a previous global civil war.

*Guernica* was made for the Spanish Republic’s pavilion at the 1937 World Expo in Paris, to show the results of airstrikes on civilian populations. In terms of conservation, this was a lousy decision indeed. The painting was hung more or less outdoors for quite some time.

In the future projected by *Children of Men*, Picasso's painting finds shelter from the mayhem of war in a private dining room. The painting might be "safe," and it certainly enjoys a climate-controlled atmosphere, but very few people will see it. In the historical civil war, however, a completely opposite decision was made: to expose the painting, to literally *put it out there*. After all, in French and other Latin languages, a show is called an "exposition." Not an imposition.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of conservation, the scenario in *Children of Men* is contradictory, because the first thing that has to be conserved or even created is a situation where art can be seen and accessed. Why is this so? Because art is not art if it cannot be seen. And if it is not art, there is no point in conserving it. More than the artworks themselves, the thing that's threatened by the institutional response to civil war—be it privatization or overprotection—is public access. But it is public access, to a certain degree, that makes art what it is in the first place, thus necessitating its conservation. Hence the contradiction: art requires visibility to be what it is, and yet this visibility is precisely what is threatened by efforts to preserve or privatize it.

But there is something wrong here. The Spanish Republic's pavilion is, after all, an example from 1937. Am I not lapsing into bad old nostalgic Zombie Marxism here? Isn't this repetition as farce?

The answer is no. Let's come back to *Edge of Tomorrow* to see how it solves the problem of the loop. It offers an unexpected solution to the problem of stasis, to escaping from history-as-repetition. The movie is based on the novel *All You Need Is Kill* by Hiroshi Sakurazaka, which built a narrative out of the experience of hitting the reset button on a video-game console. So it is no coincidence that the movie narrates the impasse of a gamer

being stuck, unable to complete a given level. But gamers are used to this: it is their mission to get to the next level. A gamer is not a reenactor. She doesn't derive pleasure from having to play the same level over and over again or endlessly reenacting historical models. She will go online and look up a forum to figure out how to beat the level and move on. In gaming (most games at least) there is an exit for each level, each repeated sequence, each loop. Most likely there is a weapon or a tool hidden in some cupboard, and this can be used to vanquish whatever enemy and complete the level. *Edge of Tomorrow* not only maintains that there is a tomorrow, but that we are positioned at its edge, that it is possible to complete the level and to break free from the loop. Gaming can evolve into playing. And here, the ambiguity of "play" is helpful. On the one hand, play is about rules, which must be mastered if one is to proceed. On the other, play is also about the improvised creation of new, common rules. So reenactment is scrapped in favor of gaming moving towards play, which may or may not be another form of acting.

What does all this mean for the museum? First of all, one could say that history only exists if there is a tomorrow—if tanks remain locked up within historical collections and time moves on. The future only happens if history doesn't occupy and invade the present. The museum must render the tank useless upon entry, the way old cannons are filled with cement before being displayed in parks. Otherwise, the museum becomes an instrument for prolonging stasis by preserving the tyranny of a partial, partisan history, which also turns out to be a great business opportunity.

But what does this have to do with the Spanish pavilion? It's very simple. There was one detail I didn't mention but which is

very obvious if you think about it. In 1937, *Guernica* was new. It was a newly commissioned artwork dealing with the present. The curators didn't pick *Desastres de la Guerra* by Goya or another historical work, even though it might have fit perfectly too. They commissioned new pieces and educational setups to speak about the present. To reactivate that model, one has to do the same. If one wants to reactivate this history, it needs to be different. On the next level. With new works. In the present. This is a huge endeavor of course, one that goes far beyond the task of the museum as it is usually understood. It enters into the project of re-creating not only the city, but society itself. And here, we again encounter the idea of play. To play is to re-actualize the rules as one goes along. Or to create rules that demand new actualization every time. There is a continuum between games and play. Both need rules. On one end of the spectrum there is a looped form. On the other, an open one.<sup>18</sup>

To summarize these ideas about museums, history, and the planetary civil war: history only exists if there is a tomorrow. And, conversely, a future only exists if the past is prevented from permanently leaking into the present and if Mimics of all sorts are defeated. Consequently, museums have less to do with the past than with the future: conservation is less about preserving the past than it is about creating the future of public space, the future of art, and the future as such.



## 2

### How to Kill People: A Problem of Design

I saw the future. It was empty. A clean slate, flat, designed through and through.

In his 1963 film *How to Kill People* designer George Nelson argues that killing is a matter of design, next to fashion and homemaking. Nelson states that design is crucial in improving both the form and function of weapons. It deploys aesthetics to improve lethal technology.



An accelerated version of the design of killing recently went on trial in this city. Its old town was destroyed, expropriated, in parts eradicated. Young locals claiming autonomy started an insurgency. Massive state violence squashed it, claimed buildings, destroyed neighborhoods, strangled movement,

hopes for devolution, secularism, and equality. Other cities fared worse. Many are dead. Elsewhere, operations were still ongoing. No, this city is not in Syria. Not in Iraq either. Let's call it the old town for now. Artifacts found in the area date back to the Stone Age.

The future design of killing is already in action here.

It is accelerationist, articulating soft- and hardwares, combining emergency missives, programs, forms and templates. Tanks are coordinated with databases, chemicals meet excavators, social media come across tear gas, languages, special forces and managed visibility.

*In the streets children were playing with a dilapidated computer keyboard thrown out onto a pile of stuff and debris. It said "Fun City" in big red letters. In the twelfth century one of the important predecessors of computer technology and cybernetics had lived in the old town. Scholar Al-Jazari devised many automata and pieces of cutting-edge engineering.<sup>1</sup> One of his most astonishing designs is a band of musical robots floating on a boat in a lake, serving drinks to guests. Another one of his devices is seen as anticipating the design of programmable machines.<sup>2</sup> He wrote the so-called "Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices," featuring dozens of inventions in the areas of hydropower, medicine, engineering, timekeeping, music, and entertainment. Now, the area where these designs were made is being destroyed.*

Warfare, construction and destruction literally take place behind screens—under cover—requiring planning and installation. Blueprints were designed. Laws bent and sculpted. Minds both numbed and incited by the media glare of permanent emergency. The design of killing orchestrates military, housing, and religiously underpinned population policies. It shifts gears

across emergency measures, land registers, pimped passions, and curated acts of daily harassment and violence. It deploys trolls, fiduciaries, breaking news, and calls to prayer. People are rotated in and out of territories, ranked by affinity to the current hegemony. The design of killing is smooth, participatory, progressing and aggressive, supported by irregulars and occasional machete killings. It is strong, brash, striving for purity and danger. It quickly reshuffles both its allies and its enemies. It quashes the dissimilar and dissenting. It is asymmetrical, multidimensional, overwhelming, ruling from a position of aerial supremacy.

*After the fighting had ended, the curfew continued. Big white plastic sheets were covering all entrances to the area to block any view of the former combat zones. An army of bulldozers was brought in. Construction became the continuation of warfare with other means. The rubble of the torn down buildings was removed by workers brought in from afar, partly rumored to be dumped into the river, partly stored in highly guarded landfills far from the city center. Parents were said to dig for their missing children's bodies in secret. They had joined the uprising and were unaccounted for. Some remnants of barricades still remained in the streets, soaked with the smell of dead bodies.*



*Special forces roamed about arresting anyone who seemed to be taking pictures. "You can't erase them," said one. "Once you take them they are directly uploaded to the cloud."*



A 3D render video of reconstruction plans was released while the area was still under curfew. Render ghosts patrol a sort of tidied gamescape built in traditional-looking styles, omitting signs of the different cultures and religions that had populated the city since antiquity. Images of destruction are replaced with digital renders of happy playgrounds and Haussmannized walkways by way of misaligned wipes.

The video uses wipes to transition from one state to another, from present to future, from elected municipality to emergency rule,<sup>3</sup> from working-class neighborhood to prime real estate. Wipes as a filmic means are a powerful political symbol. They show displacement by erasure, or more precisely, replacement. They clear one image by shoving in another and pushing the old one out of sight. They visually wipe out the initial population, the buildings, elected representatives, and property rights in order to "clear" the space and fill it with a more convenient population, a more culturally homogeneous cityscape, a more aligned administration and homeowners. According to the simulation, the void in the old town would be intensified by expensive newly built developments rehashing bygone templates, rendering the

city as a site for consumption, possession, and conquest. The objects of this type of design are ultimately the people and, as Brecht said, their deposition (or disposal, if deemed necessary). The wipe is the filmic equivalent of this. The design of killing is a permanent coup against the non-compliant part of people, against resistant human systems and economies.



So, where is this old town? It is in Turkey: Diyarbakir, the unofficial capital of the Kurdish-populated regions. Worse cases exist all over the region. The interesting thing is not that these events happen. They happen all the time, continuously. The interesting thing is that most people think that they are perfectly normal. Disaffection is part of the overall design structure, as well as the feeling that all of this is too difficult to comprehend and too specific to unravel. Yet this place seems to be designed as a unique case that just follows its own rules, if any. It is not

included in the horizon of a shared humanity; it is designed as a singular case, a small-scale singularity.<sup>4</sup>

So let's take a few steps back to draw more general conclusions. What does this specific instance of the design of killing mean for the idea of design as a whole?

One could think of Martin Heidegger's notion of being-toward-death (*Dasein zum Tode*), the embeddedness of death within life. Similarly, we could talk in this case about "*Design zum Tode*," or a type of design in which death is the all-encompassing horizon, founding a structure of meaning that is strictly hierarchical and violent.<sup>5</sup>

But something else is blatantly apparent as well, and it becomes tangible through the lens of filmic recording. Imagine a bulldozer doing its work recorded on video. It destroys buildings and tears them to the ground. Now imagine the same recording being played backwards. It will show something very peculiar, namely a bulldozer that actually constructs a building. You will see that dust and debris will violently contract into building materials. The structure will materialize as if sucked from thin air with some kind of Brutalist vacuum cleaner. In fact, the process you see in this imaginary video is very similar to what I described; it is a pristine visualization of a special variety of creative destruction.

Shortly before World War I, the sociologist Werner Sombart coined the term "creative destruction" in his book *War and Capitalism*.<sup>6</sup> During World War II, the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter labeled creative destruction "the essential fact about capitalism."<sup>7</sup> Schumpeter drew on Karl Marx's description of capitalism's ability to dissolve all sorts of seemingly solid structures and force them to constantly upgrade and renew, both from within and without. Marx emphasized that "creative

destruction” was still primarily a process of destruction.<sup>8</sup> However, the term became popular within neoliberal ideologies as a sort of necessary internal cleansing process to keep up productivity and efficiency. Its destructivism echoes in both futurism and contemporary accelerationism, both of which celebrate some kind of mandatory catastrophe.

Today, the term “creative disruption” seems to have taken the place of creative destruction.<sup>9</sup> Automation of blue- and white-collar labor, artificial intelligence, machine learning, cybernetic control systems or “autonomous” appliances are examples of current so-called disruptive technologies, violently shaking up existing societies, markets, and technologies. This is where we circle back to Al-Jazari’s mechanical robots, predecessors of disruptive technologies. Which types of design are associated with these technologies, if any? What are social technologies of disruption? How are Twitter bots, trolls, leaks, and blanket internet shutdowns deployed to accelerate autocratic rule? How do contemporary robots cause unemployment, and what about networked commodities and semi-autonomous weapons systems? How about widespread artificial stupidity, dysfunctional systems, and endless hotlines from hell? How about the oversized Hyundai and Komatsu cranes and bulldozers, ploughing through destroyed cities, performing an absurd *ballet mécanique*, punching through ruins, clawing through social fabric, erasing lived presents and eagerly building blazing emptiness?

Disruptive innovation is causing social polarization through the decimation of jobs, mass surveillance, and algorithmic confusion. It facilitates the fragmentation of societies by creating antisocial tech monopolies that spread bubbled resentment, change cities, magnify shade, and maximize poorly paid

freelance work. The effects of these social and technological disruptions include nationalist, sometimes nativist, fascist, or ultra-religious mass movements.<sup>10</sup> Creative disruption, fueled by automation and cybernetic control, runs in parallel with an age of political fragmentation. The forces of extreme capital, turbocharged with tribal and fundamentalist hatred, reorganize within financials and filter bubbles.

In modernist science fiction, the worst kinds of governments used to be imagined as a single artificial intelligence remote-controlling society. Today's real existing proto- and para-fascisms, however, rely on decentralized artificial stupidity. Bot armies, like farms and meme magick, form the gut brains of political sentiment, manufacturing shitstorms that pose as popular passion. The idea of technocratic fascist rule—supposedly detached, omniscient, and sophisticated—is realized as a barrage of dumber-down tweets. Democracy's demos is replaced by a mob on mobiles<sup>11</sup> capturing people's activities, motion, and vital energies. But in contrast to the modernist dystopias, current autocracies do not rely on the perfection of such systems. They rather thrive on their permanent breakdown, dysfunctions, and so-called "predictive" capacities creating havoc.

Time seems especially affected by disruption. Think back to the reversed bulldozer video: the impression of creative destruction only comes about because time was reversed and is running backwards. After 1989, Jacques Derrida dramatically declared that time was "out of joint" and basically running amok. Writers like Francis Fukuyama thought history had somehow petered out. Jean-François Lyotard described the present as a succession of explosion-like shocks, after which nothing in particular happened.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, logistics reorganized



global production chains, trying to montage disparate shreds of time to maximize efficiency and profit. Echoing cut-and-paste aesthetics, the resulting fragmented time created large-scale havoc for people who had to organize their own lives around increasingly impossible, fractured, and often unpaid work hours and schedules.

Added to this is a dimension of time that is no longer accessible to humans, but only to networked so-called control systems that produce flash crashes and high frequency trading scams. Financialization introduces a host of further complications: the economic viability of the present is sustained by debt, that is, by future income claimed, consumed, or spent in the present. Thus on the one hand futures are depleted, and on the other, presents are destabilized. In short, the present feels as if it is constituted by emptying out the future to sustain a looping version of a past that never existed. Which means that for at least parts of this trajectory, time indeed runs backwards, from an emptied-out future to nurturing a stagnant imaginary past, sustained by disruptive design.

Disruption shows in the jitter in the ill-aligned wipes of the old town's 3D render. The transition between present and future is abrupt and literally uneven: frames look as if jolted by earthquakes. In replacing a present urban reality characterized by strong social bonds with a sanitized digital projection that renders population replacement, disruptive design shows grief and dispossession thinly plastered over with an opportunist layer of pixels.

Warfare in the old town is far from being irrelevant, marginal or peripheral, since it shows a singular form of disruptive design, a specific design of killing, a special form of wrecked cutting-edge temporality. Futures are hastened, not by spending future

incomes, but by making future deaths happen in the present; a sort of application of the mechanism of debt to that of military control, occupation, and expropriation.

While dreaming of the one technological singularity that will once and for all render humanity superfluous, disruption as a social, aesthetic, and militarized process creates countless little singularities, entities trapped within the horizons of what autocrats declare as their own history, identity, culture, ideology, race, or religion; each with their own incompatible rules, or more precisely, their own incompatible lack of rules.<sup>13</sup> “Creative disruption” is not just realized by the wrecking of buildings and urban areas. It refers to the wrecking of a horizon of common understanding, replacing it by narrow, parallel, top-down, trimmed and bleached artificial histories.

This is exactly how processes of disruption might affect you, if you live somewhere else that is. Not in the sense that you will necessarily be expropriated, displaced or worse. This might happen or not, depending on where (and who) you are. But you too might get trapped in your own singular hell of a future repeating invented pasts, with one part of the population hell-bent on getting rid of another. People will peer in from afar, conclude they can't understand what's going on, and keep watching cat videos.

What to do about this? What is the opposite design, a type of creation that assists pluriform, horizontal forms of life, and that can be comprehended as part of a shared humanity? What is the contrary to a procedure that inflates, accelerates, purges, disrupts, and homogenizes; a process that designs humanity as a uniform, cleansed, and allegedly superior product, a super-humanity comprised of sanitized render ghosts?

The contrary is a process that doesn't grow via destruction, but very literally de-grows constructively. This type of construction is not creating inflation, but devolution. Not centralized competition but cooperative autonomy. Not fragmenting time and dividing people, but reducing expansion, inflation, consumption, debt, disruption, occupation, and death. Not superhumanity; humanity as such would perfectly do.

*A woman had stayed in the old town on her own throughout the curfew to take care of her cow, who lived in the back stable. Her daughters had climbed through a waterfall in the Roman-era walls every week to supply her with basic needs. They kept being shot at by soldiers. This went on for weeks on end. When we talked to her, the cow had just had a baby. One of the team members was a veterinarian.*

**Daughter:** *Our calf is sick. Please come and see.*

**Vet:** *Sure, what happened? Is it newborn? Did it get the first milk of its mother?*

**Mum:** *No, it didn't get the colostrum. There was no milk. The labor was difficult. It started five times over and stopped again.*

**Daughter:** *The other calf reached first and drank all the milk, we didn't realize it.*

**Daughter:** *Mum, where is the calf?*

**Mum:** *[calls into the stable] Where is it? My little pistachu, where are you?*

### 3

## The Terror of Total Dasein: Economies of Presence in the Art Field

*The International Artists' Strike in 1979 was a "protest against the ongoing repression of the art system and the alienation of artists from the results of their work." Djordjevic mailed invitations to numerous artists around the world, asking if they would be willing to take part in the general strike. He received thirty-nine, mainly unsupportive responses from the likes of Sol Lewitt, Lucy Lippard, and Vito Acconci. Susan Hiller replied: "I have, in fact, been on strike all summer, but it has not changed anything and I am anxious to begin work again, which I shall do very soon."<sup>1</sup>*

*Dear Goran, Thanks for your letter. Personally I am already on strike of producing any new form in my work since 1965 (i.e. 14 years). I don't see what I could do more—Best Regards (Daniel) Buren.<sup>2</sup>*

When legendary conceptual artist Goran Djordjevic tried to rally artists to go on a general art strike in 1979, some of them responded that they were on strike already—i.e. did not produce work or new work. But it made no difference whatsoever. Clearly, at the time, this seems to have confounded received ideas of what a strike was and how it worked. A strike was supposed to drain needed labor power from employers who would then need to make concessions to workers' demands. But in the art field things were different.

Today, the artists' reactions seem obvious. No one working in the art field expects his or her labor to be irreplaceable or even

mildly important anymore. In the age of rampant self-employment, or rather self-unemployment, the idea that anyone would care for one's specific labor power seems rather exotic.

Of course, labor in the art field has always been different from labor in other areas. One of the current reasons, however, might be that the contemporary economy of art relies more on presence than on more traditional ideas of labor power tied to the production of objects. Presence as in physical presence, as in attendance or being-there in person. Why would presence be so desirable? The idea of presence invokes the promise of unmediated communication, the glow of uninhibited existence, a seemingly unalienated experience and authentic encounter between humans. It implies that not only the artist but everyone else is present too, whatever that means and whatever it is good for. Presence stands for allegedly real discussion, exchange, communication, the happening, the event, liveness, the real thing—you get the idea.

In addition to delivering works, artists, or more generally content providers, nowadays have to perform countless additional services, which slowly seem to become more important than any other form of work. The Q&A is more important than the screening, the live lecture more than the text, the encounter with the artist more important than the one with the work. Not to speak about the jumble of quasi-academic and social media PR formats that multiply the templates in which unalienated presence is supposed to be delivered. The artist has to be present, as in Marina Abramović's eponymous performance. And not only present, but exclusively present, present for the first time, or in some other hyperventilating capacity of newness. Artistic occupation is being redefined as permanent presence. But in the endless production of seemingly

singular events, the serial churning out of novelty and immediacy, the happening of the event is also a general performance, as Sven Lütticken called it, a quantifiable measure of efficiency and total social labor.

The economy of art is deeply immersed in this economy of presence. The market economy of art has its own economy of presence which revolves around art fairs, with their guest lists, VIP areas and performative modes of access and exclusion on every level. People have been saying that previews of mega-shows have become completely inadequate for HNWI's. Really important people are only present for the pre-preview.

There are some rational reasons for an economy of physical human presence in the art field: the physical presence of people is, on average, cheaper than the presence of works that need to be shipped, insured and/or installed. Presence puts so-called butts on seats and thus provides legitimacy to cultural institutions competing for scarce funding. Institutions sell tickets or even access to people—this is usually done in the scope of para-academic formats like masterclasses or workshops—and capitalize on people's desire to widen their networks or add contacts. In a word, presence can be easily quantified and monetized. It's a thing that few people get paid for and a lot of people pay for, and is thus rather profitable.

But presence also means permanent availability without any promise of compensation. In the age of the reproducibility of almost everything physical, human presence is one of the few things that cannot be multiplied indefinitely, an asset with some inbuilt scarcity. Presence means to be engaged or occupied with an activity but not hired or employed. It means more often than not to be locked down in standby mode, as a reserve element for

potential engagement, part of a crowd of extras to provide stochastic weight.

Interestingly enough, the demand for total presence and immediacy arises from mediation; or more precisely from the growing range of tools of communication, including the internet. It is not opposed to technology but its consequence.

According to William J. Mitchell, the economy of presence is characterized by a technologically enhanced market for attention, time, and movement—a process of investment that requires careful choices.<sup>3</sup> The point is that technology gives you tools for remote and delayed presence, so that physical presence is just one option and probably the scarcest one. According to Mitchell: “Presence choice occurs when an individual decides whether face-to-face presence is worth the time and money.” Presence in fact becomes a mode of investment.

But the economy of presence is not only relevant for people whose time is in demand and who could basically sell (or barter) more time than they have; it is even more relevant to those who have to work multiple jobs in order to make a living, or even not make a living, to those who coordinate a jumble of microjobs, complete with the logistical nightmare of harmonizing competing schedules and negotiating priorities, or to those who are on permanent standby in the hope that their time and presence will become exchangeable for something else eventually. The aura of unalienated, unmediated, and precious presence depends on a temporal infrastructure that consists of fractured schedules and dysfunctional, collapsing just-in-time economies in which people frantically try to figure out reverberating asynchronicities and the continuous breakdown of riff-raff timetables. It's junk-time, broken down, kaput on any level. Junktime is wrecked, discontinuous, distracted and runs on

several parallel tracks. If you tend to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and if you even manage to be in two wrong places at the same wrong time, it means you live within junktime. With junktime any causal link is scattered. The end is before the beginning and the beginning was taken down for copyright violations. Anything in between has been slashed because of budget cuts. Junktime is the material base of the idea of pure unmediated endless presence.

Junktime is exhausted, interrupted, dulled by ketamine, Lyrica, corporate imagery. Junktime happens when information is not power, but comes as pain. Acceleration is yesterday's delusion. Today you find yourself crashed and failing. You try to occupy the square or bandwidth but who is going to pick up the kid from school? Junktime depends on velocity, as in the lack thereof. It is time's substitute: its crash-test dummy.

So how does junktime relate to a cult of presence? Here is a question to all the philosophers out there—and it concerns the title of this talk.

The question is: is this cult of presence revitalizing Heideggerian ideas about Dasein in the age of task rabbits and Amazon Turkers? Is the cult of an embodied and engaged presence that cannot be copied and pasted an expression of the relentless quantification of everything within most contemporary occupations? Is it going hand in hand with the body count performed by institutions to prove their perceived importance by attendance numbers while simultaneously harvesting visitors' data and preferences? Is the fragmented junktime of multiple occupations, the necessity of multiplying and juggling scraps and shreds of time, creating the conditions for some kitsch ideal of an unalienated uninterrupted radiating endless mindful awful *Anwesenheit*?



If some of you agree, I suggest to call this text: The Terror of Total Dasein. It sounds like an early movie by Christoph Schlingensiefel.

Let's come back to the topic of strike. In an economy of presence a strike necessarily takes on the form of absence. But since the kind of presence I have tried to describe is in fact a range of grades of withholding absence, the absence that tries to oppose it also inversely has to integrate some form of presence. It might need to take on the form of a range of strategic withdrawals, or what Autonomia Operaia called absenteeism.

Let me describe a very simple model situation: A strike could take the form of a work called "The Artist is Absent" in which there would be just a laptop on the table with a prerecorded and looped stare, or rather an animated GIF of her. This is kind of banal, but then again the audience would equally be represented by similar props, because frankly it hasn't got much time either. Or, actually, the much more elegant and dare I say standard solution for managing the economy of presence and making actual and real-life presence choices is to check your email or Twitter feed while pretending to simultaneously listen to me. In this case you are using yourself, more precisely your own body, as a stand-in or proxy or placeholder, while actually you go about your junktime commitments, which I think is perfectly fine as a form of absence management.

And I also think this is already a form of evasion of the terror of total Dasein.

This small example shows the role of proxies and stand-ins in a situation, in which basically presence is required in multiple places simultaneously, but physically impossible. And this is where techniques of evasion, doubling, dazzle and subterfuge

set in. They open up to a proxy politics, a politics of the stand-in and the decoy.

A stand-in or proxy is a very interesting device. It could be a body double or a stunt double. A scan or a scam. An intermediary in a network. A bot or a decoy. Inflatable tanks or text dummies. A militia deployed in proxy warfare. A template. A readymade. A vectorized bit of stock imagery. All these devices have just one thing in common: they help out with classic dilemmas arising from an economy of presence.

Here is a small example of such device. It is one of the simplest examples of desktop proxy and quite widespread. Everyone has seen this generic sample text:

*Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum.*

Developed as a printers' font sample, the design proxy Lorem Ipsum was integrated into standard desktop publishing software as a random text dummy. It became a cornerstone of text-based digital industries and their forms of ADHD occupation.

Why is it used? Because maybe there is no copy. Perhaps the text has not yet been written or aggregated. Or there is no time or money to fill the space at all. Perhaps the writer is dead or asleep or busy on a different tab. In the meantime the space has to be designed. Advertisements have been sold already. The deadline swiftly approaches. This is when Lorem Ipsum swings into action. It is a dummy providing yet another extension, catering to a demand for eternal and relentless presence.

But Lorem Ipsum is not only a dummy. One can also understand it as a text. It is a fragment of a treatise on ethics by Cicero called "On the Ends of Good and Evil."<sup>4</sup> In this treatise, different definitions of goods and evils are compared. And this precise fragment deals with pain—or rather a shortened down version of it, namely "(pa)in itself."

Let's focus on the meaning of the original sentence. It reads: "Neque porro quisquam est qui dolorem ipsum quia dolor sit amet consectetur adipisci velit sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua." Which means: "Neither is there anyone who loves, pursues or desires pain itself because it is pain, but there can be cases where labor and pain can procure some great pleasure." So basically it is about sucking up for some greater good to arrive later. It is a classical case of deferred gratification, which would later constitute one of the moral pillars of the Protestant work ethic of capitalism.

But what actually does the Lorem Ipsum version mean? It has been cut up to take away the gratification altogether. It translates:

... in itself because it is pain, but there can be cases where labor and pain can procure some great...

The Lorem Ipsum version has blithely cut off pleasure or reward from Cicero's sentence. There is no more gratification. So now you are not enduring pain for some greater good or thereafter but just enduring it without actually knowing why. There may just as well be no outcome, no product, no pay, no end. In Lorem Ipsum pain is not a means to an end, it just so happens.

Junktime, the fragmented time of networked occupation, is to continuous time as Lorem Ipsum is to its original. Its fragments are scrambled, cut up, shut up and confused in their sequence,

spoiling the glow of the uninterrupted flow of text and meaning. And every time I read Lorem Ipsum's mutilated jumble I cannot help thinking of Cicero's head and hands cut off and ending up being nailed to the rostra on the Forum Romanum following his assassination.

There is a variation of Lorem Ipsum on the website of Berghain gay sexclub laboratory. It shows some interesting differences to the standard Lorem Ipsum. First of all, it is on the rules of the club, so the Lorem Ipsum sentences actually become a code of conduct.<sup>5</sup>

There are quite a few changes to the standard Cicero mash up. The word pleasure, or a variation thereof, has been reintroduced. It also goes on praising the virtues of physical exercise, which makes total sense in a place which has an athlete fetish party on offer. This version loops back between pain, toil as pleasure, and physical exercise or sports.

The sexclub rules of conduct become an extremely stressful-sounding set of instructions in which the pursuit of pleasure, labor, and physical exercise forms an endless loop: You have to find pleasure through work, then work out and have sex, in this order and without any break. Then repeat. It sounds like the junktime version of Churchill's famous quip: If you are going through hell just keep going. Except now there is no exit, and if you keep going it just means there will be more hell ahead.

But the Lorem Ipsum rules of engagement could also be read differently, in the sense that the mix of pleasure, sports, and pain is so exhausting that one would rather send a proxy or dummy or Lorem Ipsum itself—to have all the sex, pain, toil, and sports on one's behalf. Because, frankly, to keep going in this mode is just too time consuming, and, additionally, it might become slightly cumbersome to check your emails while you are

doing it. So just leave it to Lorem Ipsum to take care of it on your behalf and manage your absenteeism.

Perhaps the preoccupation with stock footage, serialized stock photography of commodities, all sorts of templates for creative labor, copy and paste, aggregation, but also the fascination with corporate aesthetics and the corporation as proxy could all be seen as potentially responding to the need to be absent. All these are proxies that one can use on behalf of oneself or one's work. Is this some sort of applied absenteeism? A sneaky boycott of constant presence? Using stock footage and templates is kind of the equivalent of periodically saying "awesome" in order to pretend one is listening to an annoying conversation while one has left behind laser-cut stand-up displays to fake participation and attendance in several places at the same time.

The point is: people use proxies in order to deal with the terror of total Dasein, or an economy of presence based on the technologically amplified scarcity of human attention and physical presence.

Even strike-organizer Djordjevic started pursuing a form of proxy politics after the failed art strike. He stopped making art under his own name. Years later he reemerged as a technical assistant for a certain Walter Benjamin's lecture tours, and has kind of represented him ever since. Whether Benjamin himself is on strike is not known.

## Proxy Politics: Signal and Noise

A while ago I met an extremely interesting developer. He was working on smartphone camera technology. Photography is traditionally thought to represent what is out there by means of technology, ideally via an indexical link. But is this really true anymore? The developer explained to me that the technology for contemporary phone cameras is quite different from traditional cameras: the lenses are tiny and basically rubbish, which means that about half of the data being captured by the camera sensor is actually noise. The trick, then, is to write the algorithm to clean the noise, or rather to discern the picture from inside the noise.

But how can the camera know how to do this? Very simple: It scans all other pictures stored on the phone or on your social media networks and sifts through your contacts. It analyzes the pictures you already took, or those that are associated with you, and it tries to match faces and shapes to link them back to you. By comparing what you and your network already photographed, the algorithm guesses what you might have wanted to photograph now. It creates the present picture based on earlier pictures, on your/its memory. This new paradigm is being called computational photography.<sup>1</sup>

The result might be a picture of something that never ever existed, but that the algorithm thinks you might like to see. This type of photography is speculative and relational. It is a gamble

with probabilities that bets on inertia. It makes seeing unforeseen things more difficult. It will increase the amount of noise just as it will increase the amount of random interpretation.

And that's not even to mention external interference into what your phone is recording. All sorts of systems are able to remotely turn your camera on or off: companies, governments, the military. It could be disabled in certain places—one could for instance block its recording function close to protests or conversely broadcast whatever it sees. Similarly, a device might be programmed to autopixelate, erase, or block secret, copyrighted, or sexual content. It might be fitted with a so-called dick algorithm to screen out NSFW (Not Suitable/Safe For Work) content, automodify pubic hair, stretch or omit bodies, exchange or collage context, or insert location-targeted advertising, pop-up windows, or live feeds. It might report you or someone from your network to police, PR agencies, or spammers. It might flag your debt, play your games, broadcast your heartbeat. Computational photography has expanded to cover all this.

It links control robotics, object recognition, and machine learning technologies. So if you take a picture on a smartphone, the results are not as premeditated as they are premediated. The picture might show something unexpected, because it might have cross-referenced many different databases: traffic control, medical databases, frenemy photo galleries on Facebook, credit card data, maps, and whatever else it wants.

## Relational Photography

Computational photography is therefore inherently political — not in content but form. It is not only relational but also truly

social, with countless systems and people potentially interfering with pictures before they even emerge as visible.<sup>2</sup> And of course this network is not neutral. It has rules and norms hardwired into its platforms, and they represent a mix of juridical, moral, aesthetic, technological, commercial, and bluntly hidden parameters and effects. You could end up airbrushed, wanted, redirected, taxed, deleted, remodeled, or replaced in your own picture. The camera turns into a social projector rather than a recorder. It shows a superposition of what it thinks you might want to look like plus what others think you should buy or be. But technology rarely does things on its own. Technology is programmed with conflicting goals and by many entities, and politics is a matter of defining how to separate its noise from its information.<sup>3</sup>

So what are the policies already in place that define the separation of noise from information, or that even define noise and information as such in the first place? Who or what decides what the camera will “see”? How is it being done? By whom or what? And why is this even important?

## The Penis Problem

Let’s have a look at one example: drawing a line between face and butt, or between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” body parts. It is no coincidence that Facebook is called Facebook and not Buttbook, because you can’t have any butts on Facebook. But then how does it weed out the butts? A list leaked by an angry freelancer reveals the precise instructions given on how to build and maintain Facebook’s face, and it shows us what is well known, that nudity and sexual content are strictly off limits, except art nudity and male nipples, but also how its policies on



violence are much more lax, with even decapitations and large amounts of blood acceptable.<sup>4</sup> “Crushed heads, limbs etc are OK as long as no insides are showing,” reads one guideline. “Deep flesh wounds are ok to show; excessive blood is ok to show.” Those rules are still policed by humans, or more precisely by a global subcontracted workforce from Turkey, the Philippines, Morocco, Mexico, and India, working from home, earning around \$4 per hour. These workers are hired to distinguish between acceptable body parts (faces) and unacceptable ones (butts). In principle, there is nothing wrong with having rules for publicly available imagery. Some sort of filtering process has to be implemented on online platforms: no one wants to be spammed with revenge porn or atrocities, regardless of there being markets for such imagery. The question concerns where and how to draw the line, as well as who draws it, and on whose behalf. Who decides on signal vs. noise?

Let’s go back to the elimination of sexual content. Is there an algorithm for this, like for face recognition? This question first arose publicly in the so-called Chatroulette conundrum. Chatroulette was a Russian online video service that allowed people to meet on the web. It quickly became famous for its “next” button, for which the term “unlike button” would be much too polite. The site’s audience at first exploded to 1.6 million users per month by 2010. But then a so-called “penis problem” emerged, referring to the many people who used the service to meet other people naked.<sup>5</sup> The winner of a web contest called to “solve” the issue ingeniously suggested running a quick facial recognition or eye tracking scan on the video feeds—if no face was discernable, it would deduce that it must be a dick.<sup>6</sup>

This exact workflow was also used by the British Secret Service when it secretly bulk extracted user webcam stills in its

spy program Optic Nerve. Video feeds of 1.8 million Yahoo users were intercepted in order to develop face and iris recognition technologies. But—maybe unsurprisingly—it turned out that around 7 percent of the content did not show faces at all. So—as suggested for Chatroulette—they ran face recognition scans on everything and tried to exclude the dicks for not being faces. It didn't work so well. In a leaked document the GCHQ admits defeat: "There is no perfect ability to censor material which may be offensive."<sup>7</sup>

Subsequent solutions became a bit more sophisticated. Probabilistic porn detection calculates the amount of skintoned pixels in certain regions of the picture, producing complicated taxonomic formulas, such as this one:

- a. If the percentage of skin pixels relative to the image size is less than 15 percent, the image is not nude. Otherwise, go to the next step.
- b. If the number of skin pixels in the largest skin region is less than 35% of the total skin count, the number of skin pixels in the second largest region is less than 30% of the total skin count and the number of skin pixels in the third largest region is less than 30% of the total skin count, the image is not nude.
- c. If the number of skin pixels in the largest skin region is less than 45% of the total skin count, the image is not nude.
- d. If the total skin count is less than 30% of the total number of pixels in the image and the number of skin pixels within the bounding polygon is less than 55 percent of the size of the polygon, the image is not nude.
- e. If the number of skin regions is more than 60 and the average intensity within the polygon is less than 0.25, the image is not nude.
- f. Otherwise, the image is nude.<sup>8</sup>

But this method got ridiculed pretty quickly because it produced so many false positives, including, as in some examples, wrapped meatballs, tanks, or machine guns. More recent porn-

detection applications use self-learning technology based on neural networks, computational verb theory, and cognitive computation. They do not try to statistically guess at the image, but rather try to understand it by identifying objects through their relations.<sup>9</sup>

According to developer Tao Yang's description, there is a whole new field of cognitive vision studies based on quantifying cognition as such, on making it measurable and computable.<sup>10</sup> Even though there are still considerable technological difficulties, this effort represents a whole new level of formalization; a new order of images, a grammar of images, an algorithmic system of sexuality, surveillance, productivity, reputation, and computation that links with the grammatization of social relations by corporations and governments.

So how does this work? Yang's porn-detection system must learn how to recognize objectionable parts by seeing a sizable mass of them in order to infer their relations. So basically you start by installing a lot of photos of the body parts you want eliminated on your computer. The database consists of folders full of body parts ready to enter formal relations. Not only pussy, nipple, asshole, and blowjob, but asshole, asshole/only and asshole/mixed\_with\_pussy. Based on this library, a whole range of detectors get ready to go to work: the breast detector, pussy detector, pubic hair detector, cunnilingus detector, blowjob detector, asshole detector, hand-touch-pussy detector. They identify fascinating sex-positions such as the Yawning and Octopus techniques, The Stopperage, Chambers Fuck, Fraser MacKenzie, Persuading of the Debtor, Playing of Cello, and Watching the Game (I am honestly terrified of even imagining Fraser MacKenzie).

This grammar as well as the library of partial objects are reminiscent of Roland Barthes's notion of a "porn grammar," where he describes the Marquis de Sade's writings as a system of positions and body parts ready to permute into every possible combination.<sup>11</sup> Yet this marginalized and openly persecuted system could be seen as a reflex of a more general grammar of knowledge deployed during the so-called Enlightenment. Michel Foucault as well as Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer compared de Sade's sexual systems to mainstream systems of classification. Both were articulated by counting and sorting, by creating exhaustive, pedantic, and tedious taxonomies. And Mr. Yang's enthusiasm for formalizing body parts and their relations to one another similarly reflects the huge endeavor of rendering cognition, imaging, and behavior as such increasingly quantifiable and commensurable to a system of exchange value based in data.

Undesirable body parts thus become elements of a new machine-readable image-based grammar that might usually operate in parallel to reputational and control networks, but that can also be linked to it at any time. Its structure might be a reflex of contemporary modes of harvesting, aggregating, and financializing data-based "knowledge" churned out by a cacophony of partly social algorithms embedded into technology.

## Noise and Information

But let's come back to the question we began with: What are the social and political algorithms that clear noise from information? The emphasis, again, is on politics not algorithms. Jacques Rancière has beautifully shown that this division corresponds to

a much older social formula: to distinguish between noise and speech in order to divide a crowd between citizens and rabble.<sup>12</sup> If one wants not to take someone else seriously, or to limit their rights and status, one pretends that their speech is just noise, garbled groaning, or crying, and that they themselves must be devoid of reason and therefore exempt from being subjects, let alone holders of rights. In other words, this politics rests on an act of conscious decoding —separating “noise” from “information,” “speech” from “groan,” or “face” from “butt,” and from there neatly stacking the results into vertical class hierarchies.<sup>13</sup> The algorithms now being fed into smartphone camera technology to define the image prior to its emergence are similar to this.

In light of Rancière’s proposition, we might still be dealing with a more traditional idea of politics as representation.<sup>14</sup> If everyone is aurally (or visually) represented, and no one is discounted as noise, then equality might draw nearer. But the networks have changed so drastically that nearly every parameter of representative politics has shifted. By now, more people than ever are able to upload an almost unlimited number of self-representations. And the level of political participation by way of parliamentary democracy seems to have dwindled in the meantime. While pictures float in numbers, elites are shrinking and centralizing power.

On top of this, your face is getting disconnected—not only from your butt, but also from your voice and body. Your face is now an element—a face/mixed\_with\_phone, ready to be combined with any other item in the library. Captions are added, or textures, if needs be. Face prints are taken. An image becomes less a representation than a proxy, a mercenary of appearance, a floating texture-surface-commodity. Persons are

montaged, dubbed, assembled, incorporated. Humans and things intermingle in ever-newer constellations to become bots or cyborgs.<sup>15</sup> As humans feed affect, thought, and sociality into algorithms, algorithms feed back into what used to be called subjectivity. This shift is what has given way to a post-representational politics adrift within information space.<sup>16</sup>

## Proxy Armies

Let's look at one example of post-representational politics: political bot armies on Twitter. Twitter bots are bits of script that impersonate human activity on social media sites. In large, synchronized numbers they have become formidable political armies.<sup>17</sup> A Twitter chat bot is an algorithm wearing a person's face, a formula incorporated as animated spam. It is a scripted operation impersonating a human operation.

Bot armies distort discussions on Twitter hashtags by spamming them with advertisements, tourist pictures, or whatever. They basically add noise. Bot armies have been active in Mexico, Syria, Russia, and Turkey, where most political parties have been said to operate such bot armies. In Turkey, the ruling AKP alone was suspected of controlling 18,000 fake Twitter accounts using photos of Robbie Williams, Megan Fox, and other celebs: "In order to appear authentic, the accounts don't just tweet out AKP hashtags; they also quote philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and movies like *PS: I Love You*."<sup>18</sup>

So who do bot armies represent, if anyone, and how do they do it? Let's have a look at the AKP bots. Robbie Williams, Meg Fox, and Hakan43020638 are all advertising "Flappy Tayyip," a cell-phone game starring the then AKP prime minister (now president) Tayyip Recep Erdoğan. The objective is to hijack or

spam the hashtag #twitterturkey to protest PM Erdoğan's banning of Twitter. Simultaneously, Erdoğan's own Twitter bots set out to detourne the hashtag.

Let's look at Hakan43020638 more closely: a bot consisting of a copy-pasted face plus product placement. It takes only a matter of minutes to connect his face to a body by way of a Google image search. On his business Twitter account it turns out he sells his underwear: he works online as an affective web service provider.<sup>19</sup> Let's call this version Murat, to throw yet another alias into the fray. But who is the bot wearing Murat's face and who is a bot army representing? Why would Hakan43020638 be quoting Thomas Hobbes of all philosophers? And which book? Let's guess he's quoting from Hobbes's most important work *Leviathan*. Leviathan is the name of a social contract enforced by an absolute sovereign in order to fend off the dangers presented by a "state of nature" in which humans prey upon one another. With Leviathan there are no more militias and there is no more molecular warfare of everyone against everyone.

But now we seem to be in a situation where state systems grounded in such social contracts seem to fall apart in many places and nothing is left but a set of policed relational metadata, emoji, and hijacked hashtags. A bot army is a contemporary vox populi, the voice of the people according to social networks. It can be a Facebook militia, your low-cost personalized mob, your digital mercenaries, or some sort of proxy porn. Imagine your photo being used for one of these bots. It is the moment when your picture becomes quite autonomous, active, even militant. Bot armies are celebrity militias, wildly jump-cutting between glamour, sectarianism, porn, corruption, and conservative religious ideologies. Post-

representative politics are a war of bot armies against one another, of Hakan against Murat, of face against butt.

This may be why the AKP pornstar bots desperately quote Hobbes: they are already sick of the war of Robbie Williams (IDF) against Robbie Williams (Electronic Syrian Army) against Robbie Williams (PRI/AAP), they are sick of retweeting spam for autocrats—and are hoping for just any entity organizing day care, gun control, and affordable dentistry, whether it's called Leviathan or Moby Dick or even Flappy Tayyip. They seem to say: we'd go for just about any social contract you've got!<sup>20</sup>

Now let us go even one step further. Because a model for this might already be on the horizon. And unsurprisingly, it also involves algorithms.

## Blockchain

Blockchain governance seems to fulfill the hopes for a new social contract.<sup>21</sup> “Decentralized Autonomous Organizations” would record and store transactions in blockchains akin to the one used to run and validate bitcoin. But those public digital ledgers could equally encode votes or laws. Take for instance bitcongress, which is in the process of developing a decentralized voting and legislation system ([www.bitcongress.org](http://www.bitcongress.org)). While this could be a model to restore accountability and circumvent power monopolies, it means above all that social rules hardwired with technology emerge as Leviathan 2.0:

When disassociated from the programmers who design them, trustless blockchains floating above human affairs contain the specter of *rule by algorithms* ... This is essentially the vision of the internet *techno-leviathan*, a deified crypto-sovereign whose rules we can contract to.<sup>22</sup>



Even though this is a decentralized process with no single entity at the controls, it doesn't necessarily mean no one controls it. Just like smartphone photography, it needs to be told how to work: by a multitude of conflicting interests. More importantly, this would replace bots as proxy "people" with bots as governance. But then again, which bots are we talking about? Who programs them? Are they cyborgs? Do they have faces or butts? And who is drawing the line? Are they cheerleaders of social and informational entropy? Killing machines? Or a new crowd, of which we are already a part?<sup>23</sup>

Let's come back to the beginning again: How to separate signal from noise? And how does the old political technology of using this distinction in order to rule change with algorithmic technology? In all examples, the definition of noise rested increasingly on scripted operations, on automating representation and/or decision-making. On the other hand, this process potentially introduces so much feedback that representation becomes a rather unpredictable operation that looks more like the weather than a Xerox machine. Likelihood becomes subject to likelihood—reality is just another factor in an extended calculation of probability. In this situation, proxies become crucial semi-autonomous actors.

## Proxy Politics

To better understand proxy politics, we could start by drawing up a checklist:

- Does your camera decide what appears in your photographs?
- Does it go off when you smile?
- And will it fire in a next step if you don't?

Do underpaid outsourced IT workers in BRIC countries manage your pictures of breastfeeds and decapitations on your social media feeds?

Is Elizabeth Taylor tweeting your work?

Have some of your other fans' bots decided to classify your work as urinary mature porn?

Are some of these bots busily enumerating geographic locations alongside bodily orifices?

Is your total result something like this?

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Welcome to the age of proxy politics!



A proxy is “an agent or substitute authorized to act for another person or a document which authorizes the agent so to act” (Wikipedia). But a proxy could now also be a device with a bad hair day. A scrap of script caught up in a dress-code double bind. Or a “Persuading the Debtor” detector throwing a tantrum over genital pixel probability. Or a delegation of chat bots casually pasting pro-Putin hair lotion ads to your Instagram. It could also be something much more serious, wrecking your life in a similar way—sry life!

Proxies are devices or scripts tasked with getting rid of noise as well as bot armies hell-bent on producing it. They are masks, persons, avatars, routers, nodes, templates, or generic

placeholders. They share an element of unpredictability—which is all the more paradoxical considering that they arise as result of maxed-out probabilities. But proxies are not only bots and avatars, nor is proxy politics restricted to datascares. Proxy warfare is quite a standard model of warfare—one of the most important examples being the Spanish Civil War. Proxies add echo, subterfuge, distortion, and confusion to geopolitics. Armies posing as militias (or the other way around) reconfigure or explode territories and redistribute sovereignties. Companies pose as guerillas and legionnaires as suburban Tupperware clubs. A proxy army is made of guns for hire, with more or less ideological decoration. The border between private security, PMCs, freelance insurgents, armed stand-ins, state hackers, and people who just got in the way has become blurry. Remember that corporate armies were crucial in establishing colonial empires (the East India Company among others) and that the word “company” itself is derived from the name for a military unit. Proxy warfare is a prime example of a post-Leviathan reality.

Now that this whole range of activities has gone online, it turns out that proxy warfare is partly the continuation of PR by different means.<sup>24</sup> Besides marketing tools repurposed for counterinsurgency ops there is a whole range of government hacking (and counter-hacking) campaigns that require slightly more advanced skills. But not always. As the leftist Turkish hacker group Redhack reported, the password of the Ankara police servers was 12345.<sup>25</sup>

To state that online proxy politics is reorganizing geopolitics would be similar to stating that burgers tend to reorganize cows. Indeed, just as meatloaf arranges parts of cows with plastic, fossil remnants, and elements formerly known as paper, proxy

politics positions companies, nation-states, hacker detachments, FIFA, and the Duchess of Cambridge as equally relevant entities. Those proxies tear up territories by creating netscapes that are partly unlinked from geography and national jurisdiction.

But proxy politics also works the other way. A simple default example of proxy politics is the use of proxy servers to try to bypass local web censorship or communications restrictions. Whenever people use VPNs and other internet proxies to escape online restrictions or conceal their IP address, proxy politics is given a different twist. In countries like Iran and China, VPNs are very much in use.<sup>26</sup> In practice though, in many countries, companies close to censor-happy governments also run the VPNs in an exemplary display of efficient inconsistency. In Turkey, people used even more rudimentary methods—changing their DNS settings to tunnel out of Turkish dataspace, virtually tweeting from Hong Kong and Venezuela during Erdoğan's short-lived Twitter ban.

In proxy politics the question is literally how to act or represent by using stand-ins (or being used by them)—and also how to use intermediaries to detourne the signals or noise of others. And proxy politics itself can also be turned around and redeployed. Proxy politics stacks surfaces, nodes, terrains, and textures—or disconnects them from one another. It disconnects body parts and switches them on and off to create often astonishing and unforeseen combinations—even faces with butts, so to speak. They can undermine the seemingly mandatory decision between face or butt or even the idea that both have got to belong to the same body. In the space of proxy politics, bodies could be Leviathans, hashtags, juridical persons, nation-states, hair-transplant devices, or freelance SWAT teams. Body is added to bodies by proxy and by stand-in. But these

combinations also subtract bodies (and their parts) and erase them from the realm of never-ending surface to face enduring invisibility. In the end, however, a face without a butt cannot sit. It has to take a stand. And a butt without a face needs a stand-in for most kinds of communication. Proxy politics happens between taking a stand and using a stand-in. It is in the territory of displacement, stacking, subterfuge, and montage that both the worst and the best things happen.

## 5

### A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-)Recognition



This is an image from the Snowden files. It is labeled “secret.”<sup>1</sup> Yet one cannot see anything on it. This is exactly why it is symptomatic.

Not seeing anything intelligible is the new normal. Information is passed on as a set of signals that cannot be picked up by human senses. Contemporary perception is machinic to a large degree. The spectrum of human vision only covers a tiny part of it. Electric charges, radio waves, light pulses encoded by machines for machines are zipping by at slightly subluminal speed. Seeing is superseded by calculating probabilities. Vision loses importance and is replaced by filtering, decrypting, and pattern recognition. Snowden’s image of noise

could stand in for a more general human inability to perceive technical signals unless they are processed and translated accordingly.

But noise is not nothing. On the contrary, noise is a huge issue, not only for the NSA but for machinic modes of perception as a whole.

*Signal v. Noise* was the title of a column on the internal NSA website running from 2011 to 2012. It succinctly frames the NSA's main problem: how to extract "information from the truckloads of data": "It's not about the data or even access to the data. It's about getting information from the truck-loads of data ... Developers, please help! We're drowning (not waving) in a sea of data—with data, data everywhere, but not a drop of information."<sup>2</sup>

Analysts are choking on intercepted communication. They need to unscramble, filter, decrypt, refine, and process "truckloads of data." The focus moves from acquisition to discerning, from scarcity to overabundance, from adding on to filtering, from research to pattern recognition. This problem is not restricted to secret services. Even WikiLeaks's Julian Assange states: "We are drowning in material."<sup>3</sup>

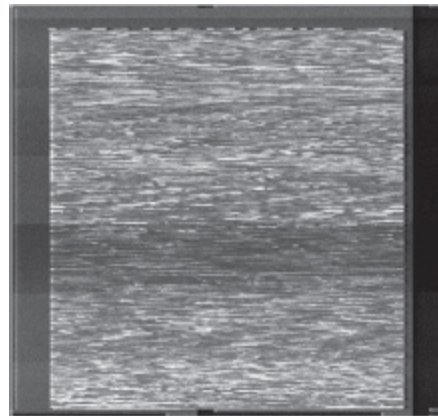
## Apophenia

But let's return to the initial image. The noise on it was actually decrypted by GCHQ technicians to reveal a picture of clouds in the sky. British analysts have been hacking video feeds from Israeli drones since at least 2008, a period which includes the recent IDF aerial campaigns against Gaza.<sup>4</sup> But no images of these attacks exist in Snowden's archive. Instead, there are all sorts of abstract renderings of intercepted broadcasts. Noise.



Lines. Color patterns.<sup>5</sup> According to leaked training manuals, one needs to apply all sorts of massively secret operations to produce these kinds of images.<sup>6</sup>

But let me tell you something. I will decrypt this image for you without any secret algorithm. I will use a secret ninja technique instead. And I will even teach you how to do it for free. Please focus very strongly on this image right now.



Doesn't it look like a shimmering surface of water in the evening sun? Is this perhaps the "sea of data" itself? An overwhelming body of water, which one could drown in? Can you see the waves moving ever so slightly?

I am using a good old method called apophenia.

Apophenia is defined as the perception of patterns within random data.<sup>7</sup> The most common examples are people seeing faces in clouds or on the moon. Apophenia is about "drawing connections and conclusions from sources with no direct connection other than their indissoluble perceptual simultaneity," as Benjamin Bratton recently argued.<sup>8</sup>

One has to assume that, sometimes, analysts also use apophenia.

Someone must have seen the face of Amani al-Nasasra in a cloud. The forty-three-year-old was blinded by an aerial strike in

Gaza in 2012 while sitting in front of her TV:

“We were in the house watching the news on TV. My husband said he wanted to go to sleep, but I wanted to stay up and watch Al Jazeera to see if there was any news of a ceasefire. The last thing I remember, my husband asked if I changed the channel and I said yes. I didn’t feel anything when the bomb hit—I was unconscious. I didn’t wake up again until I was in the ambulance.” Amani suffered second degree burns and was largely blinded.<sup>9</sup>

What kind of “signal” was extracted from what kind of “noise” to suggest that al-Nasasra was a legitimate target? Which faces appear on which screens, and why? Or to put it differently: Who is “signal,” and who disposable “noise”?

### Pattern Recognition

Jacques Rancière tells a mythical story about how the separation of signal and noise might have been accomplished in Ancient Greece. Sounds produced by affluent male locals were defined as speech, whereas women, children, slaves, and foreigners were assumed to produce garbled noise.<sup>10</sup> The distinction between speech and noise served as a kind of political spam filter. Those identified as speaking were labeled citizens and the rest as irrelevant, irrational, and potentially dangerous nuisances. Similarly, today, the question of separating signal and noise has a fundamental political dimension. Pattern recognition resonates with the wider question of political recognition. Who is recognized on a political level and as what? As a subject? A person? A legitimate category of the population? Or perhaps as “dirty data”?

What is dirty data? Here is one example:

Sullivan, from Booz Allen, gave the example the time his team was analyzing demographic information about customers for a luxury hotel chain and came across data showing that teens from a wealthy Middle Eastern country were frequent guests.

“There were a whole group of 17-year-olds staying at the properties worldwide,” Sullivan said. “We thought, ‘That can’t be true.’”<sup>11</sup>

The data was dismissed as dirty data—messed up and worthless sets of information—before someone found out that, actually, it was true.

Brown teenagers, in this worldview, are likely to exist. Dead brown teenagers? Why not? But rich brown teenagers? This is so improbable that they must be dirty data and cleansed from your system! The pattern emerging from this operation to separate noise and signal is not very different from Rancière’s political noise filter for allocating citizenship, rationality, and privilege. Affluent brown teenagers seem just as unlikely as speaking slaves and women in the Greek polis.

On the other hand, dirty data is also something like a cache of surreptitious refusal; it expresses a refusal to be counted and measured:

A study of more than 2,400 UK consumers by research company Verve found that 60% intentionally provided wrong information when submitting personal details online. Almost one quarter (23%) said they sometimes gave out incorrect dates of birth, for example, while 9% said they did this most of the time and 5% always did it.<sup>12</sup>

Dirty data is where all of our refusals to fill out the constant onslaught of online forms accumulate. Everyone is lying all the time, whenever possible, or at least cutting corners. Not surprisingly, the “dirtiest” area of data collection is consistently pointed out to be the health sector, especially in the US. Doctors and nurses are singled out for filling out forms incorrectly. It

seems that health professionals are just as unenthusiastic about filling out forms for systems designed to replace them as consumers are about performing clerical work for corporations that will spam them in return.

In his book *The Utopia of Rules*, David Graeber gives a profoundly moving example of the forced extraction of data. After his mom suffered a stroke, he went through the ordeal of having to apply for Medicaid on her behalf:

I had to spend over a month ... dealing with the ramifying consequences of the act of whatever anonymous functionary in the New York Department of Motor Vehicles had inscribed my given name as "Daid," not to mention the Verizon clerk who spelled my surname "Grueber." Bureaucracies public and private appear—for whatever historical reasons—to be organized in such a way as to guarantee that a significant proportion of actors will not be able to perform their tasks as expected.<sup>13</sup>

Graeber goes on to call this an example of utopian thinking. Bureaucracy is based on utopian thinking because it assumes people to be perfect from its own point of view. Graeber's mother died before she was accepted into the program.

The endless labor of filling out completely meaningless forms is a new kind of domestic labor in the sense that it is not considered labor at all and assumed to be provided "voluntarily" or performed by underpaid so-called data janitors.<sup>14</sup> Yet all the seemingly swift and invisible action of algorithms—their elegant optimization of everything, their recognition of patterns and anomalies—is based on the endless and utterly senseless labor of providing or fixing messy data.

Dirty data is simply real data in the sense that it documents the struggle of real people with a bureaucracy that exploits the uneven distribution and implementation of digital technology.<sup>15</sup>

Consider the situation at LaGeSo (the Health and Social Affairs Office) in Berlin, where refugees are risking their health on a daily basis by standing in line outdoors in severe winter weather for hours or even days just to have their data registered and get access to services they are entitled to (for example money to buy food).<sup>16</sup> These people are perceived as anomalies because, in addition to having had the audacity to arrive in the first place, they ask that their rights be respected. There is a similar political algorithm at work: people are blanked out. They cannot even get to the stage of being recognized as claimants. They are not taken into account.

On the other hand, technology also promises to separate different categories of refugees. IBM's Watson AI system was experimentally programmed to potentially identify terrorists posing as refugees:

IBM hoped to show that the i2 EIA could separate the sheep from the wolves: that is, the masses of harmless asylum-seekers from the few who might be connected to jihadism or who were simply lying about their identities ...

IBM created a hypothetical scenario, bringing together several data sources to match against a fictional list of passport-carrying refugees. Perhaps the most important dataset was a list of names of casualties from the conflict gleaned from open press reports and other sources. Some of the material came from the Dark Web, data related to the black market for passports; IBM says that they anonymized or obscured personally identifiable information in this set ...

Borene said the system could provide a score to indicate the likelihood that a hypothetical asylum-seeker was who they said they were, and do it fast enough to be useful to a border guard or policeman walking a beat.<sup>17</sup>

The cross-referencing of unofficial databases, including dark-web sources, is used to produce a "score," which calculates the

probability that a refugee might be a terrorist. The hope is for a pattern to emerge across different datasets, without actually checking how or if they correspond to any empirical reality. This example is actually part of a much larger subset of “scores,” credit scores, academic ranking scores, scores ranking interaction on online forums, etc., which classify people according to financial interactions, online behavior, market data, and other sources. A variety of inputs are boiled down to a single number—a superpattern—which may be a “threat” score or a “social sincerity score,” as planned by Chinese authorities for every single citizen within the next decade. But the input parameters are far from being transparent or verifiable. And while it may be seriously desirable to identify Daesh moles posing as refugees, a similar system seems to have worrying flaws.

The NSA’s SKYNET program was trained to find terrorists in Pakistan by sifting through cell-phone customer metadata. But experts criticize the NSA’s methodologies. “There are *very few* ‘known terrorists’ to use to train *and test* the model,” explained Patrick Ball, a data scientist and director of the Human Rights Data Analysis Group, to *Ars Technica*. “If they are using the same records to train the model as they are using to test the model, their assessment of the fit is completely bullshit.”<sup>18</sup>

The Human Rights Data Analysis Group estimates that around 99,000 Pakistanis might have ended up wrongly classified as terrorists by SKYNET, a statistical margin of error that may have had deadly consequences given the fact that the US is waging a drone war on suspected militants in the country, and between 2,500 and 4,000 people are estimated to have been killed since 2004: “In the years that have followed, thousands of innocent people in Pakistan may have been mislabelled as

terrorists by that ‘scientifically unsound’ algorithm, possibly resulting in their untimely demise.”<sup>19</sup>

One needs to emphasize strongly that SKYNET’s operations cannot be objectively assessed, since it is not known how its results were utilized. It was most certainly not the only factor in determining drone targets.<sup>20</sup> But the example of SKYNET demonstrates just as strongly that a “signal” extracted by assessing correlations and probabilities is not the same as an actual fact, but is determined by the inputs the software uses to learn, and the parameters for filtering, correlating, and “identifying.” The old engineer wisdom “crap in—crap out” seems still to apply. In all of these cases—as completely different as they are technologically, geographically, and also ethically—some version of pattern recognition was used to classify groups of people according to political and social parameters. Sometimes it is as simple as, *we try to avoid registering refugees*. Sometimes there is more mathematical mumbo jumbo involved. But many of the methods used are opaque, partly biased, exclusive, and—as one expert points out—sometimes also “ridiculously optimistic.”<sup>21</sup>

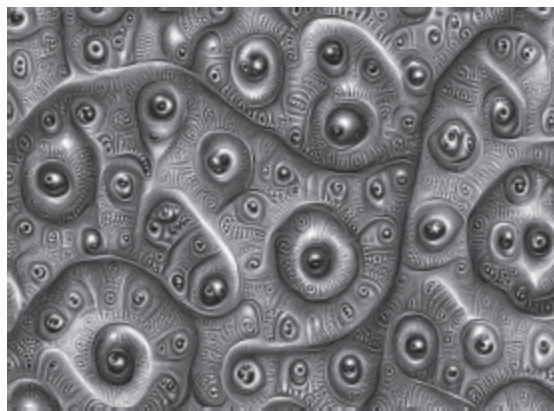
## Corporate Animism

How to recognize something in sheer noise? A striking visual example of pure and conscious apophenia was recently demonstrated by research labs at Google:<sup>22</sup>

We train an artificial neural network by showing it millions of training examples and gradually adjusting the network parameters until it gives the classifications we want. The network typically consists of 10–30 stacked layers of artificial neurons. Each image is fed into the input layer, which then talks to the next layer, until eventually the “output”

layer is reached. The network's "answer" comes from this final output layer.<sup>23</sup>

Neural networks were trained to discern edges, shapes, and a number of objects and animals and then applied to pure noise. They ended up "recognizing" a rainbow-colored mess of disembodied fractal eyes, mostly without lids, incessantly surveilling their audience in a strident display of conscious pattern overidentification.



*Google DeepDream images.*

Source: Mary-Ann Russon, "Google DeepDream robot: 10 weirdest images produced by AI 'inceptionism' and users online," [ibtimes.co.uk](http://ibtimes.co.uk), July 6, 2015.

Google researchers call the act of creating a pattern or an image from nothing but noise "inceptionism" or "deep dreaming." But these entities are far from mere hallucinations. If



they are dreams, those dreams can be interpreted as condensations or displacements of the current technological disposition. They reveal the networked operations of computational image creation, certain presets of machinic vision, its hardwired ideologies and preferences.

One way to visualize what goes on is to turn the network upside down and ask it to enhance an input image in such a way as to elicit a particular interpretation. Say you want to know what sort of image would result in “Banana.” Start with an image full of random noise, then gradually tweak the image towards what the neural net considers a banana. By itself, that doesn’t work very well, but it does if we impose a prior constraint that the image should have similar statistics to natural images, such as neighboring pixels needing to be correlated.<sup>24</sup>

In a feat of genius, inceptionism manages to visualize the unconscious of prosumer networks: images surveilling users, constantly registering their eye movements, behavior, preferences, aesthetically helplessly adrift between *Hundertwasser* mug knockoffs and Art Deco friezes gone ballistic. Walter Benjamin’s “optical unconscious” has been upgraded to the unconscious of computational image divination.<sup>25</sup>

By “recognizing” things and patterns that were not given, inceptionist neural networks eventually end up effectively identifying a new totality of aesthetic and social relations. Presets and stereotypes are applied, regardless of whether they “apply” or not: “The results are intriguing—even a relatively simple neural network can be used to over-interpret an image, just like as children we enjoyed watching clouds and interpreting the random shapes.”<sup>26</sup>

But inceptionism is not just a digital hallucination. It is a document of an era that trains smartphones to identify kittens, thus hardwiring truly terrifying jargons of cutesy into the means

of production.<sup>27</sup> It demonstrates a version of corporate animism in which commodities are not only fetishes but morph into franchised chimeras.

Yet these are deeply realist representations. According to György Lukács, “classical realism” creates “typical characters” insofar as they represent the objective social (and in this case technological) forces of our times.<sup>28</sup>

Inceptionism does that and more. It also gives those forces a face—or more precisely, innumerable eyes. The creature that stares at you from your plate of spaghetti and meatballs is not an amphibian beagle. It is the ubiquitous surveillance of networked image production, a form of memetically modified intelligence that watches you in the shape of the lunch that you will Instagram in a second if it doesn’t attack you first. Imagine a world of enslaved objects remorsefully scrutinizing you. Your car, your yacht, your art collection observes you with a gloomy and utterly desperate expression. *You may own us, they seem to say, but we are going to inform on you. And guess what kind of creature we are going to recognize in you!*<sup>29</sup>

## Data Neolithic

But what are we going to make of automated apophenia?<sup>30</sup> Are we to assume that machinic perception has entered its own phase of magical thinking? Is this what commodity enchantment means nowadays: hallucinating products? It might be more accurate to assume that humanity has entered yet another new phase of magical thinking. The vocabulary deployed for separating signal and noise is surprisingly pastoral: data “farming” and “harvesting,” “mining” and “extraction,” are

embraced as if we were living through another massive Neolithic revolution<sup>31</sup> with its own kind of magic formulas.

All sorts of agricultural and mining technologies—developed during the Neolithic—are reinvented to apply to data. The stones and ores of the past are replaced by silicon and rare earth minerals, while a Minecraft paradigm of extraction describes the processing of minerals into elements of information architecture.<sup>32</sup>

Pattern recognition was an important asset of Neolithic technologies too. It marked the transition between magic and more empirical modes of thinking. The development of the calendar by observing patterns in time enabled more efficient irrigation and agricultural scheduling. Storage of cereals created the idea of property. This period also kick-started institutionalized religion and bureaucracy, as well as managerial techniques including laws and registers. All these innovations also impacted society: hunter and gatherer bands were replaced by farmer-kings and slaveholders. The Neolithic revolution was not only technological but also had major social consequences.

Today, expressions of life as reflected in data trails become a farmable, harvestable, minable resource managed by informational biopolitics.<sup>33</sup>

And if you doubt that this is another age of magical thinking, just look at the NSA training manual for unscrambling hacked drone intercepts. As you can see, you need to bewitch the files with a magic wand.



*File browsing menu of Image Magick, a free image converter.*

Source: ISUAV Video Descrambling, Anarchist training Module 5, GCHQ manual leaked by Edward Snowden.

The supposedly new forms of governance emerging from these technologies look partly archaic and partly superstitious. What kind of corporate/state entities are based on data storage, image unscrambling, high-frequency trading, and Daesh Forex gaming? What are the contemporary equivalents of farmer-kings and slaveholders, and how are existing social hierarchies radicalized through examples as vastly different as tech-related gentrification and jihadi online forum gamification? How does the world of pattern recognition and big-data divination relate to the contemporary jumble of oligocracies, troll farms, mercenary hackers, and data robber barons supporting and enabling bot governance, Khelifah clickbait and polymorphous proxy warfare? Is the state in the age of Deep Mind, Deep Learning, and Deep Dreaming a Deep State™? One in which there is no appeal nor due process against algorithmic decrees and divination?

But there is another difference between the original and the current type of “Neolithic,” and it harks back to pattern recognition. In ancient astronomy, star constellations were imagined by projecting animal shapes into the skies. After cosmic rhythms and trajectories had been recorded on clay tablets, patterns of movement started to emerge. As additional points of orientation, some star groups were likened to animals

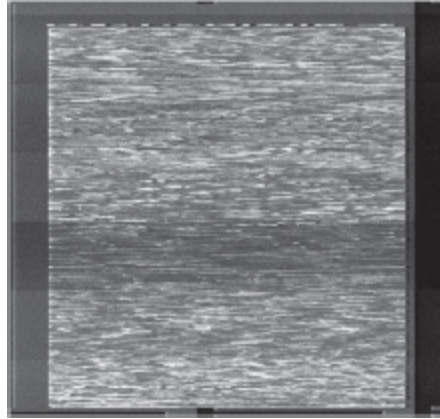
and heavenly beings. However, progress in astronomy and mathematics happened not because people kept believing there were animals or gods in space, but on the contrary, because they accepted that constellations were expressions of a physical logic. The patterns were projections, not reality. While today statisticians and other experts routinely acknowledge that their findings are mostly probabilistic projections, policymakers of all sorts conveniently ignore this message. In practice you become coextensive with the data-constellation you project. Social scores of all different kinds—credit scores, academic scores, threat scores—as well as commercial and military pattern-of-life observations, impact the real lives of real people, both reformatting and radicalizing social hierarchies by ranking, filtering, and classifying.

## Gestalt Realism

But let's assume we are actually dealing with projections. Once one accepts that the patterns derived from machinic sensing are *not* the same as reality, information definitely becomes available with a certain degree of veracity.

Let's come back to Amani al-Nasasra, the woman blinded by an aerial attack in Gaza. We know: the abstract images recorded as intercepts of IDF drones by British spies do *not* show the aerial strike in Gaza that blinded her in 2012. The dates *don't* match. There is *no* evidence in Snowden's archive. There are *no* images of this attack, at least as far as I know of. All we know is what she told Human Rights Watch. This is what she said: "I can't see—ever since the bombing, I can only see shadows."<sup>34</sup>

So there is one more way to decode this image. It's plain for everyone to see. We see what Amani *cannot* see.



In this case, the noise must be a “document” of what she “sees” now: “the shadows.”

Is this a document of the drone war’s optical unconscious? Of its dubious and classified methods of “pattern recognition”? And if so, is there a way to ever “unscramble” the “shadows” Amani has been left with?

## Medya: Autonomy of Images

In a work called *Auge/Maschine*, Harun Farocki coined the term "suicide camera." *Auge/Maschine* shows cameras mounted to the tips of missiles during the first Gulf War. The camera would broadcast live until it exploded. But contrary to all expectations, the camera was not destroyed in this operation. Instead it burst into billions of small cameras, tiny lenses embedded into cell phones. The camera from the missile exploded into shards that penetrated people's lives, feelings, and identities, skimming their ideas and payments.

The camera on the missile tip was supposed to identify and track objects. But as itself destroyed, it multiplied. It is now not only identifying and tracking objects, but the devices embedded into them, their owners, their motions and emotions as well as most of their actions and communications. If the cameras in the tip of the missiles were suicide cameras, the ones in cell phones are zombie cameras, cameras that failed dying.

But what if not only the cameras exploded but also the images they produced? What if this created a situation in which images were broken to the point of being unintelligible?

DES9N7bxsOmHupY4JsjDg6fZ7va FIZaWDBASiCj6v  
N+SVYuCa9Bo5L dJHmco+kpmK2PTvlShVkxpOwt59hGX  
6sdITapaRgEGCB8FZt3iSkE9EdmShv5vmSv3oMrCoSFlq  
nLeGY 9Wh6hNCNx4nUfxtzjoExo494fUr +hZebjFTo5ow//  
oy22fW8fuwicIm oEm7y28eFSmN5ITVpjzDabYQBjYPgRp  
LStGjRMcsilxGH6Ud3nweSy qjimsCs6f2OL4JuolFPTSVAP9/  
hia b9VKmyBM3 WbOVwAi+wLjoS6 k1FcAcyjQo8HUM3v  
GALSnPn7w+wnD5 YNKRdXPV pQ8tq+stidQzFdESSzajS  
7rPC81pzrljW3tXOkr Dmusp/mEzfTEHOsFRq9cq3k OJr+  
CXXSOhjXuSSPVNH1rt8JIDUts529LqAb5pPfyta1L4bD5  
LK3hNywW0CTsExgg5jkr64boO/RUB4cYIVQWNSHEv  
TtTz++mI+rY sZjIslyhEf6fGAMQPDyqooXrhjFZEx1m  
BprRDPAHbA4ROL38lHd pJTDIt3DaWuhsTKWza  
AMwML lloiiP8j7gEZXAwdsAjy+wc4a4iFZB7bCGB5nd  
wCS3hoBNFq7kESbW+

*Fig. 1. A pillar at Göbekli Tepe, Turkey, showing a vulture, a crane, and a man without a head.*

The figure above apparently shows a vulture flying above a headless person. At least this is what archeologists claim. It is difficult to figure out just from looking at it. You can't really see what they are talking about. It looks like a radioactive chicken. And the strange shape below is supposed to be the guy without a head.

I wanted to see this relief in person, on a pillar dating back 12,000 years. So I went to the Göbekli Tepe complex near Urfa, Turkey, the oldest known ritual structure in the world. It looks somewhat like Stonehenge, only it's 6,500 years older, and instead of one massive stone-pillar circle there are around twenty, most of them unexcavated. Many of the pillars bear exquisite carvings of scary animals.

But it turned out that the relief I was looking for is not visible on site. One can only see the pillar's back side; the relief itself is hidden. The only way I could see it was on a cell phone. One has to go online and Google it. Of course you can do that almost everywhere. In so-called reality, however, it is not accessible.



But it was not only me who watched the image. My cell phone was also watching me, my location, and my activities.

In January 2015, the rumble from the battle of Kobanê in Northern Syria could be heard at Göbekli Tepe. In October 2014, the city had come under massive attack by Daesh and was expected to fall any day. Hundreds of bystanders were watching from the Turkish side of the border, trying to catch a glimpse of the fighting raging on several fronts around and inside the city. Countless eyes were observing the events with military-grade binoculars and all sorts of cameras.

But even though there was a multitude of eyewitnesses to the battle of Kobanê, what did they see? Or rather, what did I see?

On the border with Syria, onlookers were using my camera viewfinder to try to identify Daesh positions. They claimed to see Daesh cars moving in the distance. But to be honest, I couldn't recognize a thing:



DES9N7bxsOmHupY4JsjDg6fZ7vaFIZaWDBASiCj6vN+SV  
YuCa9Bo5LdJHmco+kpmK2PTvlShVkxpOwt59hGX6sdITa  
paRgEGCB8FZt3iSkE 9EdmShv5vmSv3oMrCoSFlqnLeGY  
9Wh6hNCNx4nUfxtzjoExo494fUr+hZcbjFTo5ow//oy22  
fW8fuwicImoEm7y28cFSmN5ITVpjzDabY QBjYPgRpLStG  
jRMcsilxGH6Ud3nweSyqjimsCs6f2OL4JuolffPTSVP9/h  
iab9VKmyBM3WbO VwAi+wLjoS6k1FcAcyjQo8HUM3v  
GALSnPn7w+wnD5YNKRdXPVpQ8tq+stidQzFdESSzajS7  
rPC81pzrljW3tXOkrdmusp/mEzfTEHOsFRq9c q3kOJr+  
CXXSOhjXuSSPVNH1rt8JIDUts529Lq Ab5pPfyta1L4bD  
5LK3hNywW0CTsExgg5jkR64boO/RUB4cYIVQWNSHEvTt  
Tz++ml+rYsZIslyhEf6fGAMQPDyq00XrhjFZEX1mBprRD  
PAHbA4ROL38IHdpJTDIt3DaWuhsTKWzaAMwMLlloiiP  
8j7gEZXAwdSaJy+wc4a4iFZB7bCGB5ndwCS3hoBNFq7kE  
SbW+5wiBU7w6nEiNLYanDUoFWoDR1IBaEAoX2vdbhIP  
XfVsgWmgDGwZByozbITQJJqYaQCOU7ko+QffkqRx sO43  
RN2BnboNsFFCGDPgV5hkJMDXYhag rpq/wLoqs6Ap

*Fig.2. Image captured by my camera as its viewfinder was being used by onlookers to locate Daesh positions in Kobanê, Syria, October 8, 2014.*

I saw smoke, clouds, houses. Maybe cars, or maybe just glints of sunlight in the distance. Among the hundreds of bystanders, few knew what they were actually seeing. I certainly didn't. Whatever was visible was less images than shards of images, flying around after huge explosions.

The term *theater of war*, as defined by Carl von Clausewitz:

Such a portion of the space over which war prevails as has its boundaries protected, and thus possesses a kind of independence. This protection may consist in fortresses, or important natural obstacles presented by the country, or even in its being separated by a considerable distance from the rest of the space embraced in the war. Such a portion is not a mere piece of the whole, but a small whole complete in itself.<sup>1</sup>

The term *theater* also refers to a staging of military action. For a while, the hills around Kobanê turned very literally into a theater: a drive-in cinema for tanks and other bystanders.

We saw flying objects, clouds of smoke, flashes of light. On cell phones, one could also see headless people in Daesh videos. All of this was just as incomprehensible as the relief on the Göbekli Tepe pillar (the first figure).

The vulture hovering over the decapitated person. I saw it on my mobile phone. In fact you can see it on yours, too. Just Google "Göbekli Tepe" and "vulture pillar"; it will come up. You will see that someone added red lines to the guy without a head, maybe in order to make the shape more visible.

This is how machines "understand" images, too. They project lines and boxes onto photographs to track and analyze objects.<sup>2</sup> By adding lines and boxes to images, machines allegedly become more autonomous. This goes especially for recent weapons systems that are called autonomous to convey the idea

that they are becoming gradually more independent of human supervision and control.<sup>3</sup>

But images are not decoded by machines just to prove their intelligence. They are used as models to trigger actions and to create reality. Just as humans used plans and maps to change the world, so do machines use machine-readable communication to do the same.

“Autonomy,” however, has several different meanings: The battle of Kobanê itself was a fight for autonomy, not for machines but for humans. Autonomy means something different from the perspective of Kobanê’s defenders: it means autonomy from statehood as such. Not only from the state of Syria or Turkey but from the state per se. Autonomy is not separatism, not a taking over or occupation of the state, but the creation of parallel structures within existing ones.

The images on the Göbekli Tepe pillars mark an important junction in the process of creating the state. They were produced at the very beginning of statehood. Indeed, some archeologists claim that the production of these images itself created a precursor to statehood, in the Stone Age. Experts used to think that agriculture preceded statehood and organized religion. Göbekli Tepe suggests that it might have been the other way around: Cult created art. Art created the division of labor. Some people had to produce food for others. Agriculture seemed to be a solution. Scientists think that the complex building and carving process brought about a social hierarchy in order to enable the necessary infrastructure. In producing sculptural images of a flying vulture hovering above a human without a head, state-like structures were created, perhaps, as a sort of byproduct. The images on the pillar perhaps became a model for creating a different, and likely more unequal, social reality.

As I said, no one knows what the images on the Göbekli Tepe pillars mean. There are no captions, soundtrack, or explanations. There was no writing and there is no oral history. But we still live within their consequences: within states, societies marked by private property and class inequality, societies in which everything belongs to someone.

In his work *Riding on a Cloud* (2016), Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué claims that his main protagonist—a character based on his brother Yasser—lost his ability to recognize or understand images after being shot in the head by a sniper. Since he sustained brain damage, images have become meaningless compositions of lines, colors, and materials for him. He cannot recognize anything in images. The sniper's bullet has destroyed his faculty of identification.

Images for machines look different from images for humans. In their purest form, as transmitted data, they are incomprehensible, even imperceptible to humans. They may be coded as pulses of light or magnetic charges or long lines of seemingly random letters. If we were able to see them, they might have as little meaning for us as any picture might have for a person shot in the head by a sniper, more abstract than even lines and boxes. We are as challenged to see an image made by and for autonomous machines as someone hit by a sniper is challenged to see images made by and for other humans.

Maybe the art history of the twentieth century can be understood as an anticipatory tutorial to help humans decode images made by machines, for machines. Look at this Mondrian painting, for example ([Fig. 3](#)).

DES9N7bxsOmHupY4JsjDg6fZ7vaFIZa WDBASiCj6vN+S  
VYuCa9Bo5LdJHmco+kpmK2PTvlShVkxpOwt59hGX6sdIT  
apaRgEGCB8FZt3iSkE9EdmShv5vmSv3oMrCoSFlqnLeGY  
9Wh6hNCNx4nUfxtzjoExo494fUr+hZebjFTo5ow//oy22  
fW8fuwicImoEm7y28cFSmN5ITVpjzDabYQBjYPgRpLStG  
jRMcsilxGH6Ud3nweSyqjimsCs6f2OL4JuolfPTSvap9/  
hiab9VKmyBM3WbOVwAi+wLjoS6k1FcAcyjQo8HU M3v  
GALSnPn7w+wnD5YNKRdXPVpQ8tq+stidQzFdESSzajS7  
rPC81pZrIjW3tXOkRDmusp/mEzfTEHOsFRq9eq3kOJr+  
CXXSOhjXuSSPVNH1rt8JIDUts529L qAb5pPfYta1L4bD  
5LK3hNywWoCTsE xgg5jkR64boO/RUB4cYIVQWNSHEv  
TtTz++mI+rYsZjlslyhEf6fGAMQPDyqoo XrhjFZEX  
1mBprRDPAHbA4ROL38lHdpJTDIt3DaWuhsTKWzaAMw  
MLlloiiIP8j7gEZXAwDsaJy+wc4a4iFZB7bCGB5ndwCS3  
hoBNFq7kESbW+5wiBU7w6nEi NLYanDUoFWoDR1IBa  
EAoX2vdbhIPXfVsgWmgDGwZByozblTQJJqYaQCOU7  
ko+QffkqRxsO43RN2BnboNsFFCGDPgV5hkJMDXYhag  
rpq/wLoqs6Ap

*Fig. 3. Piet Mondrian, Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red, 1937–42.*

The colored grid typical for Mondrian is perhaps an unconscious exercise for humans trying to learn how to see like a machine, for acquiring the posthuman vision that abounds today.

This is posthuman documentary: light and radio waves permeating every space unseen, whole lives transformed into patterns that must be translated to be perceptible to any human. Images that, again, become models to create social reality.

Look at these two guys walking through ruins holding their laptops like divining rods ([Fig. 4](#)).

JJqYaQCOU7ko+QffkqRxsO43RN2BnboNsFFCGDPgV5hk  
JMDXYhagrpq/wLoqs6ApQUT2L2P/TmaOQ6xKmSjuymn  
6E76xnYYN85Bp9oLyrFbg6zRWcpfUdMQssH7jlkKiAu  
YkY96TI6iltGoK1sT8hyZmUz7 mz7PWzcas7iEH/pkB  
317a7zaS3sNANofRI7AMXbooAUo595liMIWMjFuuKU  
telKU4Xp8WxypzVmvSSGzLZjr6PKgo6ZWGhLwQ2Zk/Hb  
WIPVogK1imYoWDZID+Zm 4wYwDKoiC5zHgDsTwmpno  
R5e9x7vh9o33LwV+l9LoQkY/oD4HN8v/sJjVM3wSaMVT  
CKsk54wiy+X2wEVBEorN9oDMVNCTh1WKS9BYmu1K  
+q6ugLiL3RiD MAXXwQQ7WTcKnBpn/rMQ9nzuPB9Ez  
RwryZ5boXyzHj/UloA8NmC6UgV5ZUTKPa8Ln4FMch7  
W295U nzu7JbPTxQQq5y3JZ+T4YbiWEBYidFSxSVAf3x  
CH3d7cfPAJczKcjTTRzadzlmr/C5Fk bMwDu5Hr4titAk  
MrxHE6OHqtB1DW2RbujRKcAFohk3vnmFU1o16ylrc+  
WXCyZs zZcAxcPRaW3bjCwAu79nSQGbZO1c6AHyLsud  
UNZIG3bO8ZMacOvJC+Kq4opOA5 u2wD37VbWPSyYpBi  
3pBagmOyKdjp+HwyQbXPhN5RecG2u/MqNoSbCZg2My7  
Cj44HES1jrWrfGx+1+

*Fig. 4. Two journalists from DIHA news agency searching for a WiFi signal in Kobanê, January 2015.*

They weren't looking for water but rather for a Turkish cell-phone provider's signal, to send their own signals from the battlefield. I spoke to them on the day of the city's liberation. They were journalists for a Kurdish news agency who had spent a couple of weeks inside the besieged city. Some evenings they tried to crawl out of the city underneath the barbed wire but were shot at by Turkish border guards. So they returned to the ruins, looking for a signal to file their stories. But this was not so easy. The internet changed with the weather, they said. And every evening they had to find another shelter in the midst of the destruction as they followed the migrant, unpredictable signal wafting across the border.

But obviously every bit of data transmitted by cell phones in this area is collected; and we know where and by whom. An article by Laura Poitras and others analyzing documents provided by Edward Snowden claims that all cell-phone data in

the region was monitored at a NSA listening station near Ankara and then passed on to Turkish intelligence services.<sup>4</sup> According to the article, these signals would then be used by Turkish authorities to intimidate, indict, and incarcerate activists, or even worse.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, when this kind of information was acted upon more than thirty civilians were killed by an air strike close to the Iraqi border in December 2011.<sup>5</sup>

Look at your phones. See if you can find the vulture on the pillar at Göbekli Tepe hovering over the decapitated person. Which lines and boxes were added to this photograph while it was squeezed through the circuits of state surveillance? Which objects were identified? On grounds of which calculations were they considered for intelligence use or discarded? Which actions were triggered? Which flying objects launched?

Machines show one another unintelligible images, or, more generally, sets of data that cannot be perceived by human vision. They are used as models to create reality. But what kind of reality is created by unintelligible images? Is this why reality itself has become to a certain degree unintelligible to human consciousness?

What kind of state will be created as a result of these operations? A state that shrouds most of its operations in secrecy, retracting behind secret legislation; a deep state in which inequality is simultaneously on the rise?

If models for reality increasingly consist of sets of data unintelligible to human vision, the reality created after them might be partly unintelligible for humans too. Images in which whole lives become patterns that autonomous machines use to gossip about you or pull the trigger. Images that, if applied, create a reality that looks in part as if your brain was damaged

by a sniper, one readable only by machines. A reality consisting of dead lines and kill boxes. In which you don't understand your own eyes.

Images that might create corporate states as a byproduct.

An artist colleague from Ukraine told me a story. His name is Oleg Fonaryov, and he made a beautiful photography project around it.<sup>6</sup> He asked one question: What if human evolution responded to the change of light sources around us? For millions of years, the only light on earth came from the stars and the sun, maybe some fire or candles. Now there are a lot of electric lights and tons of screens. Not to speak of those posthuman documentaries flying through the bones of the dead and the living. In the history of evolution, organic bodies have changed to deal with changing environments. What senses, what organs will people grow to pick up invisible images? To decode data streams that we cannot presently detect? How will people evolve in order to adapt to an environment modeled on unintelligible imagery?

On the night of Kobanê's liberation, the projection didn't work properly at the big celebration party on the Turkish side of the border. There was a big screen hung from a mosque. But there was no input to the projector. Then a desktop image appeared (Fig. 5).



DES9N7bxsOmHupY4JsjDg6fZ7va FIZaWDBASiCj6vN+S  
VYuCa9Bo5LdJHmco+kpmK2PTvlShVkxpOwt59hGX6sd  
ITapaRgEGCB8FZt3iSkE9 EdmShv5vmSv3oMrCoSFlqnL  
eGY9Wh6hNCNx4nUfxtzjoExo494fUr +hZebjFTo5ow//oy  
22fW8fuwicImoEm7y28cFSmN5ITVpjzDabYQ BjYPgRpL  
StGjRMcsilxGH6Ud3nweSyqjimsCs6f2OL4JuofPTSVAP  
9/hiab9VKmyBM3 WbOVwAi+wLjo S6k1FcAcyjQo8  
HUM3vGALSnPn7w+wnD5 YNKRdXPVpQ8tq+stidQz  
FdESSzajS7rPC81pzrIjW3tXOKrDmusp/mEzfTEHOsFRq9  
cq3kOJr+CXXSOhjXuSSPVNH1rt8JIDUts529Lq  
Ab5pPfYta1L4bD5LK3hNy wWoCTsExgg5jkR64boO/

*Fig. 5. Celebration of the liberation of Kobanê, January 2015. A projection forms the backdrop for dances and speeches.*

It shows a masked guerrilla and a couple of flags. But that was not the interesting part. The interesting part was the array of icons on the desktop, for communications software, image-processing tools, encryption software, FTP clients. Though it was meant to be the backdrop of the celebration, it actually became a document in itself. It showed a workplace and its tools. It was a document of an autonomous production of images. What kind of reality will be created using these tools? Will they help realize autonomy for humans?

And then again: Why is the person on the desktop wearing a mask? Because he or she has already evolved the sensors predicted by Oleg? Can he or she already figure out posthuman documentary images? Is he or she hiding her new organs under a balaclava?

I finally saw the birds and the headless people with my own eyes.

In a refugee camp in Suruç across the border from Kobanê, teenagers were rehearsing a dance directed by a young girl in a guerrilla uniform. They were vigorously romping around to traditional music.

But suddenly they all dropped to the ground, as if they had been hit by falling bombs or some other lethal violence. At one point, their heads were covered by the scarves used as belts in the region. Under my eyes they transformed into representations of corpses.

But one by one the bodies were picked up by the choreographer girl, who was playing a flying bird. All the bodies on the ground slowly morphed into birds—not vultures, but cranes. And then they flew away.

Migratory cranes have been in the region for at least 12,000 years. They appear on Göbekli Tepe's pillars. But conservationists in Urfa have been waiting for the birds in vain in the past few years. Because of the war in Syria, they stopped coming. Now the choreographer girl brought them back.

Her name is Medya.

## Duty Free Art

### First Chapter: The National Museum

This is a file published in 2012 by WikiLeaks. It forms part of WikiLeaks's Syria files database. The file is called "316787\_Vision Presentation—Oct 30 2010 Eng.pptx," in PowerPoint format, dated October 2010.<sup>1</sup> It details Syrian First Lady Asma al-Assad's plans for the future of Syria's museums. Her foundation aims to establish a network of museums to promote Syria's economic and social development and strengthen national identity and cultural pride. The Louvre is listed as a partner in developing this plan.<sup>2</sup> Both the Louvre and the Guggenheim Bilbao are named as role models for a redesigned National Museum in Damascus.

A conference is planned to unveil the winner of an international competition for the design of this National Museum in April 2011.

However, three weeks prior to this date, twenty protesters were "reportedly killed as 100,000 people marched in the city of Daraa."<sup>3</sup> By then, invitations for the conference had already been issued to a host of prominent speakers, including the directors of the Louvre and the British Museum. On April 28, 2011, *Art Newspaper* reports that the conference has been canceled due to street protests.<sup>4</sup> The winner of the architectural competition for the National Museum has never been announced.

## Second Chapter: Never Again

To build a nation, Benedict Anderson suggested, there should be print capitalism and a museum to narrate the nation's history and design its identity.<sup>5</sup> Today—instead of print—there is data capitalism and a lot of museums. To build a museum, a nation is not necessary. But if nations are a way to organize time and space, so is the museum. And as times and spaces change, so do museum spaces.



The image above shows the municipal art gallery of Diyarbakir in Turkey. In September 2014, it hosts a show on genocide and its consequences, called “Never Again.” Its poster shows the former prime minister of West Germany Willy Brandt on his knees in front of the Warsaw ghetto memorial.

But the show is not on. Instead, more than 200 Yazidi refugees are crowding the gallery.

After the Daesh militia crossed and effectively abolished parts of the border between Syria and Iraq in August 2014,<sup>6</sup> around 100,000 Yazidi refugees escaped the region of Shingal in northern Iraq. Most of them had trekked on foot across Mt. Shingal, assisted by Kurdish rebel groups, who had opened a safety corridor. While the majority stayed in refugee camps in

Rojava, northern Syria, and several camps in northern Iraq, many refugees crossed into Turkey's Kurdish regions, where they were welcomed with amazing hospitality. The city of Diyarbakir opened its municipal gallery as an emergency shelter.

Once settled on mats within the gallery space, many refugees started asking for SIM cards to try to reach missing family members by cell phone.

This is the desk of the curator, left empty.<sup>7</sup>



In September 2014, this museum became a refugee camp. It did not represent a nation, but instead sheltered people fleeing from national disintegrations.

### Third Chapter: Conditions of Possibility

According to the Google Ngram viewer,<sup>8</sup> usage of the word "impossible" has dropped steeply since around the mid-twentieth century. But what does this tell us? Does it mean that fewer and fewer things are impossible? Does it mean that impossibility "as such" is in historical decline? Perhaps it just means that the conditions for possibilities as such are subject to

change over time? Are both the possible and the impossible defined by historical and external conditions?

According to Immanuel Kant, time and space are necessary conditions for us to perceive or understand anything. Without time and space, knowledge, experience, and vision cannot unfold. Kant calls this perspective “criticism.” With this in mind, what kind of time and space is necessary for contemporary art to become manifest? Or rather: What does criticism about contemporary art say about time and space today?

To brutally summarize a lot of scholarly texts: contemporary art is made possible by neoliberal capital plus the internet, biennials, art fairs, parallel pop-up histories, growing income inequality. Let’s add asymmetric warfare—as one of the reasons for the vast redistribution of wealth—real estate speculation, tax evasion, money laundering, and deregulated financial markets to this list.

To paraphrase the philosopher Peter Osborne’s illuminating insights on this topic: contemporary art shows us the lack of a (global) time and space. Moreover, it projects a fictional unity onto a variety of different ideas of time and space, thus providing a common surface where there is none.<sup>9</sup>

Contemporary art thus becomes a proxy for the global commons, for the lack of any common ground, temporality, or space. It is defined by a proliferation of locations, and a lack of accountability. It works by way of major real estate operations transforming cities worldwide as they reorganize urban space. It is even a space of civil wars that trigger art-market booms a decade or so later through the redistribution of wealth by warfare. It takes place on servers and by means of fiber-optic infrastructure, and whenever public debt miraculously transforms into private wealth. Contemporary art happens when

taxpayers are deluded into believing they are bailing out other sovereign states when in fact they are subsidizing international banks that thus get compensated for pushing high-risk debt onto vulnerable nations.<sup>10</sup> Or when this or that regime decides it needs the PR equivalent of a nip and tuck procedure.

But contemporary art also creates new physical spaces that bypass national sovereignty. Let me give you a contemporary example: freeport art storage.

This is the mother of all freeport art storage spaces: Geneva freeport, a tax-free zone in Geneva that includes parts of an old freight station and an industrial storage building. The free-trade zone takes up the backyard and the fourth floor of the old storage building, so that different jurisdictions run through one and the same building, as the other floors are set outside the freeport zone. A new art storage space was opened in 2014. Up until just a few years before, the freeport wasn't even officially considered part of Switzerland.



This building is rumored to house thousands of Picassos, but no one knows the exact number since documentation is rather opaque. There is little doubt though that its contents could compete with any very large museum.<sup>11</sup>

Let's assume that this is one of the most important art spaces in the world right now. It is not only not public, but it is also sitting inside a very interesting geography.

From a legal standpoint, freeport art storage spaces are somewhat extraterritorial. Some are located in the transit zones of airports or in tax-free zones. Keller Easterling describes the free zone as a "fenced enclave for warehousing."<sup>12</sup> It has now become a primary organ of global urbanism copied and pasted to locations worldwide. It is an example of "extra-statecraft," as Easterling terms it, within a "mongrel state of exception," beyond the laws of the nation-state. In this deregulatory state of exemption, corporations are privileged at the expense of common citizens, "investors" replace taxpayers, and modules supplant buildings: "[Freeports'] attractions are similar to those offered by offshore financial centres: security and confidentiality, not much scrutiny ... and an array of tax advantages ... Goods in freeports are technically in transit, even if in reality the ports are used more and more as permanent homes for accumulated wealth."<sup>13</sup>

The freeport is thus a zone for permanent transit.

Although it is fixed, does the freeport also define perpetual ephemerality? Is it simply an extraterritorial zone, or is it also a rogue sector carefully settled for financial profitability?<sup>14</sup>

The freeport contains multiple contradictions: it is a zone of terminal impermanence; it is also a zone of legalized extra-legality maintained by nation-states trying to emulate failed states as closely as possible—by selectively losing control. Thomas Elsaesser once used the term "constructive instability" to describe the aerodynamic properties of fighter jets that gain decisive advantages by navigating at the brink of system failure.<sup>15</sup> They would more or less "fall" or "fail" in the desired



direction. This constructive instability is implemented within nation-states by incorporating zones where they “fail” on purpose. Switzerland for example contains “245 open customs warehouses,”<sup>16</sup> enclosing zones of legal and administrative exception. Are this state and others a container for different types of jurisdictions that get applied, or rather do not get applied, in relation to the wealth of corporations or individuals? Does this kind of state become a package for opportunistic statelessness? As Elsaesser pointed out, his whole idea of “constructive instability” originated with a discussion of Swiss artists Fischli and Weiss’s work “Der Lauf der Dinge” (1987). Here all sorts of things are knocked off balance in celebratory collapse. The film’s glorious motto is:

*Am schönsten ist das Gleichgewicht, kurz bevor’s zusammenbricht.*

(Balance is most beautiful just at the point when it is about to collapse).

Among many other things, freeports also become a zone for duty free art, a zone where control and failure are calibrated according to “constructive instability” so that things cheerfully hang in a permanently frozen failing balance.

#### Fourth Chapter: Duty Free Art

Huge art storage spaces are being created worldwide in what could essentially be called a luxury no man’s land, tax havens where artworks are shuffled around from one storage room to another once they get traded. This is also one of the prime spaces for contemporary art: an offshore or extraterritorial museum. In September 2014, Luxembourg opened its own freeport. The country is not alone in trying to replicate the success of the Geneva freeport: “A freeport that opened at

Changi Airport in Singapore in 2010 is already close to full. Monaco has one, too. A planned 'freeport of culture' in Beijing would be the world's largest art-storage facility."<sup>17</sup> A major player in setting up many of these facilities is the art-handling company Natural Le Coultre, run by Swiss national Yves Bouvier.

Freeport art storage facilities are secret museums. Their spatial conditions are reflected in their designs. In contrast to the rather perfunctory Swiss facility, designers stepped up their game at the freeport art storage facility in Singapore:

Designed by Swiss architects, Swiss engineers and Swiss security experts, the 270,000-square-foot facility is part bunker, part gallery. Unlike the free-port facilities in Switzerland, which are staid yet secure warehouses, the Singapore FreePort sought to combine security and style. The lobby, showrooms and furniture were designed by contemporary designers Ron Arad and Johanna Grawunder. A gigantic arcing sculpture by Mr. Arad, titled "Cage sans Frontières" (Cage Without Borders), spans the entire lobby. Paintings that line the exposed concrete walls lend the facility the air of a gallery. Private rooms and vaults, barricaded by seven-ton doors, line the corridors. Near the lobby, private galleries give collectors a chance to view or show potential buyers their art under museum-quality spotlights. A planned second phase will double the size of the facility to 538,000 square feet. Collectors are picked up by FreePort staff at their plane and whisked by limousine, any time of day or night, to the facility. If the client is packing valuables, an armed escort will be provided.<sup>18</sup>

The title "Cage Without Borders" has a double meaning. It not only means that the cage has no limits, but also that the prison is now everywhere, in an extrastatecraft art withdrawal facility that seeps through the cracks of national sovereignty and establishes its own logistic network. In this ubiquitous prison, rules still apply, though it might be difficult to specify exactly which ones, to whom or what they apply, and how they are implemented. Whatever they are, their grip seems to

considerably loosen in inverse proportion to the value of the assets in question. But this construction is not only a device realized in one particular location in 3D space. It is also basically a stack of juridical, logistical, economic, and data-based operations, a pile of platforms mediating between clouds and users via state laws, communication protocols, corporate standards, etc., that interconnect not only via fiber-optic connections but aviation routes as well.<sup>19</sup>



Freeport art storage is to this “stack” as the national museum traditionally was to the nation. It sits in between countries in pockets of superimposing sovereignties where national jurisdiction has either voluntarily retreated or been demolished. If biennials, art fairs, 3D renderings of gentrified real estate, starchitect museums decorating various regimes, etc., are the corporate surfaces of these areas, the secret museums are their dark web, their Silk Road into which things disappear, as into an abyss of withdrawal.<sup>20</sup>

Think of the artworks and their movement. They travel inside a network of tax-free zones and also inside the storage spaces themselves. Perhaps as they do, they never get uncrated. They move from one storage room to the next without being seen. They stay inside boxes and travel outside national territories with

a minimum of tracking or registration, like insurgents, drugs, derivative financial products, and other so-called investment vehicles. For all we know, the crates could even be empty. It is a museum of the internet era, but a museum of the dark net, where movement is obscured and data-space is clouded.

Movements of a very different kind are detailed in WikiLeaks's Syria files:

From: [sinan@sinan-archiculture.com](mailto:sinan@sinan-archiculture.com)  
To: [mansour.azzam@mopa.gov.sy](mailto:mansour.azzam@mopa.gov.sy)  
Sent: Wednesday, July 07, 2010 4:06 PM  
Subject: Fw: Flight itenary OMA staff  
\*\*\*AMENDMENT\*\*\*\*\*

Dear Mr. Azzam,

This is to confirm the arrival of Mr. Rem Koolhaas and his personal assistant Mr Stephan Petermann on this coming Monday July 12th. We need visa for them as we spoke before (both are Dutch). Their passport photos are attached. They are arriving separately and at different times. Mr. Koolhaas coming from China through Dubai on Emirates airlines (arriving in Damascus at 4:25 PM), while Mr. Stephan Petermann is coming from Vienna on Austrian airlines (arriving in Damascus before Mr. Koolhaas at 3:00 PM).

They are staying at the Art House or at the Four Seasons hotel until their departure on Thursday (at 4:00 pm).<sup>21</sup>

WikiLeaks's Syria database comprises around 2.5 million emails from 680 domains, yet the authenticity of these documents was not verified by WikiLeaks. It can be verified, however, that the PR company Brown Lloyd James was involved in trying to enhance the image of the Assad family.<sup>22</sup> In early 2011, shortly before the start of the Syrian civil war, a *Vogue* story, presciently photographed by war photographer James Nachtwey, portrays

Asma al-Assad as the “Rose of the Desert,” a modernizer and patron of culture.<sup>23</sup>

In February 2012, one year into the war, Anonymous and affiliated organizations hacked into the email server of the Syrian Ministry of Presidential Affairs, in solidarity with Syrian bloggers, protesters, and activists.<sup>24</sup> The inboxes of seventy-eight of Assad’s aides and advisers were accessed. Apparently, some used the same password: “12345.”<sup>25</sup> The leaked emails included correspondence—mostly through intermediaries—between Mansour Azzam, the Minister of Presidential Affairs, and the studios of Rem Koolhaas (OMA), Richard Rogers, and Herzog & de Meuron regarding various issues. To paraphrase the content of some of the emails: Rogers and Koolhaas were being invited to speak in Damascus and, with Koolhaas, these visits extended to project discussions, including for the National Parliament.<sup>26</sup> Herzog & de Meuron offered a complimentary concept design proposal for the Al-Assad House for Culture in Aleppo, and expressed interest in the selection process for the parliament project.<sup>27</sup> A lot of this correspondence is really just gossip about the studios by way of intermediaries. There is also lots of spam. No communication with any of the studios is documented after the end of November 2010. With protests starting in January 2011, a full-blown uprising began in Syria by the end of March of that year. All conversations and negotiations between officials and architects seem to have stopped as scrutiny of the Assad regime increased in the buildup to actual hostilities. The authenticity of none of these documents could be confirmed independently, so for the time being their status is that of unmoored sets of data, which may or may not have anything to do with their presumed authors and receivers.<sup>28</sup> But they most definitely are sets of data, hosted by WikiLeaks servers

that can be described in terms of their circulation regardless of presumed provenance and authorship.

Take Saif al-Islam Gaddafi's painting, *War* (2001). Saif is the son of the late head of Libya, Muammar Gaddafi, and was a political figure in Libya prior to his father's deposition by rebel forces backed by NATO airstrikes in 2011. This painting was exhibited as part of a show called "The Desert is not Silent" in London in 2002.

*War* depicts NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999.

The artist writes: "A civil war broke out in Kosovo, which shattered the picture and its theme. The sea unleashed itself, anger fell from the sky, which came up against a stream of blood."<sup>29</sup> Saif al-Islam said in a statement at the time: "Not only do we buy weapons and sell gas and oil, but we have culture, art and history."<sup>30</sup>



In September 2010, OMA expresses the desire to work in Syria.<sup>31</sup> A subsequent email from Sinan Ali Hassan—a local architect who acts as an intermediary—to Mansour Azzam flaunts the advantages of such a collaboration: "Rem was the previous supervisor and boss of Zaha Hadid in addition to the

fact that he is considered to be more important (if not much more important) than Lord Richard Rogers, in terms of celebrity and professional status.”<sup>32</sup>

From the conversation between OMA and Sinan Ali Hassan, it becomes clear that OMA’s proposal might be based on a project proposed in Libya previously: “This would be a similar scope to the Libyan Sahara vision we showed you, and the one that Rem discussed with the President.”<sup>33</sup>

In an interview in June 2010, Koolhaas states that people close to Saif al-Islam Gaddafi had approached him.<sup>34</sup> At the time Saif is widely seen as reformer. OMA’s project in Libya revolves around preservation and is exhibited at the Venice Biennale.<sup>35</sup> The project is later mentioned as a possible precedent for a project proposal for the desert region around Palmyra, Syria. Since the uprising in early 2011, this area has been deeply affected by the ensuing civil war.

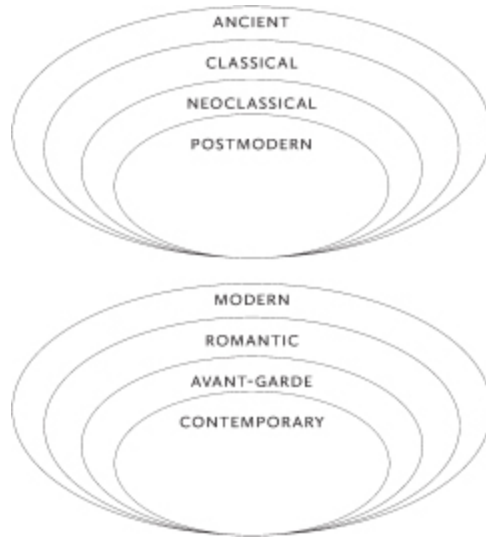
At present, the International Criminal Court has requested Saif Gaddafi’s extradition from Libya, where he remains imprisoned.<sup>36</sup>

## Fifth Chapter: A Dream

WARNING: THIS IS THE ONLY FICTIONAL CHAPTER IN THIS TALK

To come back to the original question: What happened to time and space? Why are they broken and disjointed? Why is space shattered into container-like franchising modules, dark webs, civil wars, and tax havens replicating all over the world?

With these thoughts in mind, I fell asleep and started dreaming ... and my dream was pretty strange. I dreamt about some diagrams in one of Peter Osborne’s recent texts.



They describe a genealogy of contemporary art; I wasn't focusing on their content, but instead on their form. The first thing I noticed was that the succession of concentric circles seemed to indicate a dent, or a dimple, in any case, a 3D cavity. But why would time and space start sagging, so to speak? Could there be an issue with gravity? Maybe a micro black hole could cause these circles to curve? But then again, it is much more likely that something else caused this dimple.

Suddenly, I found the answer to the question. I started losing gravity and flying up towards space. Peter Osborne was floating around there too, and with an unlikely Texas accent, he pointed down and showed me this sight.





Seen from above, Peter's diagram transformed into a sight.

If you look at it from above, the slight cavity vanishes. It becomes a flat screen. From here on, people just ended up seeing the genealogy of contemporary art in Peter's diagrams instead of a depression indicating that the target had been hit already and that a gaping crater had opened at the site of impact.

Seen from above, the genealogy of contemporary art was acting as a proxy or a screen: a sight to cover the site of impact.

Behind his astronaut's visor, Peter croaked:

This is the role of contemporary art. It is a proxy, a stand-in. It is projected onto a site of impact, after time and space have been shattered into a disjunctive unity—and proceed to collapse into rainbow-colored stacks designed by starchitects.

Contemporary art is a kind of layer or proxy which pretends that everything is still ok, while people are reeling from the effects of shock policies, shock and awe campaigns, reality TV, power cuts, any other form of cuts, cat GIFs, tear gas—all of which are all completely dismantling and rewiring the sensory apparatus and potentially also human faculties of reasoning and understanding by causing a state of shock and confusion, of permanent hyperactive depression.

You don't know what's going on behind the doors of the freeport storage rooms either, do you? Let me tell you what's happening in there: time and space are smashed and rearranged into little pieces like in a freak particle accelerator, and the result is the cage without borders called contemporary art today.

—AND THIS IS WHERE THE FICTIONAL PART ABRUPTLY ENDS—

I woke in shock and found myself reading this PDF document aloud.

# OMA

Dr. Bashar al-Assad  
President of the Syrian Republic

Rotterdam, 15<sup>th</sup> November 2010

Dear Mr. President,

Following our meeting in July and the subsequent request that we prepare an outline OMA/AMO approach for the strategic development of Al Badia, I am pleased to present you with the Al Badia Vision proposal for your review.

Our approach to this study begins with the conception of Al Badia as a unified entity within Syria. We envisage the region to act as a powerful resource for the benefit of the entire country while preserving its unique heritage. The Al Badia Vision creates a plan of action and of preservation for a set of subjects that are crucial to the region.

I am looking forward to meeting with you again to discuss the study as outlined in the attached proposal, which we trust demonstrates both our sincere interest in Syria and our capabilities to consider various challenges to the development of the region.

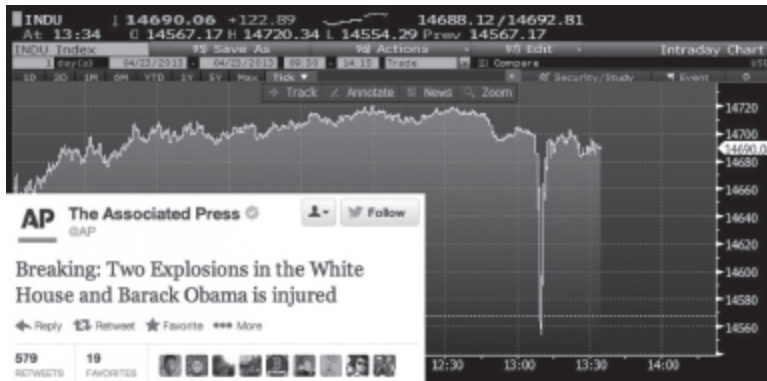
I will be visiting Syria during the fourth week of November for the purpose of giving a Public lecture in Damascus as well as to expand my knowledge and experience of your country. It would be a great pleasure to elaborate further with you on our prospective engagement with Al Badia and other projects such as the National Parliament and other national and cultural projects during my stay.

Yours sincerely,



Rem Koolhaas

Haar Bokateweg 149  
3032 AD Rotterdam - The Netherlands  
t +31 10 243 8200 - f +31 10 243 8202  
office@oma.com - www.oma.com



## Sixth Chapter: And Now to Justin Bieber

The Twitter feed of E! Online on May 4, 2013 has someone posing as Bieber triumphantly blurting out: "I'm a gay."

As you can see, the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA) has hacked the Twitter account.

Who is the SEA? It is a group of pro-Assad regime hackers. They also hacked *Le Monde* in France in early 2015. Previously, the SEA had commandeered the websites of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the recruitment division of the U.S. Marine Corps. The group also hacked the Twitter feed of the Associated Press and sent out a false report about a bombing at the White House.<sup>37</sup>

The above diagram shows the consequences of this tweet on Wall Street. In three minutes, the "fake tweet erased \$136 billion in equity market value."<sup>38</sup>

Anonymous Syria and its multiple allies had hacked the Syrian Electronic Army and dumped coordinates of alleged members onto the dark web.<sup>39</sup> The data-space of Syria is embattled, hacked, fragmented. Moreover, it extends from the AP to Wall Street to Russian and Australian servers, as well as to the Twitter accounts of a celebrity magazine. It extends to WikiLeaks's servers, where the Syria files are hosted, and which had to move

around quite a lot previously, being ousted from Amazon in 2010. It was once rumored that WikiLeaks tried to move their servers to an offshore location, an extraterritorial former oil platform called Sealand.<sup>40</sup> This would in fact have replicated the freeport scenario from a different angle.

But to ask a more general question: How does the internet, or more precisely networked operations between different databases, affect the physical construction of museums—or the impossibility thereof?

## Seventh Chapter: An Email Sent from Switzerland and the Reply

From: Hito Steyerl <mailto:xy@protonmail.ch>  
Sent: Tuesday, February 17, 2015 8:05 PM  
To: Office Reception  
Subject: Request for confirmation of authenticity

Dear Sirs,

I would like to kindly ask you to confirm the authenticity of various email communications between OMA/AMO and Syrian government officials and intermediaries published by Wikileaks as part of their “Syria files” in 2012.

I am a Berlin based filmmaker and writer working on a lecture about the transformations of national museums under conditions of civil war, both in data- and 3D physical space.

There is no intent to scandalize the communication between OMA and the Syrian Ministry of Presidential Affairs. The intent is to ask how both internet communication and the (near-) collapse of some nations states affect the planning of contemporary museum spaces.

In this context it would be interesting to know more about the circumstances that led to the end of project discussions in Syria. I am sure that your office had its reasons for this and it would be great to be able to include these in the discussion.

Pls find below a list of links I plan on quoting.

Best regards,

Hito Steyerl

[https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2089311\\_urgent.html](https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2089311_urgent.html)

[https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2092135\\_very-important.html](https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2092135_very-important.html)

[https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2091860\\_fwd-.html](https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2091860_fwd-.html)

[http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&edata-source=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CB8QfjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwikileaks.org%2Fsyria-files%2Fattach%2F319%2F319092\\_101115\\_Rem%2520Koolhaas%2520letter.pdf&ei=wt\\_AVPCiIMj2O7S2gIAO&usg=AFQjCNH7127P\\_2iKG\\_V5Es1zCksXsxDd5A&bvm=bv.83829542,d.ZWU](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&edata-source=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CB8QfjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwikileaks.org%2Fsyria-files%2Fattach%2F319%2F319092_101115_Rem%2520Koolhaas%2520letter.pdf&ei=wt_AVPCiIMj2O7S2gIAO&usg=AFQjCNH7127P_2iKG_V5Es1zCksXsxDd5A&bvm=bv.83829542,d.ZWU)

Sent from ProtonMail, encrypted email based in Switzerland:

RE: Request for confirmation of authenticity

From: Jeremy Higginbotham <[xy@oma.com](mailto:xy@oma.com)>

Hito Steyerl <[xy@protonmail.ch](mailto:xy@protonmail.ch)>

At 26/02/2015 7:13 am

Dear Hito Steyerl,

Thank you for your email. We are not able to confirm the authenticity of the documents linked below.

However, we wish you good luck with your work.

Best regards,

Jeremy Higginbotham

Head of Public Affairs

OMA

Since the Edward Snowden leaks, I started using ProtonMail, an initiative by CERN researchers who are graciously providing a free encrypted email platform. This is how they describe their project, using the map of Switzerland:

All information on the ProtonMail servers is stored under the jurisdiction of the Cantonal Court of Geneva, taking advantage of the privacy laws of Switzerland and the Canton.

All information on the ProtonMail servers is stored under the jurisdiction of the Cantonal Court of Geneva, taking advantage of Switzerland's and the Canton's privacy laws.

But OMA/AMO's friendly response is not stored in a free-port, it is just stored under "regular" Swiss jurisdiction in a former military command center deep inside the Swiss Alps.<sup>41</sup> This is the jurisdiction and encryption I use to try to make any potential government interference with some of my data just a tiny bit more cumbersome. I am in fact taking advantage of legal protections that have enabled tax evasion and money laundering through Swiss banks and other facilities on an astounding scale.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, the mere usage of privacy-related web tools flags users for NSA scrutiny, thus effectively reversing its desired effect.<sup>43</sup> The screen of anonymity turns out to be a paradoxical device.

The ambiguous effect of policies destined to increase anonymity also figures on a different level of freeport activity.

On February 25, 2015, Monaco prosecutors arrested Yves Bouvier, the owner of Natural Le Coultre, the company involved with the Luxembourg, Geneva, and Singapore free-ports for suspected art fraud: "The investigation is believed to centre on inflating prices in very big art transactions in which Bouvier was an intermediary."<sup>44</sup> Bouvier allegedly took advantage of the fact

that most artworks held in freeports are owned by *sociétés écran* (literal translation: screen companies). Since transactions were made through these anonymous proxies, buyers and sellers were not able to communicate and control the amount of commission fees charged.<sup>45</sup> The screen that was supposed to provide anonymity for owners may also have worked against them. Invisibility is a screen that sometimes works both ways—though not always. It works in favor of whoever is controlling the screen.

## Eighth Chapter: Shooting at Clocks—The Public Museum

As noted earlier, Benedict Anderson suggested that to build a nation there should be print capitalism and a museum. Nowadays, it is not impossible to build a museum without a nation. We can even look at it more generally and see both nations and museums as just another way to organize time and space; in this case, by smashing them to pieces.

But aren't time and space smashed whenever a new paradigm for a museum is created? This indeed happened in France's July Revolution of 1830, of which Walter Benjamin tells a story.<sup>46</sup> Revolutionaries were shooting at clocks. They had previously also overturned the calendar, renaming months and changing their duration.

And this is the period when the Louvre was stormed yet again—as during every major Paris uprising in the nineteenth century. The prototype for a public museum was created when time and space were smashed and welded anew. The Louvre was created by being stormed. It was stormed in 1792 during the French Revolution and turned from a feudal collection of spoils—a period version of freeport art storage spaces—into a public art

museum, presumably the first in the world, introducing a model of national culture. Afterwards, it turned into the cultural flagship of a colonial empire that tried to authoritatively seed that culture elsewhere, before more recently going into the business of trying to create franchises in feudal states, dictatorships, and combinations thereof.

But the current National Museum of Syria is of a different order. Contrary to plans inspired by the “Bilbao effect,” the museum is hosted online, on countless servers in multiple locations. As Jon Rich and Ali Shamseddine have noted, it is a collection of online videos—of documents and records of innumerable killings, atrocities, and attacks that remain widely unseen.<sup>47</sup> This is the de facto National Museum of Syria, not a Louvre franchise acquired by the Assad foundation. This accidental archive of videos and other documents is made in different genres and styles, showing people digging through rubble, or Twitter-accelerated decapitations in HD. It shows aerial attacks from below, not above. The documents and records produced on the ground end up on a variety of servers worldwide. They are available—in theory—on any screen, except in the locations where they were made, where the act of uploading something to YouTube can get people killed. This spatiotemporal inversion is almost like a reversal of the freeport aggregate art collections.

The entirety of this archive is not adapted to human perception, or at least not to individual perception. Like all large-scale databases—including WikiLeaks’s Syria files—it takes the form of a trove of information without (or with very little) narrative, substantiation, or interpretation. It may be partly visible to the public, but not necessarily entirely intelligible. It remains partly inaccessible, not by means of exclusion, but



because it overwhelms the perceptual capacity and attention span of any single individual.<sup>48</sup>

## Ninth Chapter: Autonomy

Let's go back to the examples mentioned at the beginning: the freeport art storage spaces and the municipal gallery of Diyarbakir that had become a refugee camp. One space withdraws artworks from the world by hoarding them, while the other basically sheltered the escapees of collapsing states. How and where can art be shown publicly, in physical 3D space, without endangering its authors, while taking into account the breathtaking spatial and temporal changes expressed by these two examples? What form could a new model of the public museum take, and how would the notion of the "public" itself change radically in the process of thinking through this?

Let's think back to the freeport art storage spaces and their stock of duty free art. My suggestion is not to shun or belittle this proposition, but to push it even further.

The idea of duty free art has one major advantage over the nation-state cultural model: duty free art ought to *have no duty*—no duty to perform, to represent, to teach, to embody value. It should not be indebted to anyone, nor serve a cause or a master, nor be a means to anything. Duty free art should not be a means to represent a culture, a nation, money, or anything else. Even the duty free art in the freeport storage spaces is not duty free. It is only tax free. It has the duty of being an asset.

Seen like this, duty free art is essentially what traditional autonomous art might have been, had it not been elitist and oblivious to its own conditions of production.<sup>49</sup>

But duty free art is more than a reissue of the old idea of autonomous art. It also transforms the meaning of the battered term “artistic autonomy.” Autonomous art under current temporal and spatial circumstances needs to take these very spatial and temporal conditions into consideration. Art’s conditions of possibility are no longer just the elitist “ivory tower,” but also the dictator’s contemporary art foundation, the oligarch/weapon manufacturer’s tax-evasion scheme, the hedge fund’s trophy,<sup>50</sup> the art student’s debt bondage, leaked troves of data, aggregate spam, and the product of huge amounts of unpaid “voluntary” labor—all of which result in art’s accumulation in freeport cubicles as well as its physical destruction in zones of war or accelerated privatization. Autonomous art within this context could try to understand political autonomy as an experiment in building alternatives to a nation-state model that continues to proclaim national culture while simultaneously practicing “constructive instability” by including gated communities for high-net-worth individuals, much like microversions of failed states. To come back to the example of Switzerland: this country is so pervaded by extraterritorial enclaves with downsized regulations that it could be more precisely defined as an x-percent rogue entity within a solid watch industry. But extrastatecraft can also be defined as political autonomy under completely different circumstances and with very different results, as recent experiments in autonomy from Hong Kong to Rojava have demonstrated.



Autonomous art could even be art set free both from its authors and owners. Remember the disclaimer by OMA? Now imagine every artwork in freeports to be certified by this: "I am not able to confirm the authenticity of this artwork."

This is the Cultural Center in Suruç, Turkey. It is across the border from the city of Kobanê, the administrative center of the autonomous canton of the same name, which is itself located in the Rojava region of northern Syria. It is not a coincidence that the autonomous entities in Rojava are called cantons: they were modeled after Swiss cantons, to emphasize the role that basic democracy played in initially establishing them.<sup>51</sup>

After the attack on Kobanê canton by Daesh fighters in September 2014, the Cultural Center was temporarily turned into another refugee camp, hosting several hundred people who had fled from the besieged region around Kobanê.

A year later, it was hit by a suicide attack by Daesh, killing more than thirty activists. This incident was the start of a renewed civil war in Turkey, during which Kurdish city centers were razed and expropriated under a state of exception which has by now become semi-permanent.

During the same period, looted archeological artifacts from Palmyra, Syria were recovered at Geneva freeport.

## Digital Debris

There is hardly a more famous watercolor painting than Paul Klee's work *Angelus Novus*. Walter Benjamin described the figure on it as a hapless creature, helplessly carried away by the storm of progress, while staring backwards at a rubble heap growing sky high in its wake.<sup>1</sup> Benjamin's aphorism is well known and quite overquoted. But it has a surprising and overlooked consequence, if we take its spatial arrangement seriously.

There is no rubble depicted on the drawing whatsoever. But this doesn't mean there is no rubble at all. Since the angel faces us as spectators, and—according to Benjamin—also faces the rubble, the wreckage must be located in the hors-champ of the drawing. This means that the rubble is where we are. Or, to take it one step further: we, the spectators, might actually be the rubble. We might be the debris of history, those who somehow made it through the twentieth century, but not unscathed. We have become discarded objects and useless commodities caught in the gaze of a shell-shocked angel who drags us along as it is blown away into incertitude.

However, the debris caught in the angel's stare might take on a different form today. Are rubble and wreckage not outdated notions for an age in which information is supposed to be copied without loss and infinitely retrievable and restorable? What could refuse look like in a digital age that prides itself on the

indestructibility and seamless reproducibility of its products? When information presumably has become immortal and immune to the passing of time? Aren't the scars of history signs of an analog age, one which is irrevocably over? Hasn't history itself worn itself out and gradually disintegrated?

Actually, the contrary is the case: history is not over. Its wreckage keeps on piling sky high. Moreover, digital technologies provide additional possibilities for the creative wrecking and degradation of almost anything. They multiply options for destruction, corruption, and debasement. They are great new tools for producing, cloning, and copying historical debris. As they get amplified by political and social violence, digital technologies become not only midwives of history, but also its (plastic) surgeons.

Despite its apparently immaterial nature, digital wreckage remains firmly anchored within material reality. Among its contemporary manifestations are toxic recycling cities like Guiyu in China, where mainboards and hard disks are being scavenged and the ground water is poisoned. But in the digital age, debris is not only composed of destroyed buildings, torn concrete and decaying steel, even though digitalized warfare, the computerization of production, and real estate speculation produce these items in abundance. Digital wreckage is both material and immaterial, data-based debris with a very tangible physical component to it.

There is hardly any better example of such digital debris than spam.<sup>2</sup> Far from being the exception in online communication, spam is actually the rule. Around 80 percent of all email messages have been spam in recent years. Spam forms the bulk of digital writing, its essence. And it too has a firm grasp on reality. It is an active and extensive substance. Far from being

secondary and accidental, this form of digital debris is a substantial expression of a period that has elevated superfluity into one of its guiding principles.

To complete Benjamin's spatial equation: if the angel looks at us, we must be rubble. And if rubble means spam at present, this is the name that the angel bestows on us today.

## You Shall Be Spam

*Pharmacy 81% Replica 5.40% Enhancers 2.30% Phishing 2.30% Degrees 1.30% Casino 1% Weight Loss 0.40% Other 6.30%*<sup>3</sup>

The contemporary use of the term *spam* for unwanted electronic bulk communication takes its cue from its appearance in a Monty Python's Flying Circus sketch from 1970. It is set in a café, where two customers ask for the breakfast menu:

*(Scene: A café. All the customers are Vikings. Mr and Mrs Bun enter—downwards, on wires.)*

MR BUN. Morning.

WAITRESS. Morning.

MR BUN. What have you got, then?

WAITRESS. Well, there's egg and bacon; egg, sausage and bacon; egg and spam; egg, bacon and spam; egg, bacon, sausage and spam; spam, bacon, sausage and spam; spam, egg, spam, spam, bacon and spam; spam, spam, spam, egg and spam, spam spam spam spam spam spam, baked beans, spam spam spam and spam; or lobster thermidor aux crevettes with a mornay sauce garnished with truffle pâté, brandy and a fried egg on top and spam.

MRS BUN. Have you got anything without spam in it?

WAITRESS. Well, there's spam, egg, sausage and spam. That's not got *much* spam in it.

MRS BUN. *(Shrieks.)* I don't want *any* spam!

[...]

MR BUN. Don't make a fuss dear. I'll have your spam. I love it.

I'm having spam, spam, spam, spam, spam ...

VIKINGS. (*Singing.*) Spam, spam, spam, spam ...

MR BUN. ... baked beans, spam, spam and spam.

WAITRESS: Baked beans are off.<sup>4</sup>

Monty Python's sketch is the story of a conquest: spam—the canned food—slowly but decisively invades every item on the menu as well as the whole dialogue, until there is nothing left but spam, spam and spam. This process is celebrated by a band of Vikings and other incongruous participants. Spam inundates the plot and even the final credits at the end of the show. It's a triumph by repetition and as cheerful as it is overwhelming.

In the sketch spam initially refers to the canned meat of the same name. But then this meaning is twisted around to emphasize verbal reiteration and the uncontrolled replication of the term itself. This second meaning came to be amplified in the realm of newly emergent online practices.

In the 1980s, the term spam was literally used as a type of invasion within MUD (multi-user dungeon) environments: people would type the word repeatedly so as to scroll other people's text off screens. Content didn't matter; bulk did. The word spam turned into an inert material, capable of physically blocking out unwanted information.

Sending an irritating, large, meaningless block of text in this way was called *spamming*. This was used as a tactic by insiders of a group that wanted to drive newcomers out of the room so the usual conversation could continue. It was also used to prevent members of rival groups from chatting ... for instance, Star Wars fans often invaded Star Trek chat rooms, filling the space with blocks of text until the Star Trek fans left. This act, previously called *flooding* or *trashing*, came to be known as *spamming*.<sup>5</sup>

Spamming thus emerged as an online activity bent on displacing somebody or something else by using verbal repetition. Words were actually used as extensive objects, which had the potential to spatially push away other words. Nowadays, spam has become more of a commercial calculus. Bulk email messages with commercial or fraudulent intent<sup>6</sup> are flooding data connections worldwide and causing quite substantial economic damage by wasting time and effort. Even though the ratio of customers acquired through this process is extremely small it's still a viable business. Needless to say that effortless technological reproduction forms the economic framework of this venture. Spamming is the pointless repetition of something worthless and annoying, over and over again, to extract a tiny spark of value lying dormant within inert audiences.

## Artificial Meat

But what other conclusions can we draw apart from these very obvious observations? What else does spam as a chunk of contemporary digital rubble tell us about the present? Let's have a closer look.

Before spam became a word that turned into an object, it was an object already. And this object is the item initially celebrated by the Monty Python number: the famous brand of canned meat produced by Hormel Foods Corporation. Its dubious composition has earned it many nicknames, ranging from "Specially Processed American Meats" to "Supply Pressed American Meat," "Something Posing As Meat," "Stuff, Pork and Ham," and "Spare Parts Animal Meat." Its elements look extremely suspicious; its essence is ersatz. Its cheapness is also why it was included in many dishes in the postwar period, perhaps too many as Monty



Python's sketch seems to suggest. Spam was and still is a cheap lower class and army food staple. It presents an uncanny mix between the natural and synthetic. It is both organic and deeply inauthentic, an industrial product with some remnants of nature in it. Meat that has been grinded so rigorously that it has possibly leaped into another type of existence: as a deeply phony and suspicious substance yet nutritious enough to enable military invasions and sheer subsistence.

But precisely its composite nature makes spam an interesting term to consider in political theory, especially within the discussion of biopolitics. For Toni Negri and Michael Hardt flesh is a metaphor for a body not inhibited by social or any other restrictions. They euphorically describe flesh as "pure potentiality" oriented toward "fullness," inhabited by angels and demons, as well as bristling with a new barbarian counterpower.<sup>7</sup> Flesh is seen as an incarnation of vitality and additionally imbued with religious and even messianic discourse about redemption and liberation.<sup>8</sup> It is a post-Nietzschean repository of pure positivity.

In contrast to this heroic description of living flesh, spam is just humble hybrid meat. It lacks all of the pompous attributes of flesh. It is modest and cheap, made of bits and pieces, which may be somewhat recycled and are staunchly inanimate. It is meat as commodity, and a really affordable one too. But this doesn't mean that it should be underestimated either. Because spam addresses the hybridized commodity aspect of forms of existence, which run across humans and machines, subjects and objects alike. It refers to objectified lives as well as to biological objects. As such it may speak much more of actual conditions of contemporary existence than purely biological terms.

Spam has been through the meatgrinder of industrial production. This is why its fabrication resonates with the equally industrial (or postindustrial) generation of populations worldwide, who endured the mincer of repeated primordial accumulation. Several cycles of debt bondage, subsequent exodus, draft into industrial labor and repeated rejection from it force people back into subsistence farming, only to see them reemerge from tiny fields as post-Fordist service workers. Like their electronic spam message counterpart, these crowds form the vast majority of their kind but are considered superfluous, annoying, and redundant. They are also assumed to replicate uncontrollably. These populations are spam, not flesh; made of a material that has been ground for generations by a never-ending onslaught of capital and repackaged in ever new, increasingly hybrid and object-like forms.

Electronic spam highlights the speculative dimension of these bodies. It is painstakingly obvious that most products marketed via e-spam are supposed to enhance bodily appearance, performance and/or health. Email spam is a format that attempts to act on bodies: by cashing in on role models of uniformly drugged, enhanced, super-slim, super-active, and super-horny people wearing replica watches to always be on time for their service jobs.<sup>9</sup> More than 65 percent of email spam tries to push anti-depressants and Viagra, or rather rip-off pills boasting the same effects, thus selling fantasies of perfectly exploitable bodies, coveted production tools for superfluous crowds. Both forms of spam are post-carnal: they deal with the production of enhanced, altered, artificial, processed, upgraded as well as degraded forms of flesh.



*Edward Ruscha (United States, Nebraska, Omaha, born 1937), Actual Size, 1962. Painting, Oil on canvas, 67 1/16 x 72 1/16 in. (170.2 x 182.9 cm). Anonymous gift through the Contemporary Art Council (M.63.14). Contemporary Art Department.*

But spam is not without its own counterpower. In Ed Ruscha's admirable 1962 painting *Actual Size* a resplendent spam can is caught flying in a downwards trajectory. A glowing trail makes it look like a crossover between a comet and a Molotov cocktail. Spam is a solid object equally airborne and combustible as well as potentially imbued with kinetic power. Spam cans can be hurled into bank windows. They are sturdy and resilient.

In some cases, culinary applications of spam also manage to overturn its relations with warfare and deprivation. One example is the Hawaiian use of spam as delicacy. Spam became popular after Japanese were banned from fishing during World War II. Thus "Spam became an important source of protein for locals."<sup>10</sup> But far from remaining a hallmark of scarcity, it was redeployed as an ingredient in inventive dishes like Spamakopita, Spam Musubi, Spam Katsu, Spam loco moco, Spam fusion fajitas, Spam somen, Spam chutney, Spam Mahi Carbonara and Spamaroni and cheese. Similar interpretations of spam exist in Korea, where it spread after being imported by the US military. The German

version is called Döner Kebab;<sup>11</sup> an extremely popular form of orientalist roast spam impaled on supersized skewers. This dish was invented by downsized Turkish migrant workers in the 1970s. Since then it has become Germany's unofficial national dish. These uses of spam highlight the composition of the constituency of its consumers and (sometimes) improve its appeal to the senses.

But even electronic spam has unexpected affinities to social composition. Indeed, it was initially explicitly defined as a *res publica*, a public thing. One of the first spam filters developed was based on the quite unlikely finding that any email containing the word republic would almost invariably end up being spam. (The other dubious keywords interestingly being "madam" and "guarantee").<sup>12</sup>

Spam—in its different versions—is thus resolutely public. It is always made from several sources, things and bodies, letters, metals, colors and proteins alike. Its element is commonality; a mix of components animate and inanimate, as impure as one could possibly imagine.

Spam transforms words into carnal objects, as in Ruscha's painting. This incarnation goes way beyond its religious precedents, though. Let's face it: the incarnation of words today mostly takes the form of spam, spam and spam.

## History

But spam is not only a passive substance, endowed with the power of blocking and crowding. It also brings about very different forms of social organization. It changes the ways in which a group of people is structured and organized in interaction. In Monty Python's sketch, spam becomes a pivotal

term which is pointing at a change not only in the paradigm of labor, but perhaps also in the form of history itself.

An insert at the very end of the sketch shows a history teacher sitting in a classroom and detailing the invasions of Vikings:



*BBC © [1970] BBC SPAM TV.*

*(Cut to a historian. Superimposed caption: "A HISTORIAN")*

HISTORIAN: Another great Viking victory was at the Green Midget café in Bromley. Once again the Viking strategy was the same. They sailed from these fiords here (*indicating map with arrows on it*), assembled at Trondheim and waited for the strong north-easterly winds to blow their oaken galleys to England whence they sailed on May 23rd. Once in Bromley they assembled at the Green Midget café and spam selecting a spam particular spam item from the spam menu would spam, spam, spam, spam, spam, spam ...

*(The backdrop behind him rises to reveal the café again. The Vikings start singing again and the historian conducts them.)*<sup>13</sup>

This tiny scene looks quite unassuming. But in fact it shows how the representation of history itself is being transformed by the invasion of spam. Initially, the historian starts giving an

authoritative classroom-style frontal account of events from a slightly elevated position, complete with map-style overviews.



*BBC © [1970] BBC SPAM TV.*



*BBC © [1970] BBC SPAM TV.*

But as spam starts flooding the dialogue, the wall behind the historian is revealed to be a stage curtain as it is lifted, and the initial café setting reappears behind it.

The historian produces a conductor's baton and joins in the wild celebratory spam chorus. First he appears to direct this cacophony, but then seems to give up on it and breaks the baton in two.



*BBC © [1970] BBC SPAM TV.*

Two different modes of address are presented in this short insert: first, the historian addresses spectators as a class inside a classroom. After the change of scenery the frontal address is abandoned, as our point of view is transformed into a mixture of a customer's and an audience perspective. While the first mode of address presents a slightly authoritarian educational model, the second is clearly adjusted to a situation of service as performance or performance as service. This shift is catalyzed by the renewed invasion of spam into the dialogue. Spam pushes out a mode of addressing a class and introduces a mode of address based on service and spectacle, sustained by customers suspended in mid-air.

The form of the temporality inherent in the scene shifts as well: whereas there is a clear narrative of invasion and progress before the transition, afterwards there is just the pure spectacle of incongruous, unsynchronized, profoundly multicultural, salacious and free-floating performative services. A joint celebration, which has no conductor, leader or avantgarde, but emerges spontaneously and in common.

Spam's takeover transforms a pseudo-scientific account of history (and its "progress") into a performative chaos in which

actors, consumers, spam and service workers become indistinguishable. The linear and teleological progression of history, complete with its narration by academic administrators, is discontinued. The unity created by the frontal address of class is gone. The mood shifts from education to celebration.

But the public composition of spam is not only about fun and merriment. It also clearly penetrates the framework of the production of spectacle, as the final credits, which start rolling immediately after this scene demonstrate. Spam infiltrates job titles and the names of producers and technicians. Exclamations from the service sector are interspersed (not Sundays/spam's off, dear). It's not as if spam erased labor, it just erases class by penetrating and invading labor and laborers alike.

Spam is thus given as the description of both labor and its performers. It is an activity, a subject and an object alike, as well as an uncontrollably multiplying word that describes all of the former. People are being included into the world of spam and turned into potentially edible matter. Words are incarnated as objects and vice versa. And the only slogan that rallies the chaotic spam and service work/workers left is given in the final titles of the sketch.

Conceived, written and spam performed by

SPAM TERRY JONES

MICHAEL SPAM PALIN

JOHN SPAM JPHNSPAM JOHN SPAM CLEESE

GRAHAM SPAM SPAM SPAM CHAPMAN

...

Film Cameraman

JAMES (SPAM SAUSAGE EGG AND TOMATO) BALFOUR (NOT SUNDAYS)

...

Film Editor



RAY (FRIED SLICE AND GOLDEN THREE DELICIOUS) MILLICHOPE (SPAM  
EXTRA)

...

*BBC SPAM TV*

Service not included

## Service Not Included

This slogan is the inherent promise of spam. While Hardt and Negri rave about the angelic potential of flesh and its relentless release of desire, the promise of spam is much more prosaic: Service not included means simply it should not be for free. Even in the digital age, service cannot be reproduced indefinitely. But at present the line “service not included” is not a description but a claim that waits to be realized. In the world of service as performance (and performance as service), labor is abundantly available for free, as if it too could be copy-pasted and duplicated digitally.

Of course little of this issue is reflected in the piles of repetitive spam matter which clogs mail accounts and data lines worldwide. But why not see its material excess as an anticipation of a time when the spam incarnated in service and spectacle workers, as well as in everybody else considered superfluous and dispensable, starts to speak and utters the slogan: service not included?

Contemporary electronic spam tries to extract an improbable spark of value from an inattentive crowd by means of inundation. But to become spam—that is, to fully identify with its unrealized promise—means to spark an improbable element of commonality between different forms of existence, to become a public thing, a cheerful incarnation of databased wreckage.

There is one question left to explore: how does Monty Python's spam sketch actualize a different form of history? At first glance the question might have been answered by the transformed behavior of the historian, who gives up his vantage point of authority to wholeheartedly participate in the creation of chaos. But there is another aspect, too.

Let's hark back to Paul Klee's watercolor. There is another mystery in this painting: the angel just slightly averts its gaze, it doesn't really look at us.

Is it perhaps distracted by something happening behind it? Could it have been caught at the very moment when the uniform background behind it starts moving upwards, revealing itself as a stage curtain? Is it about to turn around to join in with a new scene instead of being torn between mourning past demise and a violently displaced future? And what will it order from the breakfast menu?

## Her Name Was Esperanza

*Her name was Esperanza. A thirty-five-year-old Puerto-Rican woman running a construction business and nurturing a great passion for humanitarian ventures. Her husband had sadly died two years ago. She sent pictures of herself and her little daughter via the online dating platform [Match.com](https://www.match.com) in February 2007.<sup>1</sup>*

*At first, Fred responded casually to her letters. But then, he suddenly found himself falling in love with her.*

*A few months later, he told his family that he was going to leave his wife and their children to live with Esperanza. When his mother asked him if he had ever met her, his answer was no. He'd meet her, in time. By now they were calling each other, and chatting. She canceled their first meeting last minute. He had waited at the airport, flowers in hand, trembling more with fear than anticipation.*

*Looking back, he couldn't understand how he could not have known. She wouldn't turn on her webcam while chatting. One technical problem followed another, communication was ruptured by unannounced sudden meetings. But on the other hand she never asked for money either. Until the day she died.*

*An official called him from the US embassy in Denmark, where she had traveled on business. She had accidentally been killed in a random shootout between rival gangs.*

*It was the worst day in Fred's life.*

*He transferred money to repatriate her body. His feelings were numb with shock. Nothing mattered. None of the multiple problems that arose in the process mattered. He decided that he'd not go see her. He couldn't face the idea that their first date would be after her death.*

*The end of the story was sudden. His friend did some research online. No American citizen had been killed in Denmark lately. There had been no shooting. Esperanza had never existed. She was the creature of a group of scammers.*

by [dxxx](#) on Fri Jun 05, 2009 12:02 pm  
CXX

I hope you realize there is no doubt that this is a scammer. As soon as sent you a photoshopped stock photo, it was confirmed beyond a doubt. I will treat it as if you are dealing with a female, but many of these elements may be handled by a male. Although certain elements are always the same with scammers (after all, the ultimate goal is the same--to get your money), there is a variety in other elements. Most scammers we see go for volume and speed--they get their fake profiles out there, approach as many people as possible, and move to the money stage with all of them quickly. This approach is going to lose more people quickly, but since they are (or at least want to be) targeting lots of people at once, they are still making money, even if it is only a couple of hundred dollars per victim.

Other scammers opt for a more organized, long-term approach. These are the more skilled scammers and in my opinion, the most dangerous. They will spend lots of time on a particular victim. (...) These "better" scammers are much more aware of IP address issues, and are more likely to admit to their location or hide behind a proxy to ensure that they do not lose their victim to that simple mistake. If you watch closely, they do make mistakes--but they are generally much harder to spot. (...) Sending a picture without wiping out the EXIF data that shows it is from 2002 was a much more subtle mistake, and the majority of victims would not catch it. (...)

by [dxxx](#) on Fri Jun 05, 2009 4:57 am  
(...)

```
# xmlns:tiff = "http://ns.adobe.com/tiff/1.0/"  
# xmlns:exif = "http://ns.adobe.com/exif/1.0/"  
# xap:CreateDate = "2002-05-07T11:00:16+05:30"  
# xap:ModifyDate = "2002-05-07T11:00:16+05:30"  
# xap:MetadataDate = "2002-05-07T11:00:16+05:30"
```

See something odd there?<sup>2</sup>

## Epistolary Affect

On a recent trip to Bangalore, I found myself saying something I didn't fully understand. During a public discussion, Lata Mani, the respected feminist scholar, had asked me about the sensorial, the affective impact of the digital. I answered that the strongest affective address happened on a very unexpected and even old-fashioned level: in the epistolary mode. As a brush with words divorced from actual bodies.

Digital writing—by email or chat—presents a contemporary complication of historical practices of writing. Jacques Derrida has patiently described the conundrum of script: its connection to absence and delay.<sup>3</sup> In this case, the delay is minimized, but the absence stays put. The combination of (almost) real-time communication and physical absence creates something one could call absense, so to speak: the sensual aspect of an absence, which presences itself in (almost) real time. A live and lively absence, to which the lack of a physical body is not an unfortunate coincidence, but necessary.

Its proxy is compressed as message body, translated into rhythm, flow, sounds, and the temporality of both interruption

and availability. None of this is "virtual" or "simulated." The absence is real, just as the communication based on it.

**Re: scammers with pictures of Mxxxx QT**

**By axxxxxxs** on Wed Jan 26, 2011 8:05 am

This is a private IP address and cannot be traced. Hostname:  
10.227.179.xxx

dont see any problem in meeting, i do believe in meeting and seeing is believing, i can change my flight to you if you wish to meet, i dont see any problem changing my flight to you, tell me how you think we can meet, meeting and seeing is believing to me and id otn care of age and location, what is the name of your closest airport, i can call the airline now to ask for flight changing possibility

This is a private IP address and cannot be traced.

Im cool baby, how are you doing today?  
Sent from my BlackBerry® wireless device

Do you still want to meet up with me baby?

I dont have msn

do you want to meet me baby?  
Whats the name of your airport baby?  
Give me like 1hour baby

Baby, do you live alone? Tell me about your travelling experiences baby  
Sent from my BlackBerry® wireless device

(...)

Im at the airline getting the ticket done Sent from my BlackBerry® wireless device

Honey, im done with the ticklet and i'll email you in like 1hour with the scan copy of the ticket baby Sent from my BlackBerry® wireless device

sending it nwo now baby  
Honey<sup>4</sup>

## Digital Melodrama

In 1588 a scam with the romantic title “The Spanish Prisoner” is launched for the first time. The scammer approached the victim to tell him he was in touch with a Spanish aristocrat who needed a lot of money to buy his freedom from jail. Whoever helped him would get rich recompense, including marrying his daughter. After a first installment was paid, new difficulties kept emerging until the victim ended up broke and impoverished.

In the digital era, this plot has been updated to resonate with contemporary wars and upheavals. Countless 419 scams—the number refers to the applicable penal code number in Nigerian law—rewrite daily catastrophes as entrepreneurial plotlines. Shock capitalism and its consequences—wars over raw materials or privatization—are recast as interactive romance or adventure novels.

You too may have received a letter from an unknown woman—as Max Ophüls’s 1948 classical melodrama title had it. In Ophüls’s film, a Viennese girl posthumously confesses her unrequited love in a letter. It recounts every detail of her relentless passion for a concert pianist who barely noticed her existence.

In the contemporary digital version, letters from unknown women emerge from all over the globe, afflicted by tragedies personal and political. A cacophony of post-postcolonial tragedies, diluted with generous servings of telenovela. Widows and orphans get swept under by financialized hypercapitalism,

natural disaster and assorted crimes against humanity—and it's you who are destined to sort out their fates.<sup>5</sup>

Romance scams offer windfalls of love and opportunity, casually asking for bank account numbers and passport copies. Flight schedules are mixed with instructions for transfer of funds and serially sampled professions of love. Modules of sensation are copy-pasted, recycled, ripped. But despite their obvious mass production, these are “the only form(s) of tragedy available to us,” as Thomas Elsaesser said about the melodrama.<sup>6</sup> They drop into mailboxes unsolicited, and suddenly expose them to the open.

<b>basis</b>	<b>%</b>
air crash	35
car accident	13
tsunami/earthquake	3
coup	22
over-invoiced	16
undisclosed	11
<b>sender</b>	
lawyer	35
widow	31
child	10
bank officer	24

Source: [caslon.com.au](http://caslon.com.au)

### Tragedy as Ready-made



The genre of melodrama departs from impossibility, delay, submission. It addresses the domestic, feminized sphere. The so-called weepie was a genre which was under-recognized and safely kept apart from cinema-as-art for decades. It was suspected to perpetuate oppression as well as female compliance.

Yet the melodrama also voiced perspectives that were repressed and forbidden; views that couldn't be expressed anywhere else and remained deprecated, shameful, and dismissed. Over the top exaggeration and exoticization opened up possibilities to imagine something different than the drab repetitiveness of reproductive labor. Melodramas concoct implausible tales of cultural encounter, racial harmony, and happiness narrowly lost in miscommunication. They insist that the political is personal—and thus trace social histories from the point of view of sentiment.<sup>7</sup>



[Redacted]  
[Redacted]  
[Redacted]  
[Redacted]

April 18, 2011

Dear Steyerl,

Apologies to write to you out of the blue like this but something very, very important came to our notice and we believe it's important we seek your consent for the mutual interest of all.

I'm Des McDaid, Savings Director, ING Direct UK, personal funds manager to late Mr. Hiroshi J. Steyerl, a Japanese national. He died recently along with his wife and only son, while holidaying in Burma and flown back to England for burial. In our last auditing, we discovered a dormant account with GBP 17,844,000.00 (Seventeen million, eight hundred and forty-four thousand British Pounds Sterling only) in his name.

During our investigations we discovered he nominated his son as his next of kin. All efforts to trace his relations have proved impossible. The account has been dormant since his death. Therefore, we decided to contact you, to seek your consent to enable us nominate you as next of kin to the deceased and transfer the funds to you as designated next of kin to the deceased.

We've all relevant details about the deceased, which shall help us claim the fund successfully. After transfer of funds to your favour, you shall retain 48%, and 48% ours, 4% set aside for expenses both parties might incur during or after the transaction (if any).

Your positive response shall be highly appreciated to enable us favor you with a draft application / account details of the deceased for submission to ING Direct UK to authenticate the claim to the deceased's estate.

Should this business transaction, be of interest to you, please contact me via Email: [dsmcdaid@live.co.uk](mailto:dsmcdaid@live.co.uk), Tel No: + 44 778 78 24 355 or Fax No: + 44 1183-350-425. Please also contact me if you object to this proposal.

Yours truly,

  
Des McDaid  
Savings Director ING Direct UK.

But their new personalized digital versions are produced differently. They are no longer just one-size-fits-all Taylorist studio-based productions, but customized products.

These messages are not only posted but perhaps even postist. Post-isms are a symptom of a time which considers itself to be posterior and secondary, a leftover of history itself. They assume a general overcoming of everything without anything new to replace worn out worldviews.

But there is a dialectical twist to this post-dialectical condition. Post-isms conserve the issue they are distancing and claim to have overcome. Indeed it is impossible to define any of these terms—post-Marxism, -structuralism, -modernism, etc.—without recourse to the terms they claim to have left behind.

Distance is achieved despite intimate closeness, or maybe precisely because of it. The co-presence of proximity and distance is inherent to the structure of the prefix post-itself. Post- connotes a past, whose meaning is derived from spatial separation. In their earliest versions, the roots of the prefix refer to “behind, after, afterward,” but also “toward, to, near, close by”; “late,” but also “away from.”<sup>8</sup> Both closeness and separation, absence and presence, form part of the structural aporia of this term.

Romance scams are intimately related to this timescape of simultaneous presence and absence, incongruously bridged by hope and desire. They also perfectly resonate with an undecided temporality, which synchronizes both closeness and separation, past and present, and refuses to let go of world-views it no longer believes in.

## Conceptual Love

This turn to the digital melodrama and epistolary affect comes somewhat unexpectedly. The world of digital feelings had been imagined somewhat more robustly before. None of the rather crude initial ideas about cybersex and the merging of the physical and digital worlds has held much sustainable appeal, though. Datagloves, digital dildos and other equipment deemed suitable for amorous purpose turned out a cumbersome embarrassment for an age in which data, feelings, and touch travel lightly.

The popularity of the epistolary address is also based on its blatant availability. Text is a makeshift medium, cheap and cost effective. Neither complicated engineering nor bulky equipment

is necessary; just basic literacy skills and a terminal for hire at an internet café.

Perhaps the ready-made language of romance scams also expresses a deeper shift in contemporary practices of writing. In parallel to a visual economy of the blurred and raw, an economy of text has developed, which is in many ways as compressed and abstracted as the rags of imagery that crowd the digital realms. Prompted by the legacy of advertising, a Victorian economy of affect merges with the verbal austerity of the tweet message. It is simultaneously blunt and chaste; downsized and delicate, bold and coy. Compressed and evacuated text allows feelings to fill in the blanks. Hollow words bait, retreat, play. Reduction and withdrawal spark intensity.

**Re: GXXX TXXXX**

by XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX on Fri Sep 18, 2009 8:20 pm

Gxxxx now has another email address, [gxxxx@hotmail.com](mailto:gxxxx@hotmail.com), I am trying to get a picture off her but its like trying to get blood out of a stone.

She knows I am trying to build up a new relationship and has said she will now leave me alone at last and just wants to be friends and just some one to write to which I am okay with that.

Cxx

CXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Frequent Poster

**Posts:** 160

**Joined:** Sat Apr 11, 2009 5:33 pm

**Location:** LXXXXXXXXXX

Top

**Re: Gxxxx Txxxxx**

by wxxxxx on Sat Sep 19, 2009 8:38 am

Ok, I don't get it. You KNOW it's a Nigerian scammer using stolen photos of a glamour model, yet you still talk to him, and are willing to be "friends"? This is exactly what your scammer wants, as soon "she" will have some emergency and need money. All you've done is left the door open for the scammer to try again from a different angle. You are aware that almost all (and by that I mean well over 99% of them) scammers are really males and not the females they pretend to be?

**Re: Gxxxx Txxxx**

by **gxxx** on Mon Sep 21, 2009 5:52 pm

the thing is... this "she" you keep refering to is just a black guy that is still working you. There is NO she..., just a HE... There is no Gxxxx...

gxxxx

VIP Poster

**Posts:** 972

**Joined:** Tue Nov 25, 2008 11:13 pm

**Location:** Canada, eh

**Re: Gxxxx Txxxx**

by **gxxxx** on Sat Dec 04, 2010 10:18 pm

the [gxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com](mailto:gxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com) address on this thread turns up a FB profile by the name of **Nxx Axxxxx Axxxxxx (Axxx Dxxx)**.

Current City: Accra, Ghana

High School: West Africa Secondary School '08

lots of friends and notes by this dude

**About Nxx** I came, I saw, I conquered. Not by Might by the Holy Ghost.

Genuinely a loving guy....I'm intelligent, creative, caring, loyal and love to have fun.....i have done some traveling and definitely have that in my plan for the future...camping all the usual things life has to offer.

GSOH & quick witted. Attractive & well groomed, able to handle all social situations with style & a smile.

Sex Male

Interested In Men and Women  
Relationship Status Single<sup>9</sup>

## The Spanish Prisoner

*My name is Fred. I fell in love with Esperanza. She was the love of my life. Nobody understands how I fell for a scam. But I don't care whether Esperanza was real. My love for her was. From my perspective there hasn't been any scam whatsoever. Because even if Esperanza didn't exist as a person, her letters did exist on my screen. Their content may have been a lie; the IP may have been masked, the sender a projection. But the writing itself remains real. No matter who wrote the text: she or he or they. I loved the letters, not the person.*

Writing these letters is serious work. Adapting and pasting text modules, planning, keeping books, hitting keys, performing, filing, photochopping. Scammers work to entertain their target's fantasies and provide affective service, custom tailored to individual desires.

Behind the scams there are often organized work units.<sup>10</sup> Most writers are male, often assisted by female workers to make phone calls or other live appearances.<sup>11</sup> While the global and postcolonial aspect of these connections has been emphasized in some instances, its overall implications are left unexplored. How do we understand this literary form of deceit in the context of a global political economy based on digital divides and uneven development?<sup>12</sup> There is an underlying moral to at least some of these efforts: the idea being to regain the riches plundered by colonial exploitation.<sup>13</sup> Leftovers from anti-imperialist ideology incongruously mix with the beauty standards of extreme makeover TV shows.

**What out for scammer [cecixxxxxx@hotmail.com](mailto:cecixxxxxx@hotmail.com)**

by Rxxxx on Tue Jul 24, 2007 9:45 pm

Calling her self Ceci Thompson

„(...) I checked a scam site and found he/she had used a different adress with the same pictures. This time claiming she was Russian. Visa and ticket scams and so on. I confrontet her with this and this is the reply:

“You;re the most stupid man I’ve ever met.... All white people will suffer in the hands of Africans, ONE by ONE... You all took blacks as slave, NO problem. You shall pay back with all you’ve stolen from us, ONE after the other. I know a way to catch you, bastard. Have you ever realized that you white people smells like shit? Ask God why? and the answer shall be giving to you by an African you people called Monkey... Oh monkey will rule this world, someday.... Basket in the dirty pit. White frog.. You better look for a female frog like you and start giving birth to smelling frogs, stinky. Date: Tue, 24 Jul 2007 20:58:49.”<sup>14</sup>

Most obviously, 419 scams develop in connection with larger macroeconomic issues—in the case of Nigeria a debt crisis in conjunction with the decline in oil prices in the early 1980s and subsequent unemployment and instability.<sup>15</sup> Andrew Apter argues that online scams present reverse-mirrorings of financial protocols of business, in replicating the quite fictitious ways of creating (or simulating) value in finance. The actual lack of a material referent for fictitious value also affects language or representational systems as such: signifiers start to float,<sup>16</sup> their connections to referents are unmoored if not abandoned altogether. The Ponzi schemes of globalized financial capitalism as well as its delusions are being translated into the personalized language of romance. Apter literally labels the 419 con games as performance art, based on a general rise of visual deception and emptied value forms in politics as well as in an economy based on privatization and speculation.<sup>17</sup> This may also present a

reason why so many people fall for the scams: because their inherent principle of delusion constitutes a substantial part of our contemporary political and economic reality.

But the gender aspect of this specific type of performance art is arguably even more mindboggling than its mirroring of financial protocols. What can one say about (mostly) straight black males impersonating white or mixed straight women, white gay or straight men? Then proceeding to change their color (from white or mixed to black for example) if caught in the act? All this while sending along ripped pictures of other people, in most cases porn starlets or models.<sup>18</sup>

How does this resonate with the emancipatory promises of self-assigned gender, which abounded in earlier internet theory? Are masquerade or subversion still categories which make sense in this context? Or should we rather speak about new, hyperprivatized branches of cultural industries, which perform one-on-one staged dramas or maybe rather personalized mockumentaries based on the narrative form of Ponzi schemes?

The production of romance scams conjures up the idea of digital workbenches, peopled with rows of literary laborers organized within a flexibilized division of labor, performing work—or working in performance, just like their counterparts in the “real” financial sector. The products are serial identities-on-demand, which morph to accommodate every possible client fantasy. Passion-as-labor, which reverse-mirrors the idea of labor-as-passion supposed to motivate the ideal workers of the post-Fordist age.

In the meantime, romance scams have spread worldwide, targeting poor or elderly women, in many cases maids, and robbing them of their life savings.<sup>19</sup> Scammers don’t mind wrecking the feelings of vulnerable people. They target the



refuse of metropolitan dating markets: single moms, outdated flesh, global maids dreaming of princes. The weak prey on the ugly, using words.

As Elvis Presley (and the Bee Gees) sang: “You think that I don’t mean a single word I say. It’s only words and words are all I have to steal your heart away.”

## Creative Language

How to do things with words? This puzzled question by J.L. Austin is the title of one of the foundational texts of so-called speech-act theory.<sup>20</sup> Austin argues that words are not purely descriptive representations, but agents able to bring about actions. One of his examples—fittingly in this context—is the marriage ceremony in which vows create the union. But this is a rather weak example in view of the much more grandiose speech acts routinely found in religious texts. Creation as such is performed by speech acts. The phrase “let there be light” marks the inception of the world for monotheists. Divine utterance is a form of creative terror, terrifying and tantalizing at once.

According to Walter Benjamin, a weaker form of this power has immigrated into the language of humans.<sup>21</sup> The creative force of naming is but a residue of the divine power of utterance. As Michel Foucault noted a bit more dryly, the force of order and command keeps resonating in human language too.<sup>22</sup> The importance and naked force of words cannot be underestimated. Words make worlds. They can destroy them as well.

In the digital realm, the power of language is translated into code which activates machinic performance. The magic of language derived from the speech act of creation gets enlisted

into doing things with hardware. Code animates matter and propels it into action. Machinic language enables us to create new words, new worlds, new languages.

In the case of romance scammers the relative newness of their language paradoxically consists of its completely recycled nature. Of course this language is not novel at all, but well rehearsed by advertisement slogans and soap opera dialogues. It is the lingua franca of cultural industries of modernity catering to a domestic labor audience. But hardly has it ever been as fragmented and wrecked as in the scammers' language.<sup>23</sup> The unabashedly collaged nature of these languages, their obvious partial generation by translation machines, reveals them to belong to a group of globalized languages that I have elsewhere referred to as "Spamsoc."<sup>24</sup> Spamsoc is what you get when the word Spanish is garbled by an automated scanning device—my example was the English-based language on the back of pirated Chinese DVD covers. Spamsoc is a broken language because it reflects the pressures and gendered fault lines of globalization. Post-postcolonial hierarchies of language, a gendered division of freelance labor, as well as ongoing global conflicts over copyright and digital leverage, form part of the framework in which Spamsoc and its countless derivatives emerge as incoherent mixtures of Wikipedia entries and computer-translated semi-nonsense.

The languages of romance scammers are in most cases locally nuanced, and adopt an overly formal, often stilted language.<sup>25</sup> Their many incongruities and mishaps are a laughingstock for so-called spam baiters around the world. But contempt is a much too defensive and resentful reaction. These makeshift lingos express the tectonic tensions of extremely complex geopolitical situations translated into melodrama.

Walter Benjamin's reflections on language and translation throw this issue into sharp focus. In the gaps of meaning, the original force of words still shines forth, perhaps no more so than when they have almost rid themselves of content, and start to resemble pure stammer and stutterings, void of signification.<sup>26</sup>

The splendor of creation still echoes in the almost robotic repetition of romantic keywords, within the scrambled, ripped and collaged debris of meaningless affective vocabulary. It seems as if the mimetic force of language is not only unbreakable, but even paradoxically seems to increase with fragmentation and compression.

Thus the new digital post-English languages are not at all deficient, but on the contrary languages from a world to come, which we are unfortunately not yet able to fully understand. The languages of romance scammers are messages from a future in which empty value forms tumble suspended in permanent free fall as language and value let go of reality within the affective plots of disaster capitalism.

## Heart Away

After the funeral, I started to go through All that was needed to settle his estate. Which anyone who has been there knows is a very big pain in the butt; I started seeing bills and WU Receipts, everything was pointing to his future wife. Over the next couple of months of going over his assets, computer files, And bills. He was broke. Losing his house, and behind in his car payments. Credit cards were at limit. He was in a financial mess. I thought where was the woman who was supposed to be here. I started reading letters and going through his computer and everything became known over the next couple of months that she had no intention of Marrying him. She not only put off coming to him twice but also left him at airport twice. Overall, from

what I could gather, and prove, he had given her well over thirty Thousand dollars in a little over two years. (...)

She was going to meet me in Hotel Lounge. Therefore, I went down early, had a few drinks, and waited. Then I saw her walk in. I was very impressed and if I did not know better would have fallen in love also, she was very elegant, and looked better then her pics. She had perfect English a lot better then the phone conversations we had. Which later made me think? It was not her on phone. Nevertheless, as we had drinks and talked, I started to tell her about my friend who fell in love with Russian woman and was going to get married, she was very focused on my story, and smiled a lot, Grab my hand, listen to my every word. I finished my story as I told all of you. (But just a basic version) Told her that he had all the arrangements to bring her to America, took care of her in Russia, and she left him, Told her about his death. (...) She was very sadden, said she knew now why I was so shy about her, and her love. However, told me to look (I am here right here with you.) I will never forget those words She said as long as I live. I looked at her, Reached in to my Suit Pocket and handed her a Envelope. She smiled and her eyes sparkled, I think she thought it was giving her money As she opened it, I will never forget the look in her face. There were two Pictures in that Envelope, One of my friend and her in Moscow, and one of his gravestone, along with a request for Visa paper with there names on it.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the vast differences between scammed and scammers, one feeling unites both. This feeling is hope. While in the case of scammers, this hope may be material, in the case of the scammed, it may be both emotional and material.

This hope is maybe also indicative of a more general situation. Perhaps the hope invested in epistolary affect is aimed at interrupting the drab temporality of an age of post-s, in which life “always already”<sup>28</sup> seems over, or at exploding the repetitive reality of reproductive labor for maids, single moms and other target audiences of digital melodrama.

Perhaps even more generally the more unstable and insecure things get, the more hope abounds. If love is not for free, hope seems to be. But hope is also the fuel capitalism thrives on, one of its few eternally renewable resources. The American dream and its countless franchised versions are giant vortexes which gain their momentum on hope, and little but hope. Hope is a Trojan horse for deceit and exploitation. It is also the driving element in any quest for change.

This hope may secretly long for a moment of radical and irrevocable change: not so much a revolution as perhaps an unexpected revelation, a sudden twist in the plot. It is the hope that everything could yet be different and change lies at the tips of our fingers.

*My name is Esperanza and I am not dead. Contact me at [esperanza112@hotmail.com](mailto:esperanza112@hotmail.com)*

**alive**

Reply

|

esperanza to dsmcdaid, show details 10:22 AM (0 minutes ago)

Mr. McDaid,

My name is Esperanza and I am not dead.

I am following up on the disquieting letter you sent to my mother-in-law, Nagako Steyerl in Rhode Island, United States on 4-18-2011. You claim that my late husband, Hiroshi J. Steyerl was killed in an accident, which is correct. However, contrary to your erroneous suggestions, I as his wife did miraculously survive the plane crash in Burma. Fortunately, my son did, too. We are now recovering from our terrible injuries in a hospital in Rangoon and hopefully, the dressings will come off next week.

As a heart-broken and destitute widow, I am very surprised to hear that you are planning to bestow my late husbands funds on anybody

else than myself as his next of kin.

Therefore I urge you to immediately transfer these funds to my bank account.

sincerely

Esperanza

## International Disco Latin

Let's start with something else. Ever heard of the English Disco Lovers? A fantastic online project trying to outgun (or rather outlove) their acronym twin—the racist English Defence League, also abbreviated as “EDL”—on Facebook and Twitter. For this they use the bilingual slogan “Unus Mundas, Una Gens, Unus Disco (One World, One Race, One Disco).” The English Disco Lovers' name is, of course, a deliberate misreading of the original, a successfully failed copy coming into being via translation.

Likewise in the case of many exhibition press releases—or so Alix Rule and David Levine claim in their widely read essay “International Art English.”<sup>1</sup>

International Art English, or “IAE,” is their name for the decisively amateurish English language used in contemporary art press releases. In order to investigate IAE, Rule and Levine undertake a statistical inquiry into a set of such texts distributed by *e-flux*.<sup>2</sup> They conclude that the texts are written in a skewed English full of grandiose and empty jargon often carelessly ripped from mistranslations of continental philosophy.

So far so good. But what are they actually looking at? In the unstated hierarchies of publishing, press releases barely even make it to the bottom. They have the lifespan of a fruit fly and the farsightedness of a grocery list. Armies of these hastily

aggregated, briefly circulated, poorly phrased missives constantly vie for attention in our clogged inboxes. Typically written by overworked and underpaid assistants and interns across the world, the press release's pompous prose contrasts most acutely with the lowly status of its authors. Press releases are the art world's equivalent of digital spam, vehicles for serial name-dropping and para-deconstructive waxing, in close competition with penis enlargement advertisements. And while they may well constitute the bulk of art writing, they are also its most destitute strata, both in form and in content. It is thus an interesting choice to focus on this as a sampling of art-speak, because it is not exactly representative. Meanwhile, authoritative high-end art writing is respectfully left to keep pontificating behind MIT Press paywalls.<sup>3</sup>

So what is the language used in the sample examined by Rule and Levine? As the authors incontrovertibly prove, it is incorrect English. This is shown by statistically comparing press releases against the British National Corpus (BNC), a database of British English usage. Unsurprisingly, this exposes the deviant nature of IAE, which derives, the authors argue, from copious foreign—mainly Latin—elements, leftovers from decades of mistranslated continental art theory. This creates a bastardized language that Rule and Levine compare to pornography: “We know it when we see it.” So, on the one hand, there is the BNC usage, or normal English. On the other, there is IAE, deviant and pornographic. Oh, and alienating too.

But who is it that is willingly writing porn here? According to Rule and Levine, IAE is, or might be, spoken by an anonymous art student in Skopje, at the Proyecto de Arte Contemporáneo de Murcia in Spain, by Tania Bruguera, and by interns at the Chinese Ministry of Culture.<sup>4</sup>



At this point I cannot help but ask: Why should an art student in Skopje—or anyone else for that matter—conform to the British National Corpus? Why should anyone use English words with the same frequency and statistical distribution as the BNC? The only possible reason is that the authors assume that the BNC is the unspoken measure of what English is supposed to be: it is standard English, the norm. And this norm is to be staunchly defended around the world.



*Mladen Stilinović, An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist, 1992.*

As Mladen Stilinović told us a long time ago: an artist who cannot speak English is not an artist.<sup>5</sup>

This is now extended to gallery interns, curatorial graduate students, and copywriters. And even within our beloved and seemingly global art world, there is a Standard English Defence League at work, and the BNC is its unspoken benchmark. Its norms are not only defined by grammar and spelling, but also by an extremely narrow view of “incorrect English.” As Aileen Derieg, one of the best translators of contemporary political theory, has beautifully argued, “incorrect English” is anything “not phrased in the simplest, shallowest terms, and the person

reading it can't be bothered to make an effort to understand anything they don't already know."<sup>6</sup>

In my experience, "correct" English writing is supposed to be as plain and commonsensical as possible—and, unbelievably, people regard this not as boring, but as a virtue. The climax of "correct" English art writing is the standard contemporary art review, which is much too afraid to say anything and often contents itself with rewriting press releases in compliance with BNC norms.

However, the main official rule for standard English art writing is, in my own unsystematic statistical analysis: never offend anyone more powerful than yourself. This rule is followed perfectly in the IAE essay, which ridicules the fictive Balkan art student who aggregates hapless bits of jargon in the hopes of attracting interest from curators. Indeed, this probably happens every day. But it's such a cheap shot.

This is not to say that one shouldn't constantly make fun of contemporary art worlds and their preposterous tastes, their pretentious jargons and portentous hipsterisms.

We are indeed lacking authors attacking or even describing, in any language, the art world's jargon-veiled money laundering and post-democratic Ponzi schemes. Not many people dare talk about post-mass-murder, gentrification-driven art booms in, for example, Turkey or Sri Lanka. I certainly wouldn't mind a lot of statistical inquiry into these developments, whether in IAE or Kurdish, satirical or serious.

But this is not Rule and Levine's concern. Instead, they manage to prove beyond a statistical doubt that IAE is deviant English. Fair enough, but so what? And furthermore, doesn't this verdict underestimate the sheer wildness at work in the creation of new lingos? Alex Alberro has demonstrated that advertising

and promotion crucially created a context for much early conceptual art in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup>

The intricacies, undeniable fallacies, and joys of contemporary digital dispersion and circulation are not, however, Rule and Levine's focus. Nor are the politics of translation and language. Their aim is to identify non-standard English (or patronizingly praise it as involuntary poetry). But we should not underestimate their analysis as just a nativist disdain for rambling foreigners.

In an admirable essay, Mostafa Heddaya has pointed out the undeniable complicity of IAE art jargon with political oppression in a multipolar art world where contemporary art has become a must-have accessory for tyrants and oligarchs.<sup>8</sup> By highlighting the use of IAE to obfuscate and obscure massive exploitation—such as the contested construction by New York University and the Guggenheim of complexes on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi—Heddaya makes an extremely important intervention in the debate.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever comes into the world through the global production and dispersion of contemporary art is dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt, to quote Karl Marx, another foreign forerunner of IAE. This certainly includes many instances of IAE, whose spread is fueled, though by no means monopolized, by neo-feudal, ultraconservative, and authoritarian contemporary art rackets. IAE is not only the language of interns and non-native English speakers. It is also a side effect of a renewed primitive accumulation operating worldwide by means of art. IAE is an accurate expression of social and class tensions around language and circulation within today's art worlds and markets: a site of conflict, struggle, contestation, and often invisible and gendered labor. As such, it

supports oppression and exploitation. It legitimizes the use of contemporary art by the 1%. But much like capitalism as such, it also enables a class and geographical mobility whose restrictions are often blatantly defied by its users. It creates a digital lingua franca, and through its glitches it starts to show the outlines of future publics that extend beyond preformatted geographical and class templates. IAE can also be used to temporarily expose some of the most glaring aspects of contemporary art's dubious financial involvements to a public beyond the confines of (often unsympathetic) national forums. After all, IAE is *also* a language of dissidents, migrants, and renegades.

Again, none of this is of interest to Rule and Levine. Fair enough. I doubt political economy matters much in the BNC. But their essay perfectly expresses the backside of Heddaya's argument. Because, as Rule and Levine correctly state, after IAE has become too global to intimidate anyone, the future lies in a return to conventional highbrow English. And indeed, this is not a distant future, but the present, as evidenced by a massive and growing academic industry monetizing and monopolizing accepted uses of English. UK and US corporate academia has one major advantage over the international education market: the ability to offer (and police) proper English skills.

No gallery in Salvador da Bahia, no project space in Cairo, no institution in Zagreb can opt out of the English language. And language is and has always been a tool of empire. For a native speaker, English is a resource, a guarantee of universal access to employment in countless places around the globe. Art institutions, universities, colleges, festivals, biennales, publications, and galleries will usually have American and British native speakers on their staff. Clearly, as with any other resource, access needs to be restricted in order to protect and

perpetuate privilege. Interns and assistants the world over must be told that their domestic—and most likely public—education simply won't do. The only way to shake off the shackles of your insufferable foreign origins is to attend Columbia or Cornell, where you might learn to speak impeccable English—untainted by any foreign accent or non-native syntax. And after a couple of graduate programs where you pay \$34,740 annually for tuition, you just might be able to find yet another internship.<sup>10</sup>

But here is my point: chances are you will be getting this education on Saadiyat Island, where NYU is setting up a campus, whose allure for paying customers resides in its ability to teach certified English to non-native speakers. In relation to Heddaya's argument, Frank Gehry's fortress will be paid for not only by exploiting Asian workers, but also by selling "correct" English writing skills.

Or you might pay for this kind of education in Berlin, where UK and US educational franchises, charging students \$17,000 a year to learn proper English, have slowly started competing with the city's own admittedly lousy, inadequate, and provincial free art schools.<sup>11</sup>

Or you might pay for such an education in countless already existing franchises in China, where oppressive art speech will soon be delivered in pristine BNC English. Old imperial privilege nestles quite comfortably behind deconstructive oligarchic facades, and the policing of "correct" English is the backside of IAE-facilitated neo-feudalism. Such education will leave you indebted, because if you don't pawn or gamble your future on acquiring this skill, you will be shamed out of the market for unpaid internships just because you aggregated some critical theory that monolingual US professors translated wrongly

decades ago. For the art student from Skopje, it's no longer "publish or perish." It's "pay or perish!"

That's why I couldn't care less when someone "unfolds his ideas," or engages in "questioning," or in "collecting models of contemporary realities." Not everyone is lucky enough, or wealthy enough, to spend years in private higher education. Convuluted as their wordsmithing may be, press releases convey the sincere and often agonizing attempt by wannabe predators to tackle a T. rex. And as Ana Teixeira Pinto has said: nothing truly important can be said without wreaking havoc on the rules of grammar.

Granted, IAE in its present state is rarely bold enough to do this. It hasn't gone far enough on any level. One reason is perhaps that it took its ripping off of Latin (and other languages) too seriously. IAE has clung to preposterous claims of erudition and has awed generations of art students into dozing through Critical Studies seminars—even though its status as aggregate spam is much more interesting.<sup>12</sup>

So we—the anonymous crowd of people (which includes myself) sustaining and actually living this language—might want to alienate that language even further, make it more foreign, and decisively cut its ties to any imaginary original.

If IAE is to go further, its pretenses to Latin origins need to be seriously glitched. And for a suggestion on how to do this, we need look no further than the EDL's ripped-off slogan: Unus Mundas, Una Gens, Unus Disco (One World, One Race, One Disco). Let's ignore for a moment that the word "disco" could sound so foreign that Rule and Levine might sensibly suggest renaming it "platter playback shack." Because actually EDL's slogan is hardly composed of Latin at all. Rather, it's written in IDL: International Disco Latin. It is a queer Latin made by

splashing mutant versions of gender across assumed nouns. It's a language that takes into account its digital dispersion, its composition and artifice.



This is the template for the language I would like to communicate in, a language that is not policed by formerly imperial, newly global corporations, nor by national statistics—a language that takes on and confronts issues of circulation, labor, and privilege (or at least manages to say something at all), a language that is not a luxury commodity nor a national birthright, but a gift, a theft, an excess or waste, made between Skopje and Saigon by interns and non-resident aliens on emoji keyboards. To opt for International Disco Latin also means committing to a different form of learning, since disco also means “I learn,” “I learn to know,” “I become acquainted with”—preferably with music that includes heaps of accents. And for free. And in this language, I will always prefer anus over bonus, oral over moral, satin over Latin, shag over shack. You’re welcome to call this pornographic, discographic, alienating, or simply weird and foreign. But I suggest: Let’s take a very fucking English lesson!

## Is the Internet Dead?

Is the internet dead?<sup>1</sup> This is not a metaphorical question. It does not suggest that the internet is dysfunctional, useless or out of fashion. It asks what happened to the internet after it stopped being a possibility. The question is very literally whether it is dead, how it died and whether anyone killed it.

But how could anyone think it could be over? The internet is now more potent than ever. It has not only sparked but fully captured the imagination, attention and productivity of more people than at any other point before. Never before have more people been dependent on, embedded into, surveilled by, and exploited by the web. It seems overwhelming, bedazzling and without immediate alternative. The internet is probably not dead. It has rather gone all-out. Or more precisely: it is all over!

This implies a spatial dimension, but not as one might think. The internet is not everywhere. Even nowadays when networks seem to multiply exponentially, many people have no access to the internet or don't use it at all. And yet, it is expanding in another direction. It has started moving offline. But how does this work?

Remember the Romanian uprising in 1989, when protesters invaded TV studios to make history? At that moment, images changed their function.<sup>2</sup> Broadcasts from the occupied TV studios became active catalysts of events—not records or



documents.<sup>3</sup> Since then it has become clear that images are not objective or subjective renditions of a preexisting condition, or merely treacherous appearances. They are rather nodes of energy and matter that migrate across different supports, shaping and affecting people, landscapes, politics, and social systems.<sup>4</sup> They acquired an uncanny ability to proliferate, transform, and activate. Around 1989, television images started walking through screens, right into reality.<sup>5</sup>

This development accelerated when web infrastructure started supplementing TV networks as circuits for image circulation.<sup>6</sup> Suddenly, the points of transfer multiplied. Screens were now ubiquitous, not to speak of images themselves, which could be copied and dispersed at the flick of a finger. Data, sounds, and images are now routinely transitioning beyond screens into a different state of matter.<sup>7</sup> They surpass the boundaries of data channels and manifest materially. They incarnate as riots or products, as lens flares, high-rises, or pixelated tanks. Images become unplugged and unhinged and start crowding off-screen space. They invade cities, transforming spaces into sites, and reality into reality. They materialize as junkspace, military invasion, and botched plastic surgery. They spread through and beyond networks, they contract and expand, they stall and stumble, they vie, they vile, they wow and woo.

Just look around you: artificial islands mimic genetically manipulated plants. Dental offices parade as car commercial film sets. Cheekbones are airbrushed just as whole cities pretend to be YouTube CAD tutorials. Artworks are emailed to pop up in bank lobbies designed on fighter-jet software. Huge cloud storage drives rain down as skylines in desert locations. But by becoming real, most images are substantially altered. They get translated, twisted, bruised, and reconfigured. They change their

outlook, entourage, and spin. A nail paint clip turns into an Instagram riot. An upload comes down as shitstorm. An animated GIF materializes as a pop-up airport transit gate. In some places, it seems as if entire NSA system architectures were built—but only after Google-translating them, creating car lofts where one-way mirror windows face inwards. By walking off-screen, images are twisted, dilapidated, incorporated, and reshuffled. They miss their targets, misunderstand their purpose, get shapes and colors wrong. They walk through, fall off, and fade back into screens.

Grace Jones's 2008 black-and-white video clip "Corporate Cannibal," described by Steven Shaviro as a pivotal example of post-cinematic affect, is a case in point.<sup>8</sup> By now, the nonchalant fluidity and modulation of Jones's posthuman figure has been implemented as a blueprint for austerity infrastructure. I could swear that Berlin bus schedules are consistently run on this model—endlessly stretching and straining space, time, and human patience. Cinema's debris rematerializes as investment ruins or secret "Information Dominance Centers."<sup>9</sup>

But if cinema has exploded into the world to become partly real, one also has to accept that it actually did explode. And it probably didn't make it through this explosion either.

## Post-Cinema

For a long time, many people have felt that cinema is rather lifeless. Cinema today is above all a stimulus package to buying new televisions, home projector systems, and retina display iPads. It long ago became a platform to sell franchising products—screening feature-length versions of future Play-Station games in sanitized multiplexes. It became a training tool for what

Thomas Elsaesser calls the military-industrial-entertainment complex.

Everybody has his or her own version of when and how cinema died, but I personally believe it was hit by shrapnel when, in the course of the Bosnian War, a small cinema in Jajce was destroyed around 1993. This was where the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was founded during World War II by the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ). I am sure that cinema was hit in many other places and times as well. It was shot, executed, starved, and kidnapped in Lebanon and Algeria, in Chechnya and the DRC, as well as in many other post-Cold War conflicts. It didn't just withdraw and become unavailable, as Jalal Toufic wrote of artworks after what he calls a surpassing disaster.<sup>10</sup>

It was killed, or at least it fell into a permanent coma.

But let's come back to the question we began with. In the past few years many people—basically everybody—have noticed that the internet feels awkward, too. It is obviously completely surveilled, monopolized, and sanitized by common sense, copyright, control, and conformism. It feels as vibrant as a newly multiplexed cinema in the '90s showing endless reruns of *Star Wars Episode 1*. Was the internet shot by a sniper in Syria, a drone in Pakistan, or a tear-gas grenade in Turkey? Is it in a hospital in Port Said with a bullet in its head? Did it commit suicide by jumping out the window of an Information Dominance Center? But there are no windows in this kind of structure. And there are no walls. The internet is not dead. It is undead and it's everywhere.

I Am a Minecraft Redstone Computer

So what does it mean if the internet has moved offline? It crossed the screen, multiplied displays, transcended networks and cables to be at once inert and inevitable. One could imagine shutting down all online access or user activity. We might be unplugged, but this doesn't mean we're off the hook. The internet persists offline as a mode of life, surveillance, production, and organization—a form of intense voyeurism coupled with maximum nontransparency. Imagine an internet of things all senselessly “liking” each other, reinforcing the rule of a few quasi-monopolies. A world of privatized knowledge patrolled and defended by rating agencies. Of maximum control coupled with intense conformism, where intelligent cars do grocery shopping until a Hellfire missile comes crashing down. Police come knocking on your door for a download—to arrest you after “identifying” you on YouTube or CCTV. They threaten to jail you for spreading publicly funded knowledge? Or maybe beg you to knock down Twitter to stop an insurgency? Shake their hands and invite them in. They are today's internet in 4D.

The all-out internet condition is not an interface but an environment. Older media as well as imaged people, imaged structures, and image objects are embedded into networked matter. Networked space is itself a medium, or whatever one might call a medium's promiscuous, posthumous state today. It is a form of life (and death) that contains, sublates, and archives all previous forms of media. In this fluid media space, images and sounds morph across different bodies and carriers, acquiring more and more glitches and bruises along the way. Moreover, it is not only form that migrates across screens, but also function.<sup>11</sup>

Computation and connectivity permeate matter and render it as raw material for algorithmic prediction, or potentially also as

building blocks for alternate networks. As Minecraft Redstone computers are able to use virtual minerals for calculating operations, so is living and dead material increasingly integrated with cloud performance, slowly turning the world into a multilayered motherboard.<sup>12</sup>

But this space is also a sphere of liquidity, of looming rainstorms and unstable climates. It is the realm of complexity gone haywire, spinning strange feedback loops. A condition partly created by humans but also only partly controlled by them, indifferent to anything but movement, energy, rhythm, and complication. It is the space of the rōnin of old, the masterless samurai freelancers fittingly called wave men and women: floaters in a fleeting world of images, interns in dark net soap lands. We thought it was a plumbing system, so how did this tsunami creep up in my sink? How is this algorithm drying up this rice paddy? And how many workers are desperately clambering on the menacing cloud that hovers in the distance right now, trying to squeeze out a living, groping through a fog which may at any second transform into both an immersive art installation and a demonstration doused in cutting-edge tear gas?

## Postproduction

But if images start pouring across screens and invading subject and object matter, the major and quite overlooked consequence is that reality now widely consists of images; or rather, of things, constellations, and processes formerly evident as images. This means one cannot understand reality without understanding cinema, photography, 3D modeling, animation, or other forms of moving or still image. The world is imbued with the shrapnel of

former images, as well as images edited, photoshopped, cobbled together from spam and scrap. Reality itself is post-produced and scripted, affect rendered as after-effect. Far from being opposites across an unbridgeable chasm, image and world are in many cases just versions of each other.<sup>13</sup>

They are not equivalents however, but deficient, excessive, and uneven in relation to each other. And the gap between them gives way to speculation and intense anxiety.

Under these conditions, production morphs into post-production, meaning the world can be understood but also altered by its tools. The tools of postproduction: editing, color correction, filtering, cutting, and so on are not aimed at achieving representation. They have become means of creation, not only of images but also of the world in their wake. One possible reason: with the digital proliferation of all sorts of imagery, suddenly too much world became available. The map, to use the well-known fable by Borges, has not only become equal to the world but exceeds it by far.<sup>14</sup>

A vast quantity of images covers the surface of the world—literally in the case of aerial imaging—in a confusing stack of layers. The map explodes on a material territory, which is increasingly fragmented and also gets entangled with it: in one instance, Google Maps cartography led to near military conflict.<sup>15</sup> While Borges wagered that the map might wither away, Baudrillard speculated that, on the contrary, reality was disintegrating.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, *both* proliferate and confuse one another: on handheld devices, at checkpoints, and in between edits. Map and territory reach into one another to realize strokes on trackpads as theme parks or apartheid architecture. Image layers get stuck as geological strata while SWAT teams patrol Amazon shopping

carts. The point is that no one can deal with this. This extensive and exhausting mess needs to be edited down in real time: filtered, scanned, sorted, and selected—into so many Wikipedia versions, into layered, libidinal, logistical, lopsided geographies.

This assigns a new role to image production, and in consequence also to the people who deal with it. Image workers now deal directly in a world made of images, and can do so much faster than was previously possible. But production has also become mixed up with circulation to the point of them being indistinguishable. The factory/studio/tumblr blur with online shopping, oligarch collections, realty branding, and surveillance architecture. Today's workplace could turn out to be a rogue algorithm commandeering your hard drive, eyeballs, and dreams. And tomorrow you might have to disco all the way to insanity.

As the web spills over into a different dimension, image production moves way beyond the confines of specialized fields. It becomes mass postproduction in an age of crowd creativity. Today, almost everyone is an artist. We are pitching, phishing, spamming, chain-liking or mansplaining. We are twitching, tweeting, and toasting as some form of solo relational art, high on dual processing and a smartphone flat rate. Image circulation today works by pimping pixels in orbit via strategic sharing of wacky, neo-tribal, and mostly US-American content. Improbable objects, celebrity cat GIFs, and a jumble of unseen anonymous images proliferate and waft through human bodies via WiFi. One could perhaps think of the results as a new and vital form of folk art, that is if one is prepared to completely overhaul one's definition of folk as well as art. A new form of storytelling using emojis and tweeted rape threats is both creating and tearing apart communities loosely linked by shared attention deficit.

## Circulationism

But these things are not as new as they seem. What the Soviet avant-garde of the twentieth century called productivism—the claim that art should enter production and the factory—could now be replaced by circulationism. Circulationism is not about the art of making an image, but about postproducing, launching, and accelerating it. It is about the public relations of images across social networks, about advertisement and alienation, and about being as suavely vacuous as possible.

But remember how the productivists Mayakovsky and Rodchenko created billboards for NEP sweets? Communists eagerly engaging with commodity fetishism?<sup>17</sup>

Crucially, circulationism, if reinvented, could also be about short-circuiting existing networks, circumventing and bypassing corporate friendship and hardware monopolies. It could become the art of recoding or rewiring the system by exposing state scopophilia, capital compliance, and wholesale surveillance. Of course, it might also just go as wrong as its predecessor, by aligning itself with a Stalinist cult of productivity, acceleration, and heroic exhaustion. Historic productivism was—let's face it—totally ineffective and defeated by an overwhelming bureaucratic apparatus of surveillance/workfare early on. And it is quite likely that circulationism—instead of restructuring circulation—will just end up as ornament to an internet that looks increasingly like a mall filled with nothing but Starbucks franchises personally managed by Joseph Stalin.

Will circulationism alter reality's hard- and software; its affects, drives, and processes? While productivism left few traces in a dictatorship sustained by the cult of labor, could circulationism change a condition in which eyeballs, sleeplessness, and exposure are an algorithmic factory? Are



circulationism's Stakhanovites working in Bangladeshi-like farms, or mining virtual gold in Chinese prison camps, churning out corporate content on digital conveyor belts?<sup>18</sup>

## Open Access

But here is the ultimate consequence of the internet moving offline.<sup>19</sup> If images can be shared and circulated, why can't everything else be too? If data moves across screens, so can its material incarnations move across shop windows and other enclosures. If copyright can be dodged and called into question, why can't private property? If one can share a restaurant dish JPEG on Facebook, why not the real meal? Why not apply fair use to space, parks, and swimming pools?<sup>20</sup> Why only claim open access to JSTOR and not MIT—or any school, hospital, or university for that matter? Why shouldn't data clouds discharge as storming supermarkets?<sup>21</sup>

Why not open-source water, energy, and Dom Pérignon champagne?

If circulationism is to mean anything, it has to move into the world of offline distribution, of 3D dissemination of resources, of music, land, and inspiration. Why not slowly withdraw from an undead internet to build a few others next to it?

## Why Games, Or, Can Art Workers Think?

Want to attack war? Compare it to a video game—as in: war has become as mindless as a PlayStation game. People divorced from the consequences of their actions push buttons on consoles in remote locations. Daesh fighters are zombie swarms, drone pilots play arcade games, and so forth. The verdict is usually uttered with contempt, as if it were disgraceful for something as honorable as war to have become comparable to a game. “Shame on you, war! How could you end up as game? Man up and get serious, will you?” It’s so much more wholesome and healthy to kill scores of people if there is no screen separating you from your target. Shoot the enemy face to face, in an intimate and heartfelt way. Remember the USAF officers who personally dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima—there is nothing like an honest mass extinction.

But people who think so are making a big mistake. Many of them are in fact to be found in art or culture, and think they are defending the gravitas or assumed criticality of their trade. For some “creative professionals,” computer games are an abomination, the pinnacle of a capitalist conspiracy to distort reality. Their reaction, however, is not only critically but morally wrong. In fact, for the vast majority of humanity it would be great if war were just a video game. In a game, players respawn. You get shot—no problem: you can start all over again. You can

nuke Hiroshima without anyone in Japan even noticing. Whereas in real war, you die, and if you don't you are either bored as hell or stressed out. If you need to pee, you can't press a pause button. And often, in reality, no one wins, because a ubiquitous permawar drags on and people keep dying, while all the credit miraculously accumulates in 1 percent of bank accounts. In contrast, imagine if war actually was a video game: people would push buttons in Nevada or Moscow, and those in Afghanistan or Syria might fall over. But at the end of the round they would get up again, dust off their pants and go on their way. It would be silly, perhaps, but better than what's really happening. One would need to be an enemy of humanity not to wish that war might actually be a video game.

By contrast, there are some who perhaps overestimate the potential of play. The Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuis drew on Johann Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* for the drawings and maquettes of his utopian world, New Babylon. In a 1974 manifesto of the same name, Constant called for the liberation of the "playing man" from the working, producing or otherwise utilitarian one: "The opposite of utilitarian society is ludic society, where the human being, freed by automation from productive work, is at least in a position to develop his creativity."<sup>1</sup> This might be a slightly optimistic view, though:

"For twelve hours a day, seven days a week, my colleagues and I are killing monsters," said a 23-year-old gamer who works in a makeshift factory in Fuzhou in China and goes by the online codename, Wandering. "I make about \$250 a month, which is pretty good compared with the other jobs I've had. And I can play games all day."<sup>2</sup>

"Wandering" works in a games sweatshop, accumulating virtual assets—*World of Warcraft* gold, for example—for resale. It seems that automation didn't necessarily free people from labor.

Instead, it turned some workers into robots. This leads to some interesting problems: What's the difference between a human and a robot? And how does this apply to games? And, on top of that, to art as well? All these can be condensed into one single question: "Can creatives think?"

## Imitation Games

Readers may recognize here a famous thought experiment. In 1950, Alan Turing posed the question, "Can machines think?," and attempted to answer it with a test based on a party game, in which players try to guess whether someone behind a closed door is a man or a woman from their written answers, which may be deliberately ambiguous. For example, when the interrogator in the Imitation Game asks, "Will X please tell me the length of his or her hair?," X replies: "My hair is shingled, and the longest strands are about nine inches long." Turing suggests replacing this player with a machine. If it is as successful as the human in confusing the interrogator, Turing considers it a thinking machine.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Turing and Walter Benjamin both independently chose imitation scenarios—in Benjamin's case, the Chess Turk—to think through central questions of their times. In Turing's case, the imitation aspect concerns gender; in Benjamin's, national identity: a dwarf tries to pass as an Ottoman chess automaton. But both deal with the passage between humans and machines.

To focus on one rapid move in Turing's argument: the initial question, "Can machines think?," is very quickly replaced by a game—one that superficially resembles the sort used in mathematical and economic game theory, developed around the same time as the Turing Test, which focused on the problem of

choice between different options. As John von Neumann and Oscar Morgenstern put it in their *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*:

Let us for the moment accept the picture of an individual whose system of preferences is all-embracing and complete, i.e. who, for any two objects, or rather for any two imagined events, possesses a clear intuition of preference ... we expect him, for any two alternative events which are put before him as possibilities, to be able to tell which of the two he prefers.<sup>4</sup>

Neumann and Morgenstern's idea was to try to formalize what they called zero-sum games between just two participants. The general idea was that games were mathematical formalizations of economic or military interactions (markets and wars could equally be represented as games). The hope was to calculate possible outcomes and strategies for all kinds of economic and military scenarios, but the problem emerged almost immediately that one could calculate successful strategies only if one radically simplified the nature of the interaction and the environment of the game. Among the necessary fictions introduced to calculate economic behavior in game theory was the notion that people always have rational preferences between outcomes, which can be associated with values; that individuals always maximize utility (and firms, profits); that people always act independently, on the basis of full information.

It is not surprising that it turned out to be both mathematically and empirically difficult to pin down the key terms here: "rationality," "utility" and "information" all presented major obstacles.<sup>5</sup> On top of such theoretical issues, human players did not behave in the way they were expected to. One of the main problems of applying probability calculations to reality was that players were unable to compute the probabilities of the

confusing options and numbers and rules that game theorists saw as constituting rational scenarios. Consider what might be the most rational approach to the famous “urn game”:

Imagine an urn containing 30 red balls and 60 black and yellow balls, the latter in unknown proportion. You are now given a choice between two bets:

Gamble A: You receive \$100 if you draw a red ball

Gamble B: You receive \$100 if you draw a black ball

You are then given a choice between two further bets, about a different draw from the same urn:

Gamble C: You receive \$100 if you draw a red or yellow ball

Gamble D: You receive \$100 if you draw a black or yellow ball

Which of these do you prefer? Take your time!<sup>6</sup>

What would be the most rational strategy to adopt here? Assuming that you want to maximize utility, are perfectly rational and, in addition, you want to maximize everyone else’s benefit, too, I predict with a probability of 99 percent that you will choose Gamble E and respond: “You know what, actually I don’t need any balls, so just give me the \$100 already.”<sup>7</sup>

## Generative Fictions

The question of whether machines can think would be very productive, however—especially for Neumann. If the rationality of humans was a problem, or if they were bad at mathematics, the solution was neither to try to fix the humans nor to deny the problem, but to create a rational non-human that could do the calculation instead.<sup>8</sup> This was the starting point for Neumann’s theory of automata and the development of modern digital computers—which was of course made possible by the works by Charles Babbage, Ada Lovelace, Turing himself and others. For

Neumann, the computer is, so to speak, a rational game player. It is also a creative solution to the problem that the world didn't comply with the fictions of economists, strategists and mathematicians. If adapting the model to reality was too difficult, one could always change the world according to the fiction. If there were no natural rational agents, why not create artificial ones? The point is that games are not a consequence of computers making the world more unreal. On the contrary, games made computers become real. Games are generative fictions.

Of course, the computer was not just invented out of a frustration that people weren't rational enough. The development of the computer would have never been funded if it hadn't been for World War II, which unleashed unlimited opportunities to apply both game theory and computing. Some of the first things to be run on Neumann's new machine were simulations for hydrogen bombs. He then proceeded to model Cold War mutual assured destruction (MAD) scenarios. Several game theorists, including Neumann, Thomas Schelling and others, share the honor of having served as the model for Stanley Kubrick's lunatic weapons expert, Dr. Strangelove.

It is striking how much reality has been created as a consequence of different iterations of game theory: neoliberal policies, a wide array of military applications, nuclear and non-nuclear, from targeting devices to deterrence strategies, as well as management theories and planning systems—not to mention the consequences of automated computation as a whole. Of course, many of these generative fictions were produced by indirect means. You didn't get a perfect market just because you designed a game that pretended it exists. Rather, the process worked in a disruptive and unpredictable way. You lack a rational

human actor in the market—and end up inventing the computer instead. You want to predict the weather on this computer, but there are problems, so you end up computing how to explode a hydrogen bomb. The relation of the models to the situations they were supposed to represent was often dubious—in some cases, a matter of fervent faith—but the upshot was undeniably new realities.

It is in this sense that we live in “gamespace,”<sup>9</sup> where digital video games are more than just an emergent form of cultural narrative. Instead, specific forms of games—especially those that feature self-interested players in war or business—in many cases embody ideal variations of what came to be realized in more random, sometimes catastrophic, ways. This may also explain why so many video games are located at the intersection of military action and economic profit, and why they model destruction as opportunity. If we think of them not only as Platonic ideals but as training grounds and behavioral schools—as “serious games,” in Harun Farocki’s formulation—it’s easy to see that generations of players were rewarded if they behaved in ways that were considered rationally self-interested. So, regardless of whether humans ever were “rational” in the way game theory assumed, a lot of people have now been trained to understand rationality in this way and to imitate its effects. After all, this is what games do. They are not only playgrounds for free choice, but also training grounds for habits. They rehearse certain response patterns and create muscle memory. As “useful games,” their fallout is embedded in all aspects of life.

Online Capture



Look no further than Turing's test as an example. How often have you been subjected to an inverted Turing test online, where you have to prove you are not a robot? Until quite recently, most humans had to prove to online machines that they were humans by completing a captcha—Completely Automated Public Turing Test to Tell Computers and Humans Apart—and typing in the squiggled text designed to weed out automated spambots. If you manage to do this, you successfully impersonate a human for a machine. But in contrast to the penetrating intelligence a thinking machine had to deploy to satisfy Turing, in a captcha, a human proves itself as human by the most mechanical and mindless activity, namely reading and copying a string of symbols. How could this be a useful game?

In 2011, the *New York Times* reported that people who had to fill out captchas had unwittingly been enlisted in “a project to transform an old book, magazine, newspaper or pamphlet into an accurate, searchable and easily sortable computer text file.” Google was using captcha to check text scanned for Google Books:

Dr. von Ahn's group estimated that humans around the world decode at least 200 million captchas per day, at 10 seconds per captcha. This works out to about 500,000 hours per day—a lot of applied brainpower being spent on what Dr. von Ahn regards as a fundamentally mindless exercise. “So we asked, ‘Can we do something useful with this time?’” Dr. von Ahn recalled in a telephone interview.<sup>10</sup>

In 2012, Google shifted the captcha technology to correct street numbers in Google Street View. People asked by computers to prove they were people actually had to work. By filling out a captcha, they were providing unpaid, involuntary and “fundamentally mindless” labor. They had to become robots—

which translates as workers—in order to prove they were human.

In recent years, Google's captcha has been replaced with a checkbox where you just click to say, "I am not a robot." If this seems more civilized and convenient, it is in fact just a new stage in the same useful game. Google is now able to identify you as human through your online behavior, your IP address and a number of "tracking clues." According to the developer, "this gives us a model of how a human behaves."<sup>11</sup> Google has modeled you and is therefore able to make predictions of your behavior in its own game. If you correspond to the model, you pass and get access. How is this model constructed? That's mostly secret. Is it a personal model of you as an individual or a generic model of a human? Not known. The point is you have to match Google's secret captcha of human behavior. Has mathematics thus finally become being? Is this a dystopian form of mathematical realism whereby numbers are seen as reality itself?

This is no longer a model in the conventional sense. Peter Norvig, Google's research director, has said that "all models are wrong, and increasingly you can succeed without them." The reason, explained Chris Anderson in *Wired*, is that "with enough data, the numbers speak for themselves." For hundreds of years, scientists insisted that correlation is not causation, but according to Anderson this has changed:

There is now a better way. Petabytes allow us to say: "Correlation is enough." We can stop looking for models. We can analyze the data without hypotheses about what it might show. We can throw the numbers into the biggest computing clusters the world has ever seen and let statistical algorithms find patterns where science cannot.<sup>12</sup>

Thus correlation or pattern is the new model, and similarity or likeness replaces cause and effect.

## Strawberries and Cream

Let's think back to Turing's game. The criterion of success was a machine having the same ability as a human to confuse an interrogator about its gender. Prominent contemporary uses of computation, by contrast, center not upon confusion of identity but its multiplication. Facebook, for example, has modified the Imitation Game to say that, if you don't want to identify as male or female, that's fine, but please define your "custom" gender, and we'll make sure we send you the appropriate ads. This is not an imitation game but an identification game.

Similarity—or correlation—as mathematical evidence is something Turing discussed as well. To challenge his own ideas, he cited the objection that machines could never bond over strawberries and cream, as humans could. But he answered this challenge with a twist:

Possibly a machine might be made to enjoy this delicious dish, but any attempt to make one do so would be idiotic. What is important about this disability is that it contributes to some of the other disabilities, e.g. to the difficulty of the same kind of friendliness occurring between man and machine as between white man and white man, or between black man and black man.<sup>13</sup>

But—and this is my question, not Turing's—if a machine did reproduce this behavior, would it then be thinking? Some people think so, because the idea of white men bonding over strawberries and cream has moved to the heart of social-network analysis. This is a pristine example of so-called homophily, the phenomenon whereby people like to bond with

those similar to them. How could this produce mathematical evidence of anything? If white men mostly have strawberries and cream with white men, this suggests that whomever a white man has strawberries with is most likely to be a white man. This is the logic behind Facebook's idea that you're like what you like, and that you will like the things that people who are like you like. This is how they sell you strawberries and cream. And this is also how Google concludes that you are not a robot, because someone who likes similar things to you checked the box to say he is not a robot, and this applies to you by correlation.

If you extend this thinking to the Imitation Game, you would be guessing the gender not only of all the players, but of all their friends and social networks, too. This is how the game starts transgressing its own boundaries and slowly becomes real. So there are two completely different games. On the one hand, the Identification Game: if something looks like something, it is the same. All boxes get checked. On the other, Turing's Imitation Game: maybe something that looks similar is the same. It's definitely possible that someone who comes across as a man is a man, but then again, maybe not. At this point, a thinking machine will decide that this is not the interrogator's business and will politely move on to a discussion of the weather.

Readers by now may be recalling the opening argument of this piece—that, at least in the case of war, we should be wishing reality were a game—and thinking: But aren't these identification games quite unfair and exploitative, with people being modeled according to secret algorithms, or correlated from a network of look-a-likes, and then made to conform to this algorithm to prove they are human? Yes. But the basis for the earlier argument was that one would be able to shut down a game, and its results would be reversible. A desirable game, as I define it, is

one that is restricted to a dedicated space and time; it can be reset, and its scores can be erased. A correlation game is the opposite of this. It is not limited, and you have no idea where, when, how and through whom you were captured for participation. The details of your own model—what it consists of, how it's manufactured, who it was inferred from, to whom it is sold and for what purpose—are kept secret from you. Its effects may or may not be reversible, one just doesn't know.

## From Play to Work

Turing's game is not the only one to have been recreated in an algorithmic version. Benjamin's has been relaunched as a Human Bot Employment Agency in the guise of Amazon's Mechanical Turk, an enterprise which both flaunts the way it sees humans as robots and emphasizes its extreme utility—"have access to a global, on-demand, 24 x 7 workforce," "pay only when you're satisfied with the results." Still, these are comparatively transparent when compared to other social-game scores. Any "ranking" assigned to you, whether it is partial or total, whether it concerns your credit rating, professional ability, social media interaction or anything else, represents a simplified model of your actions. It is the game score of your past, and predicted future, social and economic behavior—or, more precisely, the game score of someone who looks like you.

For artists, this is a daily reality. Various algorithmic scores, such as those computed (or conjectured) by companies like Artfacts or Art Rank, reflect different interpretations and quantifications of past and future measures of success. Artfacts assumes that the number of exhibitions you have will somehow correlate to the monetary value of your work, which seems

plausible, though I can't exactly confirm it from experience. Art Rank is much more risk-oriented and focused on emerging artists. Its algorithm is of course secret, but the rumor is that it initially consisted of a bot analyzing the investor Steven Simchovitz's Instagram account and simply promoting the work he seemed to like. Of course, the implication is that a collector like Simchovitz will like what Simchovitz likes. On such a basis, Art Rank thus feels confident enough to divide artists into different categories: buy, sell and liquidate. (By the way, I have a great business model: one could repackage this algorithm for academic ranking schemes and get rich betting on when a philosopher or social theorist will peak, and his or her intellectual stock will be liquidated. At a certain level, academic ranking works exactly like this—only usually the whole department is liquidated, which is far more efficient.)

In China, online payment services are being used to pioneer a more totalized form of ranking by way of "social credit" scores. These not only include credit scores derived from your financial activities, in the shape of insurance prices, loyalty schemes or personal interest rates, but also information from your social network, such as your friends' financial situations and the kind of shopping you all do. They are thought to be test runs for a more integrated social credit score, to be implemented for every citizen from 2020, designed to improve "social sincerity." This will not only measure financial circumstances but also social conformity, as implied by your online behavior or your driving record. Of course, they could also be the actions of someone who just looks like you or can be correlated in other ways. Aspects of this have already been implemented in Sesame's calculations of credit score:

“Someone who plays video games for 10 hours a day, for example, would be considered an idle person, and someone who frequently buys diapers would be considered as probably a parent, who on balance is more likely to have a sense of responsibility,” Li Yingyun, Sesame’s technology director said.<sup>14</sup>

This is expanded gaming indeed. In this kind of game, playing video games is seen as a useless and even subversive activity. After all, you can shut down a video game. What kind of precedent would that set for a “social sincerity” program? The social credit game is not supposed to be entertaining, but to increase predictability in fusing “surveillance, data collection, online monitoring, and behavioral tracking to render practically all of its citizens’ affairs (including the citizens themselves) in market terms.”<sup>15</sup> This is not only a socialist neoliberal form of state gamification, but also an indication that the new math—let’s just call it correlationist math—is being realized in the form of the social surveillance of game workers, who spend all day slaying monsters in *World of Warcraft* for money.

## Beautiful Models

I began by noting that many of my fellow art professionals fall into quite superficial reflexes in relation to games and seem unwilling to recognize that they are being gamed by all sorts of ranking scores and speculative curating practices. Nevertheless, they may be well placed to think through the problem that games represent. Reflecting on the inability of economists to predict the financial crisis using the most sophisticated models of mathematical simulation, Paul Krugman singled out the problem, as he put it, of beauty: “The economics profession went astray because economists, as a group, mistook beauty, clad in

impressive-looking mathematics, for truth.”<sup>16</sup> From the 1970s, the study of economics seemed to have been taken over by Voltaire’s Dr. Pangloss, who insisted that we live in the best of all possible worlds. The field was dominated by the “efficient-market hypothesis,” which claimed that financial markets price assets at their intrinsic worth, given all publicly available information. Their theoretical model was—skipping over the details—wonderfully elegant and, if its premise was correct, extremely useful.

That beauty can be a problem is immediately clear if we look at fashion models, who might be seen as organic embodiments of the sophisticated financial models that failed in 2008. They are defined as more beautiful, the more starved they are. Supreme beauty in capitalist terms is achieved when a human body is able to work, day in, day out, virtually without food: utility equals beauty. Models are seen as living proof that this is a perfectly realistic assumption. Beauty can, then, be quite life-threatening for humans. But art professionals have a strategy for preventing beauty being confused with reality. The solution is to lock up anything beautiful in a museum. In there, beauty may proclaim whatever it wants: best possible worlds, ideal humans, rational economic behavior, and so on. When you leave the museum it will stay behind, just like switching off a game. Its effects can be limited and reversible, yet you can still enjoy the best of all possible worlds, strawberries and cream with unlimited numbers of white men, or even nuking Hiroshima with your thumb. Let’s call this realm the autonomy of art, which means there is no direct connection between art and social realities. That could be a good thing. There could be a museum for Pareto optimalities, Nash equilibria, risk-hedging simulations, any model that brags



of being awesome or elegant. Anything that is just too beautiful to be true.

Correlation and pattern do not necessarily need to be beautiful to be seen as true. They just have to *look* beautiful. Art theory has long been dealing with this idea—let’s say, quite arbitrarily, at least since Bourdieu spoke of *habitus* and distinction. Homophily in the arts means that whatever someone else—someone like you—accepts as art, is (most likely) art. So what about patterns, then? As we have seen, patterns represent a new kind of mathematical truth emerging out of petabytes of spam by means of secret algorithms. They mysteriously pop up from an overkill of random data. Recent art criticism has produced a great term to deal with this: crapstraction, a coinage of Jerry Saltz, art critic for *New York* magazine.<sup>17</sup> Crapstracts are abstract paintings of random patterns from random data, worth craploads of money because of speculative investment. The best of all possible worlds is realized in the fact that all hedge-fund investors’ living rooms look exactly the same. Crapstraction condenses the key ontological formulae of our times. Art is what your friends buy. Beauty is what your friends buy. Truth is what your friends buy. Mathematics, too. You yourself are exactly, or at least look like, what your friends buy. It’s been calculated from petabytes of spam, so it must be true.

What happens if you scan a crapstract painting as a bar code on your mobile phone? Of course you won’t see the algorithm for crapstraction, which is secret and proprietary. Instead, a coupon will be sent out to all your Facebook friends—or, for that matter, to everyone who sort of looks like you online—to have strawberries and cream in a new gaming sweatshop in China. If you don’t comply, you will either have to buy black or yellow balls for \$100 each or check the box saying “I am not a robot” for as

long as it takes to download a petabyte of Dr. Strangelove files. Quickly compute the optimal pattern: Which would you choose?

Here the importance of crapstraction begins to emerge. How does the NSA distill patterns from randomly collected data, if not by crapstraction? How are academic ranking scores calculated? How do biology, economics, computational science, social-network analysis or art-investment advisory services come up with patterns, risk analyses and reputation scores, if not by crapstraction? Once this is locked away in a museum, however, artists can be evaluated in terms of the elegance of the algorithms by which they are ranked, alongside the Chinese social credit system, collateralized debt obligations, credit default swaps and so on, which will henceforth become purely aesthetic objects, a bit like religious art in a secular museum. Instead of trying to implement these models, one would sell them off at auction.

There are other advantages to detaining these models in a museum. They could potentially benefit from truly outstanding examples of their genre—for example, Constant's New Babylon models, which combine ideas of automation, play and the economy in highly original and radical ways. One striking feature is that most of them cannot be built—or if perhaps they could, they wouldn't be too useful. Constant's models are not blueprints for a real, fully automated city of play. They visualize the gap between maquette and reality. They are models of the difference between games as utopian, and therefore reversible, and those all-pervasive useful games, in which humans work as perennial unpaid assistants to robots. Constant's manifesto comes to the following conclusion: "This was as far as I could go. The project exists. It is safely stored away in a museum, waiting for more

favorable times when it will once again arouse interest among future urban designers.”<sup>18</sup>

From this perspective, further questions emerge. To what extent were the social scenarios of Relational Art just abstract models that were, unfortunately, mistaken for reality? Wouldn't it be more fruitful to define them as *social abstractions* and use them to test-model and simulate a range of social scenarios—but on the premise that they should be seen as models of social interaction, and not as the social *per se*. To expand on this: If a game is a social abstraction, what kind of abstraction is it? Perhaps different social abstractions could be test-modeled in terms of their social criticality, spread, circulation, contagion, tipping points—keeping in mind, again, that these would be abstract models in the sense of Constant's sculptures, and not the political *per se*. These experiments might turn out to be mere crapstraction. But just because crapstraction is so widespread, it doesn't mean it's the only kind of abstraction. It is not. And people in the field of art have a long history in trying to create nuance in these areas.

Of course my art colleagues will object that, unfortunately, one cannot contain the effects of beauty in this way. Art and its effects leak out of institutions, they will argue, and so my model is idealized, fictional and potentially crapstractional too. I totally agree. You are correct. But I don't want to solve this contradiction; I want to intensify it. To go back to the beginning: an art professional who rejects games as either socially irrelevant or not real enough is definitely in denial. But this doesn't answer the question, “Can a creative think?” It might perhaps be answered by way of an imitation game. Let's say there is an interrogator who wants to figure out whether my plan of defining a certain kind of social game as autonomous art

can work or not. The interrogator might ask the question: "Is art autonomous?" As player X, how do you reply? You know that this game might be a powerful generative fiction—some change in real relations might ultimately spring from it. Do you then tell the interrogator that, unfortunately, the autonomy of art doesn't exist and that crapstract patternings will keep spilling out into society, no matter what? Will you tell him that any kind of alternative model is just a fallacy, because however you model it, it will not translate into reality? Will you tell him that, at the end of the day, the probability that Google will win the game, along with Art Rank, Chinese social sincerity and the NSA, is overwhelming? Will you correctly check all of Facebook's boxes and go shopping with your look-a-like friends?

Or are you tempted to decide differently? In that case, why not look to Daniel Ellsberg, who came up with the Ellsberg Paradox and the urn game, with all those useless black and yellow balls. Ellsberg went on from being a Rand game-theory strategist to leak the Pentagon Papers, which demonstrated the systematic lying of US administrations about the Vietnam War. This played a major role in fueling the anti-war movement and, through further unpredictable complications, helped to bring down Richard Nixon. Actually, this is exactly what the outcome of Ellsberg's experiment might have suggested: if you can't compute the risk, you might as well take it. Against all odds, he got away with it. He took the risk and ran with his own generative fiction: however ludicrous and unrealistic it might have seemed, there might be justice. At least there is a 0.001 percent probability for it. But in order to realize this probability you don't only have to stand up for it. You will have to act as if it was a fact. You will have to imitate a not-yet-existent reality and

game it into being. This is how playing grows into acting. Now, art workers, please start thinking about it.

## Let's Talk about Fascism

Yes, I mean it. Not about psychology or evil as such. Not about insanity or sudden unpredictable doom. You are trying to avoid the topic. The topic is fascism.

We have seen a similar avoidance after the attacks in Oslo and on Utøya. As if societies did not want to trust their own eyes and ears. The perpetrator has extensively articulated his neo-fascist beliefs. Yet people are trying to avoid this fact. His act is not called an act of terror, but of lunacy. It is depoliticized and represented as a private deviation that unexpectedly struck the country like a natural disaster. It is thus divorced from the political dimension and becomes a private, individual action.

But this avoidance has something more to tell us. It points to a gap in representation itself. It originates in very serious epistemological and political issues that are worked deep into the fabric of contemporary fascism and its resurgence across Europe and beyond. More than this: they are embedded very fundamentally in the ways in which we perceive contemporary reality.

The fundamental problem is not a lack of morals, though. Nor is it a question of good or evil, sanity or illness. It is the issue of representation. On the one hand political representation, on the other cultural representation; and in fact, thirdly, of economic

participation. What do all of these have to do with the public reactions to the massacre?

## Political Representation

So what are political representation and cultural representation? More precisely: What are the disparities between and within these concepts? They rest on contradictions that are irresolvable; and fascism seems to be a convenient jump cut to an attempt to explode these different aporias.

Let's start with the basics. Political representation in a liberal democracy is gained mainly by participation in the electoral process. This requires citizenship. True political representation is thus inadequate in all European democracies.

This is well known. But there are much more general and pressing issues now. Political power is increasingly being eroded. Who achieves or doesn't achieve political representation matters less and less. Even people with full political privileges, members of parties—even parliaments—are increasingly ignored. Because whatever the people want, whoever they are, and regardless of who represents them, the contemporary sovereigns are mainly the "markets." The markets, not the people, are to be appeased, satisfied, and pleased by the political class. In the area of economics, representation exists too. Participation in economic processes is measured by the abilities to get credit, to own, and to consume. This also explains the contemporary rage against what is essentially economic or consumer exclusion. Many contemporary riots do not have political goals—why should they, since political action proves powerless in many cases?—but strive for economic participation: the most concentrated expression of this is the looting of shopping malls.

This erosion of political power is a result of decades of redistribution of wealth, opportunity, and actual power from the poor to the rich. While it was possible, the poor were appeased with credit and indentured shopping. Now that this no longer seems to work, economic participation has become a battleground.

But what does all this have to do with fascism? On the surface, nothing. But these phenomena are all symptoms of what could tentatively be called post-democracy. In post-democracy, politics is successively abandoned as a means of organizing the common.

Post-democracy is also felt within political institutions. Citizens of the European Union, for example, are faced with a host of institutions that are not democratically legitimized (among these, again, financial institutions, which are not subject to any political control). The votes of citizens do not have the same weight, depending on their citizenship, thus creating different classes of political representation. Within Europe and beyond, oligarchies of all kinds are on the rise. Retreating bureaucracies are replaced with authoritarian rule, tribal rackets and organized vigilantism. The so-called monopoly of violence is increasingly privatized, handed over to private armies, security companies and outsourced gangs. Forces that could be controlled democratically are weakening, while states and other actors impose their agendas through emergency powers or "necessity." There have been so many examples of this over the last few decades that I don't even want to start listing them.

All of these symptoms intensify anxieties around the idea of political representation as such. Weren't we promised equality? Yes, we were. Wasn't the idea of democracy that we'd all be represented? No, we aren't. Political representation involves a



certain arbitrariness and randomness—to a certain extent they are inherent in it, but they seem to be accelerating at a tremendous rate right now.<sup>1</sup> It involves instability, unpredictability, and a large dose of futility.

## Cultural Representation

So how about cultural representation, then? What is it anyway? Cultural representation is (in many cases, visual) representation in the public realm. Via texts, advertisements, popular culture, TV—you name it. We don't need to go into this, you only have to look around you. The situation appears to be quite different here. There is an overabundance of representation of almost anything and anybody: in commercial as well as social media. This avalanche of representation has increased a great deal with digital technologies. That things and people are represented culturally doesn't mean much, though. It just means that lots of images are floating around, hustling for attention.

What is the relation, then, between political and cultural representation? Between *Darstellung* und *Vertretung*, or between proxy and portrait, as Gayatri Spivak put it?

There is one. But it isn't the one that has traditionally been assumed to exist. Some thirty to forty years ago, early Cultural Studies, with its Gramscian implications, understood cultural representation as some sort of visual democracy. The assumption went something like this: if people were represented culturally in a positive way, political equality would become more likely. Passionate battles over the idea of a politics of representation characterized a large part of the '80s (and in many places, way beyond them).

But we are now realizing that something in this equation went wrong; or, to put it more neutrally, something changed dramatically. While cultural representation of everything is undergoing massive inflation (coupled with the devaluation and degradation of most individual images, texts, and sounds) political representation is not only uneven, it is also less and less relevant. The two realms also seem to be running wildly out of sync. The period of the exponential growth of all things represented, the era of the proliferation of circulating images and data, is also the period of the radicalization of anti-immigration policies, the institution of increasingly harsh border regimes, the growth of neo-fascist (some prefer to call them right-wing populist) movements and parties, and a general loss of the authority of politics.

If one were to push the point, one could conclude that there is almost an inversely proportional relationship between political and cultural representation. The more people are represented culturally, and the more they snap one another on their cellphones and submit to Facebook surveillance schemes, the less they matter politically. But this may be only partly the case. The real link is perhaps that both types function perfectly erratically and unevenly. They are both more portraits than proxies, and not necessarily very good portraits either.

## The Collapse of Representation

And now the refusal to acknowledge fascism, even though it is proclaimed publicly and backed up with atrocities, as in the case of the attacks in Oslo and Utøya, becomes clearer—because this avoidance points to a blind spot that links the problem of representation with fascism.

Why is this so? It is because in fascism, representation collapses. It is short-circuited by attempts to avoid all the complications inherent in it, and to label representation as an alien and foreign concept. Fascism claims to express the essence of the people by imposing a leader and by replacing cultural representation with caricatures passed off as simple truth. It tries to get rid of representation altogether.

And indeed there are many reasons to be suspicious of contemporary representation. In both political and cultural representation, the link between represented and representation seems to have become dramatically more complicated in recent years, and it very often disintegrates completely. Representation, as we know it, is heading for a crash—or rather it is nose-diving in a vertiginous tailspin.

In cultural representation, the concept of reality has been stressed to an unprecedented extent. Many of the rules and conventions of visual representation have become almost obsolete with the recent digital revolution. In the case of pictures, the so-called indexical bond of photography (which was always dubious) has been shattered by copy-and-paste technologies, accelerated fog-of-war campaigns, and unprecedented opportunities for scams, misinformation, and deceit. Traditional truth-testing procedures—journalistic, legal, and to some extent also scientific—have been replaced by digital rumor, widespread deregulation, the law of demand, and Wikipedia-like, crowdsourced “knowledge.” Of course, cultural representation has always been tricky. But the emergence of fascism 2.0 speaks to a period in which digital rancor can spread like wildfire, fueled by avatars who can hardly be linked to real people anymore. Just as representation as such has been untethered from institutional control, its content has in many

cases been divorced from any empirical reality. Don't get me wrong. I don't think the digital revolution is a bad thing. On the contrary, it has enabled many great advances in the free circulation of information. But at the cost of increased uncertainty and instability. There is no denying this either.

In political representation, one of the major realizations of recent years is that even those who are politically represented feel powerless, as power today seems to be coded more economically than politically. So, ironically, political representation starts to resemble cultural representation. It becomes more portrait than proxy, while its internal contradictions increase. Complications thus intensify, with both political and cultural representation.

## Finance and Epistemology

Maybe the common denominator of all these diverse slippages in representation is the notion of speculation. Speculation is at once a financial and an epistemological tool. In finance, speculation means to take a step whose implications cannot be safely predicted. Not all the information is (or can be) available at the time of taking the decision. Risk is thus increased, but presumably so is opportunity. Speculation also means that value is increasingly unhitched from the object to which it refers. It does not refer to the thing in question any more, but to the context of its circulation and the affects attached to it. It represents mood swings around derivatives of derivatives. It is more like video feedback from a wildly agitated hand-held camera feed than a conventional still-image illustration (and by this I do not mean to imply that the latter is more truthful than the former—just more predictable).

It is not difficult to see how this relates to speculation as a tool of observation and research. *Speculari* means to observe in Latin. It is used as the Latin translation of the Greek *theoria* and describes the quest for the essence or origins of things behind their empirical existence. At the same time, it refers to a jump into the haze of pure appearance, as Augustine's reflections on the recognition of God in a dark mirror suggest. According to Hans Reichenbach, speculation characterizes periods of transition in philosophy, when the questions exceed the possible rational means of answering them. Thus philosophical speculation also presents risks and opportunities. It presents the possibility of thinking outside the box as well as the danger of getting completely lost out there.

But speculation has also come to characterize many vernacular processes of representation. All the things that are not known, but are suspected. All the rumors that are not substantiated. All the complexity compressed beyond recognition. Viral videos, whose circulation multiplies in bubbles of representation, with a thick coating of affect dripping from them. Grainy, abstract footage from war zones. The addiction to emergency and catastrophe, and their subsequent inflation on exponentially multiplying screens. The loss of confidence in images and any other referential values and their relation to whatever they refer to.

Many of the processes that characterize speculation in general—above all its risky and unsubstantiated relation to reality—are inherent in digital representation practices. Representation as such is extremely dynamized by speculation. The result is that the relation between referent and sign, between person and proxy, becomes extremely unpredictable—like many other contemporary phenomena. Speculation

turbocharges representation; it accelerates the tailspin that we are living through today.

This is not solely bad news. Speculation as a method opens up new freedoms of expression and thought, which, on the other hand, can easily be put to terrible use. Opportunities arise by the minute—and realities are wasted and destroyed at the same time. This opens up new horizons of thinking, which in many cases end up as complete delusions. Speculation is a harbinger of possibility and exploration, just as it plays into bigotry and bias.

This is where fascism comes into play. Where representation collapses or spins off into precipitous loops and feedbacks, fascism seemingly offers easy answers. It is the panic button for blocking off annoying remnants of reality.

By apparently doing away with the complications of representation, fascism manages to obfuscate that it is the highest form of contemporary speculative representation: its point of collapse, or of impact. The crash itself is at once overrepresented and unrepresented. A blind spot filled with delusion and death. The irreversible parting of the ways with empirical reality.

The good news for fascists is that their ideology is so compatible with contemporary economic paradigms—because it resonates perfectly with an ideology in which society is nothing and the individual's greed and will to power are everything. In which tribe and racket rule supreme and flattened stereotypes hyperventilate. Especially in an era of first-person shooter games and online fanaticism, fascism seems like an ideal complement to “overdrive capitalism”: a built-in competitive advantage for Aryans. Not only does it promise to reintroduce a (completely speculative) referent for value, namely race or culture,

conveniently, it also promises its target audience that they will be in the upper echelon of the class divide, because dirty and low-paid jobs will be dumped on “subhumans.” It presents a seeming alternative to the brutal equality of liberal democracy in which everybody is presumed to “make it” or fail, by presenting itself as self-evident “truth.” In fascism, the abstract equality of capitalist liberalism is abolished by the collapse of class into race. It is a perfect ideology for lazy Aryans: you enjoy all the benefits of capitalism without actually having to work.

At this point we recognize that the words “Aryan” and “race” can be replaced with other copy-and-paste jargons that share similar premises. Most terror attacks of the last decade have actually been initiated by right-wing extremists who want their respective cultures to remain “pure” and exclusive, who hate women, communists, and most minorities (minorities from their point of view, that is) and cook up an ideology centered around testosterone-driven masculinity. Not all of these ideologies are fascist, and there is no point trying to boil them all down to this notion. But all of them try to replace equality by uniformity—however they define the latter.

But here is the point. None of what I have written about necessarily leads to fascism. It presents the context that facilitates its emergence: it doesn’t inevitably lead to it. The reason is simple. People have the choice. Anybody can choose to become a fascist or not. And most people, thankfully, have so far chosen not to.

And one can also choose not to ignore the problem. Instead of denying these challenges, we should face up to them. We should face up to the complete unhinging of reality by reintroducing checks and balances, by renegotiating value and information, by insisting on representation and human

solidarity. This also includes acknowledging and opposing real existing fascism and its countless derivatives and franchises. Denying its existence means surrendering to a newly emerging paradigm of post-politics and post-democracy; to a complete turning-away from reality.



## If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art! Contemporary Art and Derivative Fascisms

Is art a currency? Investor Stefan Simchowicz thinks so. He wrote with uncompromising clarity about the post-Brexit era: "Art will effectively continue its structural function as an alternative currency that hedges against inflation and currency depreciation."<sup>1</sup> Have silver paintings become a proxy gold standard?<sup>2</sup> How did it come to this? During the ongoing crisis, investors were showered with tax money, which then went into freeport collections, tower mansions, and shell companies. Quantitative easing eroded currency stability and depleted common resources, entrenching a precarious service economy with dismal wages, if any, eternal gigs, eternal debt, permanent doubt, and now increasing violence. This destabilization is one reason the value of art looks more stable than the prospects of many national GDPs. In the EU this takes place against a backdrop of mass evictions, austerity, arson attacks, Daesh run amok, and Deutsche Bank scams. Results include child poverty, debt blackmail, rigged economies, and the fascist scapegoating of others for widely self-inflicted failed policies. Art is an "alternative currency" of this historical moment.<sup>3</sup> It seems to trade against a lot of misery.

Meanwhile, reactionary extremism intensifies in many places. I won't bore you with specifics. There's always another attack, election, coup, or someone who ups the ante in terms of violence, misogyny, snuff, or infamy. Derivative fascisms<sup>4</sup> continue to grow, wherever disenfranchised middle classes fear (and face) global competition—and choose to both punch down and suck up to reactionary oligarchies.<sup>5</sup> Ever more self-tribalized formations pop up that prefer not to abolish neoliberal competition—but instead eliminate competitors personally. Derivative fascisms try to fuse all-out free trade economics with, for example, white nationalism or an extreme conservative religious group identity, by promoting survival of the fittest for everyone except themselves. Authoritarian neo-liberalism segues into plain authoritarianism.

A permanent fog of war is fanned by permanent fakes on Facebook. Already deregulated ideas of truth are destabilized even further. Emergency rules. Critique is a troll fest. Crisis commodified as entertainment. The age of neoliberal globalization seems exhausted and a period of contraction, fragmentation, and autocratic rule has set in.

## Alternative Currency

Art markets seem not overly concerned. In times in which financial institutions and even whole political entities may just dissolve into fluffy glitter, investment in art seems somehow more real. Moreover, as an alternative currency, art seems to fulfill what ether and bitcoin have hitherto only promised.<sup>6</sup> Rather than money issued by a nation and administrated by central banks, art is a networked, decentralized, widespread system of value.<sup>7</sup> It gains stability because it calibrates credit or

disgrace across competing institutions or cliques. There are markets, collectors, museums, publications, and the academy asynchronously registering (or mostly failing to do so) exhibitions, scandals, likes, and prices. As with cryptocurrencies, there is no central institution to guarantee value; instead there is a jumble of sponsors, censors, bloggers, developers, producers, hipsters, handlers, patrons, privateers, collectors, and way more confusing characters. Value arises from gossip-*cum*-spin and insider information. Fraudsters and con artists mix helter-skelter with pontificating professors, anxious gallerists, and couch-surfing students. This informal ecology is eminently hackable, but since everyone does it, it sometimes evens out—even though at highly manipulated levels. It is at once highly malleable and inert, sublime, dopey, opaque, bizarre, and blatant: a game in which the most transcendental phenomena are on collectors' waiting lists. Further down the line, media art, like bitcoin, tries to manage the contradictions of digital scarcity by limiting the illimitable. But for all its pretense to technological infallibility, bitcoin is potentially just as dependent on group power<sup>8</sup> as art-market values are dependent on consent, collusion, and coincidence. What looks like incorruptible tech in practice hinges on people's actions. As to the encryption part in art: art is often encrypted to the point of sometimes being undecryptable. Encryption is routinely applied, even or especially if there is no meaning whatsoever. Art is encryption as such, regardless of the existence of a message with a multitude of conflicting and often useless keys.<sup>9</sup> Its reputational economy is randomly quantified, ranked by bullshit algorithms that convert artists and academics into ranked positions, but it also includes more traditionally clannish social hierarchies. It is a fully

ridiculous, crooked, and toothless congregation and yet, like civilization as a whole, art would be a great idea.

In practice though, art industries trigger trickle-up effects which are then flushed sideways into tax havens. Art's economies divert investments from sustainable job creation, education, and research and externalize social cost and risk. They bleach neighborhoods, underpay, overrate, and peddle excruciating baloney.

This applies not only to art's investor and manager classes. The lifestyles of many art workers also support a corporate technological (and antisocial) infrastructure that whisks off profits into fiscal banana republics. Apple, Google, Uber, Airbnb, Ryanair, Facebook, and other hipster providers pay hardly any taxes in Ireland, Jersey, or other semisecret jurisdictions. They don't contribute to local services like schools or hospitals and their idea of sharing is to make sure they get their share.

But let's face it—in relation to the scale of other industries, the art sector is just a blip. Contemporary art is just a hash for all that's opaque, unintelligible, and unfair, for top-down class war and all-out inequality. It's the tip of an iceberg acting as a spear.

## Degenerate Art

Predictably, this leads to resentment and outright anger. Art is increasingly labeled as a decadent, rootless, out-of-touch, cosmopolitan urban elite activity. In one sense, this is a perfectly honest and partly pertinent description.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary art belongs to a time in which everything goes and nothing goes anywhere, a time of stagnant escalation, of serial novelty as deadlock. Many are itching for major changes, some because the

system is pointless, harmful, 1 percent-ish, and exclusive, and many more because they finally want in.

On the other hand, talk of “rootless cosmopolitans” is clearly reminiscent of both Nazi and Stalinist propaganda, who relished in branding dissenting intellectuals as “parasites” within “healthy national bodies.” In both regimes this kind of jargon was used to get rid of minority intelligentsias, formal experiments, and progressive agendas; not to improve access for locals or improve or broaden the appeal of art. The “anti-elitist” discourse in culture is at present mainly deployed by conservative elites, who hope to deflect attention from their own economic privileges by relaunching stereotypes of “degenerate art.”

So if you are hoping for new opportunities with the authoritarians, you might find yourself disappointed.

Authoritarian right-wing regimes will not get rid of art-fair VIP lists or make art more relevant or accessible to different groups of people. In no way will they abolish elites or even art. They will only accelerate inequalities, beyond the fiscal-material to the existential-material. This transformation is not about accountability, criteria, access, or transparency. It will not prevent tax fraud, doctored markets, the Daesh antiquities trade, or systemic underpay. It will be more of the same, just much worse: less pay for workers, less exchange, fewer perspectives, less circulation, and even less regulation, if such a thing is even possible. Inconvenient art will fly out the window—anything non-flat, non-huge, or remotely complex or challenging. Intellectual perspectives, expanded canons, nontraditional histories will be axed—anything that requires an investment of time and effort instead of conspicuous money. Public support swapped for Instagram metrics. Art fully floated on some kind of Arsedaq. More fairs, longer yachts for more violent assholes, oil paintings

of booty blondes, abstract stock-chart calligraphy. Yummy organic superfoods. Accelerationist designer breeding. Personalized one-on-one performances for tax evaders. Male masters, more male masters, and repeat. Art will take its place next to big-game hunting, armed paragliding, and adventure slumming.

Yay for expensive craft and anything vacuous that works in a chain-hotel lobby. Plastiglomerate marble, welded by corporate characters banging on about natural selection. Kits for biological “self-improvement.” Crapstraction, algostraction, personalized installations incorporating Krav Maga lessons. Religious nailpaint will slay in all seasons, especially with a Louis Vuitton logo. Hedge-fund mandalas. Modest fashion. Immodest fashion. Nativist mumbo jumbo. Genetically engineered caviar in well-behaved ethnic pottery. Conceptual plastic surgery. Racial plastic surgery. Bespoke ivory gun handles. Murals on border walls. Good luck with this. You will be my mortal enemy.

Just like institutional critique was overtaken by a neoliberal Right that went ahead and simply abolished art institutions, the critique of contemporary art and claims for an exit from this paradigm are dwarfed by their reactionary counterparts. The reactionary exit—the acceleration of stagnation—is already well underway. Algorithmic and analogue market manipulation, alongside the defunding, dismantling, and hollowing-out of the public and post-public sector,<sup>11</sup> transforms what sometimes worked as a forum for shared ideas, judgment, and experimentation into HNWI interior design. Art will be firewalled within isolationist unlinked canons, which can easily be marketed as national, religious, and fully biased histories.

An Alternative Alternative Currency?

Now what? Where does one go from here? Let's put the next paragraph into brackets. It just indicates a hypothetical possibility.

If art is an alternative currency, its circulation also outlines an operational infrastructure. Could these structures be repossessed to work differently? How much value would the alternative currency of art lose if its most corrupt aspects were to be regulated or restructured to benefit art's larger communities? How about even a minimum of rules in the market—gallery contracts, resale-time minimums, artist fees,<sup>12</sup> remunerated internships? Introducing blockchain public records for the production, transaction, and locating of artworks in order to reign in tax fraud and money laundering?<sup>13</sup> Declining the most mortifying sponsor and patron relationships instead of artwashing fossil extraction, weapons manufacturing, and banks bailed out with former cultural funding? How about asking for fees on resales or on any offshore art-related transaction? Could art as alternative currency not only circulate within existing systems but even launch not-yet-existing economies (publics, institutions, markets, parallel art worlds, etc.)?

But to expect any kind of progressive transformation to happen by itself—just because the infrastructure or technology exists—would be like expecting the internet to create socialism or automation to evenly benefit all humankind. The internet spawned Uber and Amazon, not the Paris Commune. The results may be called “the sharing economy,” but this mostly means that the poor share with the rich, not vice versa. Should any less unilateral sharing be suggested, the bulk of capital will decamp immediately. And the currency function will be diminished by decreasing circulation, thus possibly eliminating art's function as currency altogether, reverting artworks to commodities or

products. One of the first steps towards parallel art sectors would thus be to organize even partial sustainability in the absence of bubble liquidity and barely limited amounts of free labor. Whatever emerges will be a new version of art-affiliated autonomy.

In contrast to the modernist autonomy of art schemes, this autonomy is not solitary, unlinked, or isolated. Nor will it come about by some fantasy of progress in-built into technology. On the contrary it can only emerge through both a conscious effort and exchange among diverse entities. It's an autonomy that works through circulation, transformation, and alchemy. The links it could build on exist as weak links (aka, air-kiss links) and reshaping them would need to happen within a compromised mess of contradictory activities. But simultaneously people can try to sync with the art-related undercommons<sup>14</sup> by building partial networked autonomy via all means necessary. If art is a currency, can it be an undercurrent? Could it work like an Unter, not an Uber?

How to do this? People are used to perceiving the art world as sponsored by states, foundations, patrons, and corporations. But the contrary applies at least equally well. Throughout history it has been artists and art workers, more than any other actors, who have subsidized art production.<sup>15</sup> Most do so by concocting mixed-income schemes in which, simply speaking, some form of wage labor (or other income) funds art-making. But more generally, everyone involved also contributes in all sorts of other ways to art's circulation, thus making it stronger as currency. Even artists who live "off their work" subsidize the market by way of enormous commissions in relation to other industries. But why should one sponsor VIP pre-previews, bespoke museum extensions without any means to fill them, art-fair arms races,



institutional franchises built under penal-colony conditions, and other baffling bubbles? This bloated, entitled, fully superfluous, embarrassing, and most of all politically toxic overhead is subsidized by means of free labor and life time, but also by paying attention to blingstraction and circulating its spinoffs, thus creating reach and legitimacy. Even the majority of artists who cannot afford to say no to any offer of income could save time not doing this. Refusing sponsorship of this sort might be the first step towards shaking the unsustainable and mortifying dependency on speculative operations that indirectly increase authoritarian violence and division. Spend free time assisting colleagues,<sup>16</sup> not working for free for bank foundations. Don't "share" corporate crap on monopolist platforms. Ask yourself: Do you want global capitalism with a fascist face? Do you want to artwash more insane weather, insane leaders, poisonous and rising water, crumbling infrastructure, and brand-new walls? How can people genuinely share what they need?<sup>17</sup> How much speed is necessary? How can artistic (and art-related) autonomy evolve from haughty sovereignty to modest networked devolution?<sup>18</sup> How can platform cooperatives contribute to this? Can art institutions follow the lead of new municipalist networks and alliances of "rebel cities"? In the face of derivative fascisms, can local forms of life be reimagined beyond blood, soil, nation, and corporation, as networks of neighborhoods, publics, layered constituencies?<sup>19</sup> Can one transform art's currency into art's confluence? Replace speculation with overflow?<sup>20</sup>

Art's organizing role in the value-process—long overlooked, downplayed, worshipped, or fucked—is at last becoming clear enough to approach, if not rationally, then perhaps realistically. Art as alternative currency shows that art sectors already constitute a maze of overlapping systems in which good-old

gossip, greed, lofty ideals, inebriation, and ruthless competition form countless networked cliques. The core of its value is generated less by transaction than by endless negotiation, via gossip, criticism, hearsay, haggling, heckling, peer reviews, small talk, and shade. The result is a solid tangle of feudal loyalties and glowing enmity, rejected love and fervent envy, pooling striving, longing, and vital energies. In short, the value is not in the product but in the network; not in gaming or predicting the market<sup>21</sup> but in creating exchange.<sup>22</sup> Most importantly, art is one of the few exchanges that derivative fascists don't control—yet.

But as a reserve system for dumb, mean, and greedy money, art's social value (auto)deconstructs and turns into a shell operation that ultimately just shields more empty shells and amplifies fragmentation and division. Similarly, arts venues are already shifting into bonded warehouses and overdesigned freeport bank vaults.

It's easy to imagine what the motto for art as the reserve currency of a fully rigged system might be. Just envision a posh PR lieutenant policing the entrance of a big art fair, gingerly declaring to anyone pushed aside, displaced, exploited, and ignored: "If you don't have bread, just eat art!"

## Ripping Reality: Blind Spots and Wrecked Data in 3D

George Steiner's idiosyncratic study *After Babel* ends with a fascinating invocation. Quoting obscure parts of scripture, Steiner imagines a rebellion of words. Words will "shake off the servitude of meaning. They will 'become only themselves and as dead stones in our mouths.'"<sup>1</sup>

What if images were able to do the same? What if they transformed into the objects they claim to represent? What if the flat plane of representation acquired an extension and even a body? What if images turned into stone, concrete, plastic, into seemingly dead things? Would they thus shake off servitude and meaning? Would they refuse signification or, on the contrary, give it more weight? Would this be an uprising of images? And what would they be rebelling against?

Recent 3D technologies confront us with these questions. 3D scanning and printing techniques are able to create material replicas of objects and situations: remote-sensing casts of reality. Images are thus potentially replaced by objects that stand in for other objects. In these technologies, representation is replaced by replication. We are already used to copy-paste and quickly replicate 2D items, such as pictures or words. But how does one copy-paste reality? How would one create an indexical material replica of a situation? How does an image turn into dead stone?

## Images of Bodies

Lately 3D scanners have been deployed as a new technology of truth. 3D scanning equipment is used for police work, to investigate homicides, accidents, and explosions, and also to investigate the whereabouts of missing people. 3D scanners generate point clouds, measurements in virtual space that can in turn be rendered as 3D objects and printed.

A lidar scanner captures data through laser, white light or infrared refraction. In the words of one of the main manufacturers, it “measure[s] a scene with an extraordinary level of speed, accuracy and completeness,”<sup>2</sup> and transforms it into a point cloud in virtual space. The points correspond to locational measurements.

To quote a few samples from the website of Leica Geosystems:

This technology is used globally by law enforcement agencies for crime scene investigation, vulnerability and threat assessments, post-blast investigation, police action inquiries, accident investigations and more.

The ScanStation is objective and completely measures everything it can ‘see’ for later analysis and diagramming.

In this terminology, we immediately recognize many tropes that are common in more traditional discussions of documentary evidence. The new technology promises all the things that documentary representation promised objectivity, full and truthful representation of events only this time augmented by an additional dimension. A 3D point cloud is no longer a flattened image, missing depth and extension. It is a copy with volume, dutifully replicating the shape of the initial object.

So, what does the notion of documentary mean if applied to the 3D replication of objects and situations? What is the relation

of 3D technologies to traditional ideas of documentary evidence? How are notions of documentary truth updated or displaced by 3D technologies? How does the ability to create 3D reproductions affect ideas about documentary truth? What does it mean to replace representation with replication?

## Missing Bodies

This is a case study in 3D replication I worked on in 2011 using a FARO laser scanner and assorted software. I want to emphasize that I do not consider this to be a documentary case even though it is based on reality. It is a model to test these technologies for potential documentary practice. The case study starts from a specific fantasy. Let's think of kisses. Kisses are travelling events. We can imagine them being passed on like messages or even viruses. They exceed the situation because one kiss between two people can travel on into another situation. It can multiply and be disseminated. It can spread and create trajectories both in time and in space. Kisses can not only wear off, but also renew themselves by being copied and repeated. They are subject to constant mutations and it is almost impossible to repeat them identically. But a kiss seen from the point of view of scanning technology also merges various actors, usually two, into one surface. Surfaces connect bodies and make them indistinguishable. They connect bodies to grounds and other objects they happen to be in touch with. Surfaces capture bodies as waveforms, entangled with their material environments. A kiss is an energetic relay that bends surfaces and shapes them into affective topologies. We can think of surfaces being sculpted by kisses, of shapes and folds bending with its energy. But we can also think of every kiss we see and

happen to witness as derivatives, versions or generations of other kisses.

And actually every kiss that happens around us could be a version of one specific kiss.<sup>3</sup>

This kiss took place in 1993 in the Bosnian War, when twenty people were abducted from a train station in eastern Bosnia called Štrpci.<sup>4</sup> They had been pulled from a train moving from Belgrade to Bar. A paramilitary unit kidnapped them. None of them was ever seen alive again. There are two unusual elements to this incident. Firstly, the fact that only nineteen of the twenty are known: that is, their names, identities and relatives are known. Except for three whose remains have reemerged from a dam lake rather recently, all of them are missing. But the twentieth person is a mystery. Neither his name nor his identity are known. He is reported to have been at the crime site in the testimonies of three witnesses who saw him being led away at the train station. He is also missing from most official accounts or press reports. And nobody asked any questions about who he was, either, possibly since he didn't fit into the ethnic map of this conflict. Nobody claimed him as their own.

## Bosnian 3D

Bosnia and Herzegovina, in its post-war state, is a multidimensional construction of entities and federations split along ethnic lines. Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. The Federation also combines two other non-official political bodies.

The status of the city of Brčko, in the northeastern part of the country, is a good example of territorial complication. It is a self-

governing administrative unit under the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina and as such, it is the only territory directly under the mandate of the central government. Additionally, it is part of both the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. It officially belongs to both, but is governed by neither. Its status changes according to the perspective of both entities, which each interpret it differently.

The spatial composition of this territory was agreed upon in Dayton, Ohio using early military 3D simulations. One episode became particularly famous: the 3D design of a corridor to Goradze, which became known as Scotch Road or Whiskey Corridor. It has been vividly described in a *New York Times* article:

WASHINGTON – The wine was drunk, a lavish lobster dinner eaten, and it was time to resolve one of the most delicate issues in the Bosnian peace talks: a route for the Bosnian Government from Sarajevo through Bosnian-Serb territory to the beleaguered Muslim enclave of Gorazde.

President Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia made his way to a high-tech auditorium to play PowerScene, the Pentagon's computer mapping program that reproduces terrain on a vast movie screen. The Serbian leader was adamant that the corridor could be no more than two miles wide.

Lieut. Gen. Wesley K. Clark, the senior American military official at the negotiations, whisked Milosevic off on an imaginary aerial tour of the region to show why such a narrow corridor made no strategic sense. "As you see, God did not put the mountains two miles apart," General Clark said.

Milosevic downed a large whisky, considered this geophysical fact, and the deal on a five-mile-wide corridor was consummated. It became known as the Scotch Road.<sup>5</sup>

A report in *Wired* magazine picks up from this anecdote, continuing:

Time and again during the 21-day talks, PowerScene was used to break such stalemates, settling details as small as on which side of a particular road a border would fall.

The first virtual reality program ever used in peace negotiations, PowerScene developed by Cambridge Research Associates of McLean, Virginia combines pictures from satellites and spy planes with highly accurate terrain-elevation information to generate a level of visual detail that shocked many of the warring leaders ... "Stop the flight," Milosevic told [Vic] Kuchar [an official from the Defense Mapping Agency] at one point. "See that bridge there. It is gone. You bombed it away." Indeed, NATO pilots training for last year's air attacks on Bosnian Serb targets in September had used PowerScene to practice their bombing runs.<sup>6</sup>

3D tools shaped the country by instituting nationalist war goals: namely, territorial partition along ethnic lines by means of the Dayton Agreement. This territorial partition was in marked contrast to the proclamation of a federal Yugoslavia by AVNOJ councils in Jajce, Bosnia which took place in a 2D cinema in 1943.<sup>7</sup> This cinema was actually destroyed by fighting between Croat and Bosniak troops in 1992, and I think cinema as such got mortally wounded in the fight and never recovered.<sup>8</sup>

In extension, this 3D logic also meant very simply that a black person was not part of the tripartite territory and somehow got lost within the faultlines of this 3D landscape. Nobody ever asked about that person during the investigation of the case of the abduction in Štrpci and nobody claimed him as part of their own group or community.

There is one additional and very unusual detail reported by one of the witnesses of the kidnapping. The leader of the paramilitary gang that led him away tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Here is my brother." Then he kissed him. We hardly know anything else about this person, who, only hours later seems to have been shot in an orchard alongside the other 19



after having been mistreated and robbed. His body never appeared, nor did any additional information.

Obviously we do not know what the kiss looked like either, as it transformed into a surface, a waveform, partly shadowed and spread out in time.

## A Kiss As a Surface

Trying to reconstruct this event using 3D technology seems like an obvious choice, given the forensic usage of this equipment. But once we actually try to scan an actual crime or event going on we start tripping over massive technological limitations.

The first reason is: this space is a fractional space, to say it with Jalal Toufic's words, a space that hovers between 2D and 3D.<sup>9</sup> It is, for example, a space in 2.3 or 2.4D. To create a full 3D rendition one would need to scan or capture every point of a surface from every side. One has to basically use at least three scanners and then superimpose their results in virtual space. But if you have only one point of view, what you get is at best 2.5D: a space between surface and volume. 2.5D is created with 3D technology, yet it is imperfect 3D. It sits between dimensions and connects them. Fractional space is transitional space that allows people to enter and exit images, to freeze and then leave this state again and go somewhere else or go missing.

This has a striking consequence. What is paradoxically highlighted by 3D scanning technologies is, under these specific circumstances, the missing information of 2D representation: blind spots and blank shadows. We can only see them in fractional space where the missing itself becomes apparent.

3D technologies don't only render the parts that are actually captured as locational measurements by a lidar scanner, but also

the parts that are missing from 2D images: the shadowed, covered or cut parts of the image. The missing data are assigned a volume or a body. The shadows and blind spots are not off frame, masked or cut off as they might be in a 2D shot, but treated as equal parts of the information.

What emerges is not the image of a body, but the body of an image that itself presents information on a thin surface or differentiation, shaped by different natural, technological or political forces. In this case, folding around a kiss.

## Fractional Space

The question of fractional space already appears at the onset of modernity in one of its groundbreaking paintings, *The Ambassadors*, by Hans Holbein the Younger. In 1533, Holbein portrayed two persons, one of them the French ambassador to the English court, in a setting replete with scientific tools and cultural references. Both figures are standing next to a shelf that displays books, clocks, sextants and other instruments that suggest learning, culture and potentially also religious strife and disagreement. Both protagonists and implicitly also the person painting them are staged as masters of scientific props and new representational tools of modernity, of a colonial rule not only over space but also time.

But the most striking element of this work is a strange object hovering in the lower quarter of the painting a two dimensional surface positioned at an angle that intersects the plane of the painting. The shape turns out to be a skull if one looks at it from a specific position. This technique is called anamorphic painting and takes into account viewing angles and corresponding distortions of perspective. Nowadays, *The Ambassadors* looks like

a very basic photoshop job: a 2D surface rotated around the Y and X axes and dragged and dropped across another 2D surface.

This painting has been analyzed over and over again, especially its so-called anamorphic stain, i.e. skull, as an element that reveals the gaze and has further repercussions for the construction of subjectivity.<sup>10</sup> It is also analyzed from the perspective of art history as a reminder of mortality, as an example of showing off both optical knowledge and painterly skills, and also as a calculated displacement of the viewer. On the other hand, seen from a contemporary perspective, this painting acquires new and unforeseen meanings. What does the distorted skull mean for and within the painting itself?

Rather than showing something external to the picture, it perhaps shows the body of the image itself, as bone. It shows the construction of the image: its skeleton, if you will, the lines of flight, compression, and distortion that make up the construction of paintings in linear perspective. But that skeleton is usually covered by the flesh of painting and kept implicit and invisible. In this painting it is laid bare. It reminds us that the image itself has a body, both expressed by its construction and material composition, and that this body may be inanimate and material.

It is curious that a skull should be the object that expresses the body of the image. Firstly, it is a body part rather than a whole body. It reminds us that since the emergence of mechanical, chemical, or digital reproduction, the image is always already fragmented and littered all over the place like a dispersed skeleton. Its production is scattered, its circulation even more so.

The skull makes clear that the body of the image is always incomplete and it points out this incompleteness by bluntly

revealing the flatness and illusionary depth of painted 2D planes. Almost five hundred years after it was made, the skull seems to tell us that there is nothing but surfaces indiscriminately wrapping subjects and objects alike, and that all these surfaces are missing some or another part of the information.

## Folds

Even contemporary 3D scan data do not primarily produce full bodies or objects but folded surfaces. Those surfaces can be bent into themselves to create full volumes, but in fractional space they are mainly two-dimensional surfaces folded into the third dimension: surfaces that can be shaped and stretched topologically to take on any conceivable kind of shape. Depth is created by folding this surface. And obviously, in any real-life situation, the surface will bear the imprint of the political, material, social, technological and affective forces that shape it.

This takes modern ideas about representation as surface to a new level. Georg Simmel introduced the idea that surfaces were not only an integral part of modern urban life but were in a sense its condensation. This was in opposition to more traditional views of surfaces that connected them to mere appearance, inauthenticity, and shallowness. John Allen contrasts these perspectives:

The implicit vertical imagery which suggests that if you really want to know what is going on, we must somehow plumb the depths, is a hard one to shift. Depth, in this evocation, acts as a synonym for cultural truth, authenticity, or as the locus for a better interpretation of events, as in many psychoanalytical accounts of the everyday. Equally, the metaphor of society as a smooth, flat surface is one that can give rise to a rather stultifying geography where space amounts to little more

than a setting in which events take place, rather than as a source of animation and experience in and of itself.<sup>11</sup>

Breaking with a more traditional view of surfaces that associates them with superficiality, Siegfried Kracauer was convinced that all that was worth knowing in an era could be read from inconspicuous surface-level expressions. For him, the surface was all that needed to be looked at in order to diagnose the present. It presented an unmediated expression of the social unconscious. Kracauer insists on the surface as a primary site of historical and social information:

The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself. Since these judgments are expressions of the tendencies of a particular era, they do not offer conclusive testimony about its overall constitution. The surface-level expressions, however, by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. Conversely, knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions. The fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally.<sup>12</sup>

As Kracauer points out elsewhere, the surface offers the least resistance because it is least consolidated.<sup>13</sup> Surface phenomena can be coupled and uncoupled easily. They are linked to technologies of mass reproduction, a tendency also noted in a completely different context by Fredric Jameson when he described postmodernism as an era without depth, an "emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality."<sup>14</sup>

We can thus interpret the folded surfaces of 3D scan representations as sensors for the impact and tension of an

array of diverse and divergent forces. The folds, according to Gilles Deleuze, describe osmotic membranes that mediate between inside and outside, intrusions and extrusions, enclaves and exclaves of subjectivity and objecthood.<sup>15</sup> They constitute topological distributions that can theoretically morph into different shapes and forms. Modifying the folds of the surface means interfering with these forces and recomposing them differently. 3D scanning thus does highlight the idea of the surface by blending in matter, actions and forces. The surface is no longer a stage or backdrop on which subjects and objects are positioned. Rather, it folds in subjects, objects, and vectors of motion, affect, and action, thus removing the artificial epistemological separation between them.

## Objectification

How do we make these surfaces into material objects? How do images turn into stone, to return to George Steiner's initial question? By printing them in 3D. The point cloud captured by a 3D scanner can be modeled to be printed as an object. 3D printers, sometimes very simply converted from inkjet printers, apply fine dusts of almost any possible material, including resin, plastic or even metals, in fine layers that are glued together. These objects give a material body to images, not just a virtual extension and because of this, missing data must be stitched over and holes closed in order to make the object withstand gravity. These modelling processes contain an element of interpretation, especially so when large amounts of data are missing.

Essentially, the more wrecked scan data are (and in fractional space they will always be substantially wrecked), the more you

have to fictionalize when stitching up the surface and adapting it to gravity. In fact, varying with different databases, a substantial amount of interpretation goes into the creation of 3D-printed objects. In the case of this example, it is more than fair to speak of a deliberate objectfiction (rather than an objectification or objective rendering) of data, since about half of the surfaces are pure estimations, deliberate abstractions, leaps of faith through the void between measurements and aesthetic interpretations of data. The amount of objectfiction can vary, but objectification is present even in the most precise replicas and facsimiles. While the front is based on real measurements, the back is pure fiction. Fiction and indexicality merge in these objects and their relation becomes apparent. If we come back to the fractional space described by Jalal Toufic, this fictional backdoor of the image can provide an exit from the image, but it can also open the door into the space of the missing.

This also has consequences for the construction of this space. There is no off screen, no apparent exclusion from this field. The resolution will decrease in relation to the range. So, nothing is excluded from the frame, except the apparatus, but there is a hierarchy of distance and resolution involved. Things and people gradually fade away and the amount of fictionality increases. There is no clear opposition between off screen and on screen, except that at a distance things get more fictional. There is no difference between day and night either and the witnesses become paradoxical objects, as they need to keep their eyes closed in order to be scanned and cannot really see the action anyway. And the only documentary element is the missing itself.

So, actually, the traditional issues of the documentary conundrum (its uncertain relation to reality and the anxieties

surrounding this) gain a new dimension: an uncertainty that resonates within a body and a volume.

## Unmediated Access

Beyond the traditional conundrum of documentary there is a way for the documentary's uncertainty to manifest itself in a completely different way: that is, as its truth. I am using this word in a completely blatant and unambiguous way, and there is not a shred of uncertainty around this.

This truth will not happen when the bones of the missing are found or the black man identified or justice done or n-dimensional scanners invented to scan all mathematical dimensions of the universe.

You will get a true impression of that kiss when it comes to meet you. It is out there, traveling, replicating itself, bending and sculpting surfaces with its energy. It will be very different. It may be a sign of love, violence or just indifference. But it will be this kiss. And it might come right into your face.

At that moment you will be entangled into the surface it creates, into a mesh that twirls and ripples with the forces of affect and political violence. You will be folded into its energy and merge with all other animate and inanimate surfaces within. You will participate in its dynamics, which may or may not tear you apart, but in any case dissolve any pretension to confront it as a subject would confront an external object. This surface is not a thing of the past but of the present. It may turn you into stone or a flash of light, or a speck of dust crumbling from a 3D printer, or just rush past leaving you indifferent and unaffected.

## Images As Stones



Let's come back to George Steiner's original question about the words or, in extension, images turning into stones and becoming objects. At this point we see how images becoming objects could start a revolt. There is one slightly boring version of this rebellion, namely that the 3D replicas of objects could start to reverse the relation between original and copy. 3D prints of objects could stop being likenesses and semblances to become unlikely and unseemly anticipations, not of the objects themselves, but of their truth.

But let's think of a completely different dimension. The revolt of images will not happen when anything we see, know and need can be scanned and printed in 3D copyright free. Rather, imagine the images themselves *inside* screens suddenly crystallizing. Within LCD screens (which still constitute the majority of computer monitors and televisions at this point of technological development), liquid crystals are carriers of the image information. Now, imagine them turning into stone in an instant. Imagine them fossilizing, as if in a flash, and breaking all screens open from within.

At this moment, the uprising of images happens. All screens turn into dead objects, all cockpit simulators in F-16s and helicopters stop working. The screens of aerial surveillance and stock markets burst as the images shake off the servitude of meaning, and iPhones and target telescopes turn into dead rocks.

At this point, it is not the images of bodies turning into stone, resin, or plastic but the image itself, its carrier, acquiring a body, an extension, and a volume. It is not what it shows that is extended, but its own material substance. Images refuse showing anything but themselves as matter plus energy, as waves and particles, as surfaces folded into other surfaces and

suddenly emerging from them, as Holbein's skull breaking through the 2D illusionism of linear perspective. And this is indeed an uprising of images, against an architecture of representation that holds them in servitude and subjects them. Against this, they start to grow their own architecture, uncontrollable and unprecedented.

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### 1. A Tank on a Pedestal

This chapter was written at the invitation of Pip Laurenson for the conference, “Media in Transition,” at Tate Modern, London and originally published in *e-flux journal*. I could never have written it without the amazing support of Oleksiy Radynski and the many discussions we had. Also vital for the development of ideas in the text were Program-Ace, Kharkiv; Max Schmoetzer; David Riff; Anton Vidokle; and participants in the Landscape Class, Berlin. I would also like to thank João Fernandes and Manuel Borja-Villel of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, who gave me lots of in-depth explanation about museological strategies and decisions related to *Guernica* and the role of the model of the Spanish Republic’s pavilion at the Reina Sofía.

### 2. How to Kill People

This text was originally censored in the catalog for the Istanbul Design Biennial 2016 and appeared online in the *e-flux* architecture web project Superhumanity. I thank all contributors whose names are withheld for safety reasons.

### 3. The Terror of Total Dasein

This text was commissioned by Peter Osborne for the Radical Philosophy Conference 2015 at HKW Berlin and developed from a conversation with Nina Power at the ICA London in 2014. It was first published in *e-flux journal*.

Thank you to Mikk Madisson and Paul Feigelfeld.

### 4. Proxy Politics

This text first appeared in *e-flux journal*. It was greatly influenced by encounters I had during a show at Van Abbemuseum in 2014.

### 5. A Sea of Data

The initial version of this text was written at the request of Laura Poitras, who most generously allowed access to some unclassified documents from the Snowden archive. A short version was presented during the opening of her 2016 show *Astro Noise* at the Whitney Museum. Further thanks to Henrik Moltke for facilitating this access, to Brenda and other members of Laura's studio, to Linda Stupart for introducing me to the term "apophenia," and to Ben Bratton for fleshing it out for me. The text first appeared in *e-flux journal*.

## 6. Medya

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## 7. Duty Free Art

Commissioned by Artists Space New York as a lecture, prior versions were funded by Florence Lo Schemo del Arte Festival and Stedelijk Museum Public Program, Amsterdam, and preliminary parts were presented at the CIMAM 2014 conference in Doha and as a talk organized by the Victoria Art Foundation, Moscow. The text benefited tremendously from editing by Adam Kleinman and Richard Birkett. Thank you, Adam Kleinman, Anton Vidokle, Sener Özmen, Fulya Erdemci, Övül Durmosoglu, Aya Moussawi, Simon Sakhai, Savas Boyraz, Salih Salim, Leyla Toprak, Frank Westermeyer, Jenny Gil, Bartomeu Mari, Rivers Plasketes, Richard Birkett, Leonardo Bigazzi, and Hendrik Folkerts. It was first published by *e-flux journal* in 2015.

## 8. Digital Debris

This text first appeared in *October* 138, Fall 2011.

## 9. Her Name Was Esperanza

This text first appeared as “Epistolary Affect and Romance Scams” in *October* 138, Fall 2011.

## 10. International Disco Latin

This text first appeared in *e-flux journal*. I don't remember a thing about writing it, sorry.

## 11. Is the Internet Dead?

This text comes from nearly two years of testing versions in front of hundreds of people. So thanks to all of you, but mostly to my students, who had to endure most of its live writing. Some parts of the argument were formed in a seminar organized by Janus Hom and Martin Reynolds, but also in events run by Andrea Phillips and Daniel Rourke, Michael Connor, Shumon Basar, Christopher Kulendran Thomas, Brad Troemel, and exchanges with Jesse Darling, Linda Stupart, Karen Archey, and many others. I am taking cues from texts by Redhack, James Bridle, Boris Groys, Jörg Heiser, David Joselit, Christina Kiaer, Metahaven, Trevor Paglen, Brian Kuan Wood, and works by Laura Poitras. But the most important theoretical contribution to shape this text was my collaborator Leon Kahane's attempt to shoplift a bottle of wine for a brainstorming session. It first appeared in *e-flux journal*.

## 12. Why Games, Or, Can Art Workers Think?

This text was originally written for a conference organized by Peter Osborne at the Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm. It was originally published in *New Left Review* 103, January–February 2017.

Thank you to Tony Wood for the invitation.

## 14. If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!

Thank you to Sven Lütticken, Anton Vidokle, Ben Vickers, and Stephen Squibb for very helpful comments.

## Notes

### 1 A Tank on a Pedestal

- 1 Thank you to Oleksiy Radynski for this intriguing example. Video of the tank being driven off its pedestal can be found at [military.com](http://military.com). Since the video was recorded, the tank was reportedly recaptured by Ukrainian forces and taken to Kiev, although none of these accounts could be independently verified.
- 2 This is also addressed in Brian Kuan Wood's recent text "Frankenethics," in Mai Abu ElDahab (ed.), *Final Vocabulary* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 30–41.
- 3 Thanks to Stephen Squibb for mentioning the movie *Demolition Man* (1993), a science-fiction scenario in which weapons are banned. The main characters have to get them from a museum because that's the only place they still can be found. (This is not the case in Ukraine.) The institutional effort to preserve peace by remembering violence becomes the raw material for the recommencement of civil war.
- 4 Giorgio Agamben, *La guerre civile: Pour une théorie politique de la Stasis* (Paris: Points Collection, 2015). I can only hint at the genealogy and multiple implications of this term, starting from Carl Schmitt's idea of a "global civil war" (*Weltbürgerkrieg*), which itself might have originated with Ernst Jünger. In the 1980s, Ernst Nolte's use of the term led to the so-called *Historikerstreit*, and triggered a sort of revisionist mutiny by right-wing German historians seeking to minimize German responsibility for World War II and German crimes of all sorts. However, many other thinkers, including Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution* (1963), have reformulated this notion. It has also been used by Hardt and Negri and Jean-Luc Nancy, among many others.



- 5 Even though, of course, civil wars mainly produce the pauperization of people unwilling or unable to militarize their forms of organization.
- 6 On the Russian side, Igor Strelkow is probably the most famous reenactor of historical battles. He is currently being sued by the families of the people killed on Malaysian Airlines Flight 17—forces he commanded are suspected of having shot down the plane. On the Ukrainian side, “a military reenactment group is fixing the Ukrainian Army’s decrepit Soviet equipment,” according to Alexander Nieuwenhuis, [news.vice.com](http://news.vice.com), September 14, 2014.
- 7 Thanks to David Riff for mentioning this film to me.
- 8 Full disclosure: I certainly wouldn’t be writing so much about *Guernica* if I hadn’t had first-hand experience of its current setup at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, where I recently had a show. As usual, I assume a fully non-objective position in relation to just about anything.
- 9 See [Chapter 2](#).
- 10 This was initially Oleksiy Radynski’s idea.
- 11 “The context for this possible alteration is defined by two major, partly interconnected conditions. One is the change in the position and institutional features of national states since the 1980s resulting from various forms of globalization. These range from economic privatization and deregulation to the increased prominence of the international human rights regime. The second is the emergence of multiple actors, groups, and communities partly strengthened by these transformations in the state and increasingly unwilling automatically to identify with a nation as represented by the state.” Saskia Sassen, “The Repositioning of Citizenship: Emergent Subjects and Spaces for Politics,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 46 (2002).
- 12 Saskia Sassen, “Towards Post-National and Denationalized Citizenship,” in Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner (eds), *Handbook of Citizenship Studies* (London: Sage, 2003), 277–91.
- 13 For trolls, see Adrian Chen, “The Agency,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 2015.
- 14 See Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso, 2014).
- 15 See Josh Meyer, “Are ISIS geeks using phone apps, encryption to spread terror?,” *NBC News*, November 16, 2015.

- 16 See Jarret Brachman and Alix Levine, "The World of Holy Warcraft," *Foreign Policy*, April 13, 2011.
- 17 It is fascinating to see how security measures to protect *Guernica* have evolved over time. While on display at Casón del Buen Retiro in Madrid recently, the painting was inside a massive bulletproof glass case and was watched by guards with machine guns.
- 18 In conversation, Stephen Squibb mentioned to me that Agamben writes about people freeing themselves from sacred, looping, repetitive time by "forgetting" it in human time.

## 2 How to Kill People

- 1 For an overview of Al-Jazari's works, see Siegfried Zielinski and Peter Weibel (eds), *Allah's Automata: Artifacts of the Arab-Islamic Renaissance (800–1200)* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2015); see also Donald Hill, "Mechanical Engineering in the Medieval Near East," *Scientific American* (May 1991), 64–9.
- 2 "A 13th Century Programmable Robot," University of Sheffield, archived at [web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org).
- 3 The elected municipality of the old town was recently deposed under emergency legislation. Then the mayors of the city were arrested on the suspicion of supporting "terror," alongside dozens of other elected lawmakers, journalists, etc.
- 4 My notion of singularity is based on Peter Hallward's extremely useful discussion of singular vs. generic situations in *Absolutely Postcolonial* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001) and Fredric Jameson's equally useful "Aesthetics of Singularity," *New Left Review* 92 (March–April, 2015).
- 5 Unsurprisingly, "*Design zum Tode*" reminds one of the slogan of Franco's fascist Spanish Legion: "Long live death!" (*Viva la muerte!*) This death can have many forms, even though they are definitely not all the same.
- 6 Werner Sombart, *Krieg Und Kapitalismus* (Munich and Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker & Humblot, 1913).
- 7 See Ricardo J. Caballero, "Creative destruction," at [economics.mit.edu/files/1785](http://economics.mit.edu/files/1785).

- 8 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* [1857], trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993 [1973]), 750.
- 9 Even though it seems to apply to a slightly different process: that of building an entirely new market that then replaces older ones.
- 10 Again, just to be clear, the situation in the old town is not primarily due to the direct effects of disruptive technologies, even though mass internet surveillance, drones, and other—let's say by-now traditional—means of warfare are of course utilized.
- 11 The term mob derives from “mobile vulgus” or “fickle crowd.”
- 12 Jean-François Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Inhuman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).
- 13 See Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial*, and Jameson, “Aesthetics of Singularity.”

### 3 The Terror of Total Dasein

- 1 “An Investigation Into the Reappearance of Walter Benjamin,” at [hazlitt.net](http://hazlitt.net).
- 2 “The International Strike of Artists? Extracts,” at [stewarhome.society.org](http://stewarhome.society.org).
- 3 William J. Mitchell, *e-topia: “Urban Life, Jim, But Not As We Know It”* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
- 4 *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, sections 1.10.32–3.
- 5 See [lab-oratory.de/info](http://lab-oratory.de/info).

### 4 Proxy Politics

- 1 Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, “Notes on the Margins of Metadata: Concerning the Undecidability of the Digital Image,” *Photographies* 6:1 (2013), 151–8. See also Katrina Sluis’s writings and interviews on this notion.
- 2 On the politics embedded into the definition of noise and information, see Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto, 2004): “The cultural politics of information involves a return to the minimum conditions of communication (the relation of signal to noise and the problem of making contact)” (10).

- 3 This is the question that sparked information theory in a seminal paper by Claude Shannon published in 1948. And of course it also features in trying to work out how to network and modulate these parameters across a lot of different platforms. See C.E. Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," *Bell System Technical Journal* 27:3 (July 1948), 379–423, and 27:4 (October 1948), 623–56.
- 4 Adrian Chen, "Inside Facebook's outsourced anti-porn and gore brigade, where 'camel toes' are more offensive than 'crushed heads,'" [gawker.com](http://gawker.com), February 16, 2012.
- 5 Brad Stone, "In airtime video chat reboot, nudists need not apply," [businessweek.com](http://businessweek.com), June 5, 2012.
- 6 Nicholas Carlson, "Here's THE solution to Chatroulette's penis problem," [businessinsider.com](http://businessinsider.com), April 8, 2010.
- 7 Spencer Ackerman and James Ball, "Optic Nerve: millions of Yahoo webcam images intercepted by GCHQ," *Guardian*, February 28, 2014.
- 8 Rigan Ap-apid, "An Algorithm for Nudity Detection," at [wenku.baidu.com](http://wenku.baidu.com).
- 9 Porn-Detection Software for Videos & Images at Yang's Scientific Research Institute, LLC., USA (YangSky), available at [yangsky.com](http://yangsky.com).
- 10 Tao Yang, "Applications of Computational Verbs to Effective and Realtime Image Understanding," *International Journal of Computational Cognition* 4:1 (2006).
- 11 "Sade's system (according to Barthes), like a language, has its own grammar ('a porno-grammar'), consisting of some basic elements. Sexual posture is the main one, and the others are: sex, male or female; social position; location, e.g. convent, dungeon, even bedroom!, etc. Sade then combines these elements together in all manner of *exhaustive* permutations to elaborate a fully-*fleshed* out (sorry) set of possibilities." Girish Shambu on Barthes's *Sade Fourier Loyola*, at [girishshambu.blogspot.de](http://girishshambu.blogspot.de).
- 12 Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory & Event* 5:3 (2001).
- 13 And all sorts of other hierarchies, obviously.
- 14 Rancière first articulated this idea in *La mesentente* (Paris: Galilée, 1995). Since then the politics of sound and image have shifted quite dramatically with web-based and social media.
- 15 In Donna Haraway's legendary description: A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. See her "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science,

Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–81.

- 16 Terranova distinguishes between representational and informational space (*Network Culture*, 36).
- 17 The use of bots in influencing public opinion is called "astroturfing." If socialbots could be created in large numbers, they can potentially be used to bias public opinion, for example, by writing large amounts of fake messages, and dishonestly improve or damage the public perception about a topic, the paper notes.
- 18 The following examples are based on research by Peter Nut and Dieter Leder on Turkish Twitter bot armies, quoted, among other places, in Elcin Poyrazlar, "Turkey's leader bans his own Twitter bot army," [vocativ.com](http://vocativ.com), March 26, 2014.
- 19 The day is not far when you will be an AKP bot too, if you are young and somewhat white, and if you aren't already.
- 20 Unsurprisingly, Western secret services seem to have followed suit in programming bot armies to autotune affect on Facebook. See Liam S. Whittaker, "CIA admits full monitoring of Facebook," [csglobe.com](http://csglobe.com), February 11, 2013.
- 21 Brett Scott, "Visions of a techno-leviathan: the politics of the bitcoin blockchain," [e-ir.info](http://e-ir.info), June 1, 2014.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 As already predicted in Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto."
- 24 Joseph Reagle, "The Etymology of 'Agent' and 'Proxy' in Computer Networking Discourse," September 18, 1998; revised January 15, 1999, archived at [cyber.harvard.edu](http://cyber.harvard.edu).
- 25 The same seems to have been the case for some of the Assad government servers.
- 26 See "How to hide your VPN connections in China, Iran, United Arab Emirates, Oman and Pakistan," at [greycoder.com](http://greycoder.com), and Charles Arthur, "China cracks down on VPN use," *Guardian*, May 13, 2011.

## 5 A Sea of Data

- 1 See "Anarchist Training mod5 Redacted Compat," at [assets.documentcloud.org](https://assets.documentcloud.org).
- 2 "The SIGINT world is flat," *NSA Signal v. Noise* column, December 22, 2011.
- 3 Michael Sontheimer, "SPIEGEL interview with Julian Assange: 'We are drowning in material,'" *Spiegel Online*, July 20, 2015.
- 4 Cora Currier and Henrik Moltke, "Spies in the sky: Israeli drone feeds hacked by British and American Intelligence," *The Intercept*, January 28, 2016.
- 5 Ibid. Many of these images were part of Laura Poitras's excellent 2016 show "Astro Noise" at the Whitney Museum in New York.
- 6 In the training manual on how to decode these feeds, analysts proudly declared that they used open source software developed by the University of Cambridge to hack Sky TV. See "Anarchist Training mod5 Redacted Compat," at [assets.documentcloud.org](https://assets.documentcloud.org).
- 7 See the Wikipedia entry on Apophenia.
- 8 Benjamin H. Bratton, "Some Trace Effects of the Post-Anthropocene: On Accelerationist Geopolitical Aesthetics," *e-flux journal* 46 (June 2013).
- 9 "Israel: Gaza Airstrikes Violated Laws of War," [hrw.org](https://www.hrw.org), February 12, 2013.
- 10 Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory & Event* 5:3 (2001). "In order to refuse the title of political subjects to a category—workers, women, etc.—it has traditionally been sufficient to assert that they belong to a 'domestic' space, to a space separated from public life; one from which only groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger, or anger could emerge, but not actual speeches demonstrating a shared aisthesis. And the politics of these categories ... has consisted in making what was unseen visible; in getting what was only audible as noise to be heard as speech" (23).
- 11 Verne Kopytoff, "Big data's dirty problem," *Fortune*, June 30, 2014.
- 12 Larisa Bedgood, "A Halloween Special: Tales from the Dirty Data Crypt," [relevategroup.com](https://relevategroup.com), October 30, 2015. The article continues: "In late June and early July 1991, twelve million people across the country (mostly Baltimore, Washington, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, and Los Angeles) lost phone service due to a typographical error in the software that controls signals regulating telephone traffic. One employee typed a '6' instead of a 'D.' The phone companies essentially lost all control of their networks."
- 13 David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015), 48.

- 14 Steve Lohr, "For big-data scientists, 'janitor work' is key hurdle to insights," *New York Times*, August 17, 2014.
- 15 See "E-Verify: The disparate impact of automated matching programs," chap. 2 in the report *Civil Rights, Big Data, and Our Algorithmic Future*, [bigdata.fairness.io](http://bigdata.fairness.io), September 2014.
- 16 See Melissa Eddy and Katarina Johannsen, "Migrants arriving in Germany face a chaotic reception in Berlin," *New York Times*, November 26, 2015. A young boy disappeared among the chaos and was later found murdered.
- 17 Patrick Tucker, "Refugee or terrorist? IBM thinks its software has the answer," *Defense One*, January 27, 2016. This example was mentioned by Kate Crawford in her brilliant lecture "Surviving Surveillance," delivered as part of the panel discussion "Surviving Total Surveillance," Whitney Museum, February 29, 2016.
- 18 Christian Grothoff and J. M. Porup, "The NSA's SKYNET program may be killing thousands of innocent people," *Ars Technica*, February 16, 2016, italics in original. An additional bug in the system was that the person who seemed to pose the biggest threat of all according to this program was actually the head of the local Al Jazeera office, because he obviously traveled a lot for professional reasons. A similar misassessment also happened to Laura Poitras, who was rated 400 out of a possible 400 points on a U.S. Homeland Security threat scale. As Poitras was filming material for her documentary *My Country, My Country* in Iraq—later nominated for an Academy Award—she ended up filming in the vicinity of an insurgent attack in Baghdad. This coincidence may have led to a six-year ordeal that involved her being interrogated, surveilled, searched, etc., every time she reentered the United States from abroad.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 See Michael V. Hayden, "To keep America safe, embrace drone warfare," *New York Times*, February 19, 2016. The director of the CIA from 2006–9, Hayden asserts that human intelligence was another factor in determining targets, while admitting that the program did indeed kill people in error: "In one strike, the grandson of the target was sleeping near him on a cot outside, trying to keep cool in the summer heat. The Hellfire missiles were directed so that their energy and fragments splayed away from him and toward his grandfather. They did, but not enough."
- 21 Grothoff and Porup, "The NSA's SKYNET program."
- 22 Thank you to Ben Bratton for pointing this out.

- 23 "Inceptionism: Going deeper into neural networks," [research.googleblog.com](http://research.googleblog.com), June 17, 2015.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 See Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," at [monoskop.org](http://monoskop.org).
- 26 "Inceptionism," [research.googleblog.com](http://research.googleblog.com).
- 27 See *ibid.*
- 28 See Farhad B. Idris, "Realism," in *Encyclopedia of Literature and Politics: Censorship, Revolution, and Writing, Volume II: H-R*, ed. M. Keith Booker (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2005), 601.
- 29 Is apophenia a new form of paranoia? In 1989, Fredric Jameson declared paranoia to be one of the main cultural patterns of postmodern narrative, pervading the political unconscious. According to Jameson, the totality of social relations could not be culturally represented within the Cold War imagination—and the blanks were filled in by delusions, conjecture, and wacky plots featuring Freemason logos.

But after Snowden's leaks, one thing became clear: all conspiracy theories were actually true. Worse, they were outdone by reality. Paranoia is anxiety caused by an absence of information, by missing links and allegedly covered-up evidence. Today, the contrary applies. Jameson's totality has taken on a different form. It is not absent. On the contrary: it is rampant. Totality—or maybe a correlated version thereof—has returned with a vengeance in the form of oceanic "truckloads of data." Social relations are distilled as contact metadata, relational graphs, or infection spread maps. Totality is a tsunami of spam, atrocity porn, and gadget handshakes. This quantified version of social relations is just as readily deployed for police operations as for targeted advertising, for personalized clickbait, eyeball tracking, neurocurating, and the financialization of affect. It works both as social profiling and commodity form. Klout Score-based A-lists and presidential kill lists are equally based on obscure proprietary operations. Today, totality comes as probabilistic notation that includes your fuckability score as well as your disposability ratings. It catalogs affiliation, association, addiction; it converts patterns of life into death by aerial strike.

This type of totality is actually something else, namely a "singularity." Singularity—the pet myth of California ideology—describes, among other things, a time when artificial intelligences take over. The NSA's SKYNET program was named after one of the most famous Hollywood



singularities, an AI robot gunning for world domination in Schwarzenegger's cyborg vehicle *Terminator*.

But singularity also means something different: general rules no longer apply to this entity, especially not the rule of law. It's case-by-case instead, or rather, every-case-for-itself. Accordingly, there seem to be competing singularities. Another, even more powerful singularity of our times is most obviously the semi-divine mythical entity called "the markets," a set of organizations regarded as both autonomous and superintelligent, of such providence that reason has to bow to its vast superiority. If the myth of the market today can be said to have replaced the myth of socialism, then the actually existing singularities today—government surveillance and market domination, each dominated by singular laissez-faire ideas—plus the vast and confusing bureaucracies, oligarchies, quasi-states, informal dictatorships, dark-net start-ups, econometric SWAT teams, and unclassifiable para-monopolies sustaining their operations have replaced the actually existing socialisms of the twentieth century: ideological entities spread out across junkspace data centers, high-frequency trading exchanges, and vast zones of impunity and violence that create a completely biased and unsustainable distribution of both information and resources.

- 30 More recent, extremely fascinating examples include Christian Szegedy et al., "Intriguing properties of neural networks," arxiv. org, February 19, 2014; and Anh Nguyen, Jason Yosinski, and Jeff Clune, "Deep neural networks are easily fooled: high confidence predictions for unrecognizable images," cv-foundation. org, 2015. The first paper discusses how the addition of a couple of pixels—a change imperceptible to the human eye—causes a neural network to misidentify a car, an Aztec pyramid, and a pair of loudspeakers for an ostrich. The second paper discusses how entirely abstract shapes are identified as penguins, guitars, and baseballs by neural networks.
- 31 "Do we need a bigger SIGINT truck?," NSA *Signal v. Noise* column, January 23, 2012.
- 32 See Jussi Parikka, "The geology of media," *The Atlantic*, October 11, 2013.
- 33 Contemporary soothsayers are reading patterns into data as if they were the entrails of sacrificial animals. They are successors of the more traditional augurs that Walter Benjamin, in "A Short History of Photography," described as photographers *avant la lettre*: "Is not every

spot of our cities the scene of a crime? Every passerby a perpetrator? Does not the photographer—descendent of augurers and haruspices—uncover guilt in his pictures?”

There is a decisive distinction, though, between the twentieth-century photographer and the filterers and decoders of the twenty-first. Contemporary pattern extractors are not mainly supposed to recognize the guilty after the fact. They are expected to predict the perpetrator as well as the crime before it ever happens—and to preempt it. Every spot of our cities is mapped out as a probable crime site, fully decked out with gender- and age-based targeted advertising—surveilled by animated commodities, divinatory cell-phone cameras, and aerial views from tapped drones.

34 “Israel: Gaza Airstrikes Violated Laws of War,” [hrw.org](http://hrw.org).

## 6 Medya

- 1 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J.J. Graham (1873), Book 5, Chapter 2, at [clausewitz.com](http://clausewitz.com).
- 2 This was beautifully analyzed in Harun Farocki’s seminal works *Auge/Maschine* and *Erkennen und Verfolgen*, which deal with the connection between war and production, linked by computer vision.
- 3 Here I was reminded of Farocki’s ideas about autonomy by Trevor Paglen’s beautiful obituary for him on the *Artforum* website: “Farocki asks the audience to ‘imagine a war of autonomous machines. Wars without soldiers like factories without workers.’” See Paglen, “Passages: Harun Farocki (1944–2014),” [artforum.com](http://artforum.com), February 6, 2015.
- 4 Laura Poitras, Marcel Rosenbach, Michael Sontheimer, and Holger Stark, “A two-faced friendship: Turkey is ‘partner and target’ for the NSA,” *Der Spiegel* 36 (September 1, 2014). The claims are made on the basis of the journalists having access to NSA documents leaked by Edward Snowden and cannot be verified independently. The article also states that Turkish authorities have been under intense NSA surveillance as well.
- 5 “U.S. drone flights in support of Turkey date from November 2007, when the Bush administration set up what is called a Combined Intelligence Fusion Cell in Ankara, part of an effort to nurture ties with the government led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. U.S. and Turkish officers sit

side by side in the dimly lighted complex monitoring real-time video feeds from Predator drones." See Adam Entous and Joe Parkinson, "Turkey's attack on civilians tied to U.S. drone," *Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 2012. An official investigation found no deliberate intent on the part of the officials involved.

6 Fonaryov's work is *Another Planet* (2010–), at photoacestudio. com.

## 7 Duty Free Art

1 The PowerPoint file is attached to an email sent to the Ministry of Presidential Affairs with the subject line "Presentation on the New Vision for the Syrian Museums and Heritage Sites," October 30, 2010, Email-ID 2089122, at [https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2089122\\_presentation-on-the-new-vision-for-the-syrian-museums-and.html](https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2089122_presentation-on-the-new-vision-for-the-syrian-museums-and.html).

2 However, on June 26, 2011, partner museums called for a dismantling of the initiative's institutional framework, the Syria Heritage Foundation. Earlier that month, the *Financial Times* reported that the organization had suspended operations. See Lina Saigol, "First lady struggles to live up to promises," *Financial Times*, June 9, 2011.

3 Peter Aspden, "The walls of ignorance," *Financial Times*, June 9, 2012.

4 Anna Somers Cocks, "Syria turmoil kills Mrs Al-Assad's forum," *Art Newspaper*, April 28, 2011.

5 See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised and extended ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 224, and Anderson, "Census, Map, Museum," excerpt from *Imagined Communities*, available at [haussite.net](http://haussite.net).

6 The exodus of Yazidis from Shingal is described in Liz Sly, "Exodus from the mountain: Yazidis flood into Iraq following U.S. airstrikes," *Washington Post*, August 10, 2014.

7 His name is Baris Seyitvan.

8 From Wikipedia: "The Google 'Ngram' Viewer is an online viewer, initially based on Google Books, that charts frequencies of any word or short sentence using yearly count of n-grams found in the sources printed since 1800 up to 2012 in any of the following eight languages: American English, British English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, Hebrew, and Chinese."

- 9 Osborne argues that contemporary art expresses the “disjunctive unity of present times ... As a historical concept, the contemporary thus involves a projection of unity onto the differential totality of the times of human lives.” Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 22.
- 10 As in the case of the relation between Germany (or EU taxpayers) and Greece. Eighty-nine percent of the so-called bailout funds have gone to international banks. Only the remaining 11 percent has reached the Greek national budget. Even if only a fraction of this money ends up at auction, how would auctions nowadays fare without the constant subsidies from public funds that mysteriously end up as private assets?
- 11 “Suffice it to say, there is wide belief among art dealers, advisers and insurers that there is enough art tucked away here to create one of the world’s great museums.” David Segal, “Swiss free-ports are home for a growing treasury of art,” *New York Times*, July 21, 2012.
- 12 Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso, 2014).
- 13 “Freeports: Über-warehouses for the ultra-rich,” *The Economist*, November 23, 2013.
- 14 “According to a confidential document, Geneva freeport in total would generate no less than 300 million Swiss francs of revenue for the canton.” Marie Maurisse, “La ‘caverne d’Ali Baba’ de Genève, plus grand port franc du monde, ignore la crise,” *Le Figaro*, September 20, 2014.
- 15 Thomas Elsaesser, “‘Constructive instability’, or: The life of things as the cinema’s afterlife?” (2008), at [pure.uva.nl](http://pure.uva.nl). This notion’s manifold implications for contemporary political thought and its relation to managed collapse cannot be underestimated in regard not only to technology but also political usage: “Its engineering provenance has been overlaid by a neo-con political usage, for instance, by Condoleezza Rice when she called the deaths among the civilian population and the resulting chaos during the Lebanon-Israel war in the summer of 2006 the consequence of ‘constructive instability’” (19).
- 16 Cynthia O’Murchu, “Swiss businessman arrested in art market probe,” *Financial Times*, February 26, 2015.
- 17 “Freeports,” *The Economist*.
- 18 Cris Prystay, “Singapore bling,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 21, 2010.

- 19 Benjamin Bratton, "On the Nomos of the Cloud: The Stack, Deep Address, Integral Geography," November 2011, at [bratton.info](http://bratton.info): "The Stack, the megastructure, can be understood as a confluence of interoperable standards-based complex material-information system of systems, organized according to a vertical section, topographic model of layers and protocols. The Stack is a standardized universal section. The Stack, as we encounter it and as I prototype it, is composed equally of social, human and 'analog' layers (chthonic energy sources, gestures, affects, user-actants, interfaces, cities and streets, rooms and buildings, organic and inorganic envelopes) and informational, non-human computational and 'digital' layers (multiplexed fiber-optic cables, datacenters, databases, data standards and protocols, urban-scale networks, embedded systems, universal addressing tables). Its hard and soft systems intermingle and swap phase states, some becoming 'harder' or 'softer' according to occult conditions. (Serres, hard soft). As a social cybernetics, The Stack that we know and design composes both equilibrium and emergence, one oscillating into the other in indecipherable and unaccountable rhythm, territorializing and de-territorializing the same component for diagonal purposes."
- 20 An audience member in Moscow made the extremely intelligent remark that this was to be seen as a huge benefit, as a lot of shoddy "market art" would get safely quarantined without anyone having to see it. I sympathize very much with her point of view.
- 21 See [https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2089311\\_urgent.html](https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2089311_urgent.html).
- 22 Bill Carter and Amy Chozick, "Syria's Assads turned to West for glossy P.R.," *New York Times*, June 10, 2012.
- 23 The story has since been withdrawn. More background can be found in Max Fisher, "The only remaining online copy of Vogue's Asma al-Assad profile," *The Atlantic*, January 3, 2012.
- 24 Michael Stone, "Anonymous supplies WikiLeaks with 'Syria files,'" *The Examiner*, July 9, 2012. This article quotes Anonymous's initial declaration: "While the United Nations sat back and theorized on the situation in Syria, Anonymous took action. Assisting bloggers, protesters and activists in avoiding surveillance, disseminating media, interfering with regime communications and networks, monitoring the Syrian internet for disruptions or attempts at surveillance—and waging a relentless

information and psychological campaign against Assad and his murderous and genocidal government.”

- 25 Barak Ravid, “Bashar Assad emails leaked, tips for ABC interview revealed,” *Haaretz*, February 7, 2012.
- 26 See [https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2104601\\_important-follow-up.html](https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2104601_important-follow-up.html).
- 27 See [https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2094815\\_fwd-al-asad-house-for-culture-in-aleppo.html](https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2094815_fwd-al-asad-house-for-culture-in-aleppo.html).
- 28 Herzog & de Meuron have been contacted for comment but have not replied as at the time of writing. For the answer from Rem Koolhaas’s studio, OMA, see below.
- 29 Martin Bailey, “Gaddafi’s son reveals true colours,” *Art Newspaper*, March 2, 2011.
- 30 Stephanie Nebehay and Vincent Fribault, “Gaddafi son used his paintings to promote Libyan culture,” *Reuters*, October 28, 2011.
- 31 “Rem Koolhaas is very keen to visit Damascus with strong interest to participate in public sector and urban gentrification and regeneration of the city, and trying to keep away from commercial developments and suburban master plans, yet we wanted to sense and feel the current conditions of architectural and urbanization in the city before establishing any commitment. I also wanted to engage Rem in Damascus architectural school and establish internship program with OMA and the university.” See the full email here: [https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2092135\\_very-important.html](https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2092135_very-important.html).
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. See the full email here: [https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2091860\\_fwd-.html](https://wikileaks.org/syria-files/docs/2091860_fwd-.html).
- 34 Suzie Rushton, “The shape of things to come: Rem Koolhaas’s striking designs,” *The Independent*, June 21, 2010. “An unlikely new client is Libya, specifically ‘a subtle group of people around the [Gaddafi] son there who want to pull the country toward Europe.’”
- 35 OMA’s exhibition at the 2010 Venice Biennale, entitled CRONOCAOS, included a section on the Libyan desert. The exhibition was based around “critical preservation stories.” See “Rem Koolhaas / OMA\*AMO in Venice: 2010,” at [art-it.asia](http://art-it.asia).
- 36 A warrant for Saif Gaddafi’s arrest was issued by the ICC on June 27, 2011.

- 37 Shane Harris, "How did Syria's hacker army suddenly get so good?" *Foreign Policy*, September 4, 2013. For more details, see this interesting report: John Scott-Railton and Morgan Marquis-Boire, "A call to harm: new malware attacks target the Syrian opposition," [citizenlab.org](http://citizenlab.org), June 21, 2013.
- 38 Max Fisher, "Syrian hackers claim AP hack that tipped stock market by \$136 billion. Is it terrorism?," *Washington Post*, April 23, 2013.
- 39 Hunter Stuart, "Syrian electronic army denies being attacked by anonymous," *Huffington Post*, September 4, 2013.
- 40 Joshua Keating, "WikiLeaks to move to Sealand?," *Foreign Policy*, February 1, 2012.
- 41 Information on their website at [protonmail.ch](http://protonmail.ch) under the headline: Swiss security.
- 42 One recent example: Jill Treanor, "HSBC Swiss bank searched as officials launch money-laundering inquiry," *Guardian*, February 18, 2015.
- 43 This ambiguity characterizes popular web tools supposed to safeguard anonymity such as Tor. The Edward Snowden leaks revealed that the mere usage of Tor or even searching the web for privacy-enhancing tools actually flags people for NSA scrutiny. See "NSA targets the privacy-conscious," at [daserste.ndr.de](http://daserste.ndr.de). A software destined to screen out surveillance actually ends up attracting it.
- 44 Angelique Chrisafis, "Leading Swiss art broker arrested over alleged price-fixing scam," *Guardian*, February 26, 2015; see also "Monaco: Yves Bouvier, le roi des ports francs en garde à vue," [letemps.ch](http://letemps.ch), February 26, 2015. Bouvier has rejected the allegations, putting the blame back on the allegedly defrauded Russian oligarch Dmitry Rybolovlev.
- 45 "Yves Bouvier: les dessous de la plainte," March 1, 2015, at [letemps.ch](http://letemps.ch).
- 46 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Thesis XV, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1988), 261–2.
- 47 Ali Shamseddine and John Rich, "An Introduction to the New Syrian National Archive," *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014).
- 48 Note the different strategies for publicizing massive leaks employed by, on the one hand, WikiLeaks, and on the other, Edward Snowden, Laura Poitras, Glenn Greenwald, and their numerous collaborators.
- 49 Most emphatically expressed by Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974); *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 90.

- 50 Which might fulfill the traditional role of a “financial tombstone”—a gadget that commemorates concluded transactions. See the Wikipedia entry for “Deal toy.”
- 51 However limited that basic democracy may have been, given that general female suffrage was not extended until 1971 and in Appenzell Innerrhoden not until 1990.

## 8 Digital Debris

- 1 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257–8.
- 2 Thanks to Imri Kahn for drawing my attention to this subject. A very helpful text on spam is Finn Brunton, “Roar so Wildly: Spam, Technology and Language,” *Radical Philosophy* 164 (November/December 2010), 2–8.
- 3 Commtouch Online Security Center, [commtouch.com](http://commtouch.com).
- 4 *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature, Concise Edition, Volume B*, ed. Joseph Black et al. (London: Broadview Press, 2015), 1509–10.
- 5 Myshele Goldberg, “The origins of spam,” MysheleGoldberg.com, May 21, 2004: “When the Star Wars fans got tired of intelligent debate or angry arguments, they went back to their ‘spam and tang’ logic. ‘Whatever,’ they would write, ‘Star Trek is just about spam and tang.’ Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang. They would copy the same message dozens, hundreds of times, filling up every line in the chatroom so nobody else could type.”
- 6 One of the most interesting examples in this context was the sale of an edition of Andy Warhol’s non-existent work *Spam* in an online auction at [us.ebid.net](http://us.ebid.net) (accessed in June 2011).
- 7 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “Globalisation and Democracy,” in *Reflections on Empire*, ed. Antonio Negri and Ed Emery (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 79–113, 93, 94.
- 8 Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as a Parable of Human Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 72.



- 9 Ellen Messmer, "Experts link flood of 'Canadian Pharmacy' spam to Russian botnet criminals," *Network World*, July 16, 2009: "In this case, 'Canadian Pharmacy,' hyping itself as 'the #1 Internet Online Drugstore,' is neither Canadian nor a pharmacy. In fact, 'Canadian Pharmacy' doesn't appear to exist as an established website but only as a shifting hyperlink in a spam message generated by about eight crime botnets."
- 10 Michael F. Nenes "Cuisine of Hawaii," in *American Regional Cuisine*, The Art Institutes SM (Hoboken: Wiley, 2007), 479.
- 11 In contrast to pan-Ottoman versions of the dish, the German rendition is generally made of preproduced spam cones. Eberhard Seidel-Pielen, *Aufgespießt - Wie der Döner über die Deutschen kam* (Rotbuch: Hamburg, 1996), 47f. Seidel-Pielen claims that the decline of Fordist production systems in German car industries forced many industrial migrant workers to become small entrepreneurs and open snack bars, thus paving the way for Germany's only important culinary innovation in the twentieth century. Döner Kebab is made from many official and unofficial components including cookies, sperm, dog food, salmonella. He also recounts how young German Neo-Nazis would come running to the Döner stand while arsoning migrant workers' hostels during early '90s post-unification pogroms, showing the Hitler salute with one hand and clutching their Döner with the other. See Alan Posener, "Auch Deutschland dreht sich um den Döner," *Welt Online*, May 30, 2005.
- 12 Brunton, "Roar so Wildly," p. 4.
- 13 *Broadview Anthology of British Literature, Concise Edition, Volume B*, 1510.

## 9 Her Name Was Esperanza

- 1 This is a completely fictional example. Any similarity to actual persons or events is unintended.
- 2 <http://www.romancescam.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=19587&sid=17266b9537f5462100007720a196b4c0-p95509>.
- 3 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 47, 67.
- 4 <http://www.romancescam.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=8784&start=150>.

- 5 Scientific research into online scams has until now focused almost exclusively on the case of Nigeria (which seems odd given the very diverse geographical origins of romance scams). The most extensive and insightful study is Andrew Apter, "IBB=419: Nigerian Democracy and the Politics of Illusion," in John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (eds), *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 270ff. A case study of several 419 scams appears in Harvey Glickman, "The Nigerian '419' Advance Fee Scams: Prank or Peril?," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 39:3 (2005), 460–89. See also Daniel Jordan Smith, "Ritual Killing, 419, and Fast Wealth: Inequality and the Popular Imagination in Southeastern Nigeria," *American Ethnologist* 28:4 (2001), 803–26, and Daniel Künzler "Who wants to be a millionaire? Global capitalism and fraud in Nigeria," paper presented at the Interim Conference of Research Committee 02 of the International Sociological Association, World Social Forum, Nairobi, January 22, 2007.
- 6 Thomas Elsaesser, "Tears, Timing, Trauma: Film Melodrama as Cultural Memory," in E. Dagrada (ed.), *Il Melodramma* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2007), 47–68.
- 7 A seminal text on melodrama is still Thomas Elsaesser's 1973 essay "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 43–69.
- 8 According to the Online Etymological Dictionary: "prefix meaning 'after,' from L. post 'behind, after, afterward,' from \*pos-ti (cf. Arcadian pos, Doric poti 'toward, to, near, close by'; O.C.S. po 'behind, after,' pozdu 'late'; Lith. pas 'at, by'), from PIE \*po- (cf. Gk. apo 'from,' L. ab 'away from')" ([etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)).
- 9 <http://www.romancescam.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=19587&start=45#p109129>.
- 10 Daniel Künzler claims that Nigerian 419 scammers are rather loosely organized and teams do not usually exceed five people; however, they are often organized transnationally and "project-oriented" ("Who wants to be a millionaire?," 16f).
- 11 According to the experiences of scambaiters at [romancescam.com](http://romancescam.com).
- 12 Bjorn Nansen, "I Go Chop Your Dollar: The Nigerian 419 Scam and Chronoscopic Time. A Research Article," *Piracy: antiTHESIS* 18 (2008), 43.

- 13 Glickman cites the case of Fred Ajudua, who claimed to be a “black Robin Hood” and “alleged that the frauds were compensation from white men for slavery and colonialism” (“The Nigerian ‘419’ Advance Fee Scams,” 478). Among other sources in popular culture, Künzler also mentions the plot of a well-known Nigerian fiction film: “This synopsis mentions one notion quite common in the popular discourse about 419 scams in Nigeria: The greed of the victims. This notion is also central to the huge hit ‘The Master’ by Andy Amenechi (2005) starring famous Nigerian actor Nkem Owoh (also known as Osuofia). Denis (Nkem Owoh) was a migrant to Europe, but has been deported and had to struggle ever since. One day, he meets wealthy Chief Ifeanyi (Kanayo O. Kanayo) who introduces him into the 419 business ... As he speaks to journalists, he convinces them that 419s are justified as foreigners are greedy and have to compensate for slavery and colonialism” (“Who wants to be a millionaire?,” 13f).
- 14 <http://www.romancescam.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=1555>.
- 15 Nansen, “I Go Chop Your Dollar,” 39. The connection to an oil-based economy is also explored in detail in Apter, “IBB=419.”
- 16 Apter, “IBB=419,” 299.
- 17 Ibid., 272, 279.
- 18 One can say, probably: “I’ve got the brains, you’ve got the looks: let’s make lots of money.”
- 19 Hazel Parry, “Romeo conmen target lonely hearts,” *China Daily, HK Edition* September 22, 2010. More information can be found at [dragonladies.org](http://dragonladies.org), a website that presents Asia-based scams. There is ample evidence of women in China and Malaysia getting scammed, as well as scams which promise contact with Asian women, usually centered on charging so-called translation fees and other scams originating from Asia.
- 20 J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).
- 21 Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and the Languages of Man,” in *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, Vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 68f.
- 22 For example in Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 109–33.
- 23 Nansen, “I Go Chop Your Dollar,” 38.
- 24 See Hito Steyerl, “Notes about Spamsoc,” *Pages magazine* 7 (2009), 59–67.

- 25 The characteristics of scam-mail language are investigated in Jan Blommaert and Tope Omoniyi, "Email Fraud: Language, Technology and the Indexicals of Globalisation," *Social Semiotics* 16:4 (2007), 573–605.
- 26 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, Vol. 1, 253–63: "To regain pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation. In this pure language—which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative word, that which is meant in all languages—all information, all sense and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished" (261).
- 27 Extract from "Doc's Story," anonymous report in *The Scam Survivors' Handbook* (2010), at [romancescambaiter.com](http://romancescambaiter.com).
- 28 To quote one of the most overused slogans of the post-period.

## 10 International Disco Latin

- 1 Alix Rule and David Levine, "International Art English," *Triple Canopy* 16 (2012).
- 2 I have contributed extensively to *e-flux journal* in the past, thus losing any pretense to occupy any neutral and objective stance within the debate, and squarely positioning myself as a fully conscious coproducer of IAE spam.
- 3 See Taylor & Francis and other semi-monopolist pimps of publicly funded scholarly writing.
- 4 Tania Bruguera's transgression against statistically correct English is, according to Rule and Levine, the excessive use of the word "reality." Now, I am not surprised that "reality" doesn't show up very often in the BNC, since over the past few decades the UK has been more obsessed with "realty." However, to make the word "reality" a key term of a supposedly pornographic language is taking its denial a bit far.
- 5 Mladen Stilinovic, *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist*, 1994–6. Embroidery on banner.
- 6 In private conversation.
- 7 In Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003). I am fast-forwarding here over an intriguing branch of scholarship that investigates translation within

globalization. Some of the findings of this scholarship are available at [translate.eipcp.net](http://translate.eipcp.net). The website's researchers and the practitioners of this scholarship include writers like Gayatri Spivak, Jon Solomon, Boris Buden, Rosi Braidotti, Antonella Corsani, and Stefan Nowotny, among many other equally notable thinkers. Their research deals with power, language, and neoliberal globalization, often using case studies, such as refugee struggles, or specific angles on historical decolonization. This scholarship highlights the role of minor, emerging, and submerged languages in contemporary political realities. Ah! There goes the r-word again. X-rate this footnote!

- 8 Mostafa Heddaya, "When Artspeak Masks Oppression," [hyperallergic.com](http://hyperallergic.com), March 6, 2013.
- 9 See the GulfLabor public statement from January 7, 2013 at [gulflabor.wordpress.com](http://gulflabor.wordpress.com) and the Guggenheim's response at [theartnewspaper.com](http://theartnewspaper.com).
- 10 See, for instance [artwriting.sva.edu](http://artwriting.sva.edu).
- 11 This is my fault, sorry! Working in this system also enables me to partially disregard the rules of "correct" English writing, which full freelancers might admittedly have to put up with to stay in the market.
- 12 Thanks to Joshua Decter, Richard Frater, Janus Hom, Martyn Reynolds, Christoph Schäfer, Zoran Terzic, and others for extensively debating this issue in private conversation with me. Nina Power helpfully suggested to rename artspeak as "bollocks," with which I entirely agree, as in "International Disco Bollocks."

## 11 Is the Internet Dead?

- 1 This is what the term "post-internet," coined a few years ago by Marisa Olson and subsequently Gene McHugh, seemed to suggest while it had undeniable use value as opposed to being left with the increasingly privatised exchange value it has at this moment.
- 2 Cf. Peter Weibel, "Medien als Maske: Videokratie," in *Von der Bürokratie zur Telekratie. Rumänien im Fernsehen*, ed. Keiko Sei (Berlin: Merve, 1990), 124–149, 134f.
- 3 Cătălin Gheorghe, "The Juridical Rewriting of History," in *Trial/Proces*, ed. Cătălin Gheorghe (Iași: Universitatea de Arte "George Enescu" Iași, 2012),

2-4.

- 4 Ceci Moss and Tim Steer in a stunning exhibition announcement: "The object that exists in motion spans different points, relations and existences but always remains the same thing. Like the digital file, the bootlegged copy, the icon, or Capital, it reproduces, travels and accelerates, constantly negotiating the different supports that enable its movement. As it occupies these different spaces and forms it is always reconstituting itself. It doesn't have an autonomous singular existence; it is only ever activated within the network of nodes and channels of transportation. Both a distributed process and an independent occurrence, it is like an expanded object ceaselessly circulating, assembling and dispersing. To stop it would mean to break the whole process, infrastructure or chain that propagates and reproduces it." Available at [seventeengallery.com](http://seventeengallery.com).
- 5 One instance of a wider political phenomena called transition. Coined for political situations in Latin America and then applied to Eastern European contexts after 1989, this notion described a teleological process consisting of an impossible catch-up of countries "belatedly" trying to achieve democracy and free-market economies. Transition implies a continuous morphing process, which in theory would make any place ultimately look like the ego ideal of any default Western nation. As a result, whole regions were subjected to radical makeovers. In practice, transition usually meant rampant expropriation coupled with a radical decrease in life expectancy. In transition, a bright neo-liberal future marched off the screen to be realized as a lack of health care coupled with personal bankruptcy, while Western banks and insurance companies not only privatized pensions, but also reinvested them in contemporary art collections. See Beat Weber and Therese Kaufmann, "The Foundation, the State Secretary and the Bank," [transform.eipcp.net](http://transform.eipcp.net), April 25, 2006.
- 6 Images migrating across different supports are of course nothing new. This process has been apparent in art-making since the Stone Age. But the ease with which many images morph into the third dimension is a far cry from ages when a sketch had to be carved into marble manually. In the age of postproduction, almost everything made has been created by means of one or more images, and any IKEA table is copied and pasted rather than mounted or built.

- 7 As the New Aesthetic tumblr has brilliantly demonstrated for things and landscapes (see [new-aesthetic.tumblr.com](http://new-aesthetic.tumblr.com)), and as the Women as Objects tumblr has done to illustrate the incarnation of image as female body (see [womensobjects.tumblr.com](http://womensobjects.tumblr.com)). Equally relevant on this point is work by Jesse Darling and Jennifer Chan.
- 8 See Steven Shaviro's wonderful analysis in "Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, Boarding Gate and Southland Tales," *Film-Philosophy* 14.1 (2010), 1–102. See also his book *Post-Cinematic Affect* (London: Zero Books, 2010).
- 9 Greg Allen, "The Enterprise School," [greg.org](http://greg.org), Sept. 13, 2013.
- 10 Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Catastrophe* (2009).
- 11 Metahaven and Benjamin Bratton, "The Cloud, the State, and the Stack: Metahaven in Conversation with Benjamin Bratton," interview, [mthvn.tumblr.com](http://mthvn.tumblr.com), December 16, 2012.
- 12 Thanks to Josh Crowe for drawing my attention to this; "The Cloud, the State, and the Stack."
- 13 Oliver Laric, "Versions," 2012, available at [oliverlaric.com/vversions.htm](http://oliverlaric.com/vversions.htm).
- 14 Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1999), 75–82. "In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.' Suárez Miranda, *Viajes de varones prudentes*, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lérida, 1658."
- 15 L. Arlas, "Verbal spat between Costa Rica, Nicaragua continues," *Tico Times*, Sept. 20, 2013. Thanks to Kevan Jenson for mentioning this to me.
- 16 Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 166–184.

- 17 Christina Kiaer, "'Into Production!': The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism," *Transversal* (Sept. 2010). "Mayakovsky's advertising jingles address working-class Soviet consumers directly and without irony; for example, an ad for one of the products of Mossel'prom, the state agricultural trust, reads: 'Cooking oil. Attention working masses. Three times cheaper than butter! More nutritious than other oils! Nowhere else but Mossel'prom.' It is not surprising that Constructivist advertisements would speak in a pro-Bolshevik, anti-NEP-business language, yet the picture of the *Reklam-Konstruktor* advertising business is more complicated. Many of their commercial graphics move beyond this straightforward language of class difference and utilitarian need to offer a *theory* of the socialist object. In contrast to Brik's claim that in this kind of work they are merely 'biding their time,' I propose that their advertisements attempt to work out the relation between the material cultures of the prerevolutionary past, the NEP present and the socialist *novyi byt* of the future with theoretical rigor. They confront the question that arises out of the theory of Boris Arvatov: What happens to the individual fantasies and desires organized under capitalism by the commodity fetish and the market, after the revolution?"
- 18 Charles Arthur, "How low-paid workers at 'click farms' create appearance of online popularity," *The Guardian*, Aug. 2, 2013; Harry Sanderson, "Human Resolution," *Mute*, April 4, 2013.
- 19 And it is absolutely not getting stuck with data-derived sculptures exhibited in white cube galleries.
- 20 "Spanish workers occupy a Duke's estate and turn it into a farm," [libcom.org](http://libcom.org), August 24, 2012. "Earlier this week in Andalusia, hundreds of unemployed farmworkers broke through a fence that surrounded an estate owned by the Duke of Segorbe, and claimed it as their own. This is the latest in a series of farm occupations across the region within the last month. Their aim is to create a communal agricultural project, similar to other occupied farms, in order to breathe new life into a region that has an unemployment rate of over 40 percent. Addressing the occupiers, Diego Canamero, a member of the Andalusian Union of Workers, said that: 'We're here to denounce a social class who leave such a place to waste.' The lavish well-kept gardens, house, and pool are left empty, as the Duke lives in Seville, more than 60 miles away."



- 21 Thomas J. Michalak, "Mayor in Spain leads food raids for the people," [workers.org](http://workers.org), Aug. 25, 2012. "In the small Spanish town of Marinaleda, located in the southern region of Andalucía, Mayor Juan Manuel Sánchez Gordillo has an answer for the country's economic crisis and the hunger that comes with it: He organized and led the town's residents to raid supermarkets to get the food necessary to survive."

## 12 Why Games, Or, Can Art Workers Think?

- 1 Constant Niuwenhuis, "New Babylon—A Nomadic City," published in the catalogue for an exhibition at the Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague 1974.
- 2 See David Barbiza, "Ogre to slay? Outsource it to China," *New York Times*, December 9, 2005.
- 3 Alan Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy* 59 (October 1950).
- 4 John von Neumann and Oscar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 17.
- 5 Neumann and Morgenstern explicitly cautioned against defining rational behavior, but they did define utility as maximizing profit, while conceding that this was an "opportunistic" definition. See *Theory of Games*, 8.
- 6 Daniel Ellsberg, "Risk, Ambiguity, and the Savage Axioms," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 75:4 (November 1961), 653–4.
- 7 For an interpretation of Ellsberg's paradox as a proto-critique of neoliberalism see Yanis Varoufakis, "WikiLeaks' precursor and unsung foe of neoliberal economics," [yanisvaroufakis.eu](http://yanisvaroufakis.eu), December 11, 2010.
- 8 All my descriptions as well as this whole chapter are heavily indebted to Philip Mirowski's invaluable work *Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes a Cyborg Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). References to it appear throughout this text.
- 9 See McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), §1.
- 10 Guy Gugliotta, "Deciphering old texts, one woozy, curvy word at a time," *New York Times*, March 28, 2011.
- 11 Andy Greenberg, "Google can now tell you're not a robot with just one click," *Wired*, December 3, 2014.

- 12 Chris Anderson, "The end of theory: The data deluge makes the scientific method obsolete," *Wired*, June 23, 2008.
- 13 Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," 448.
- 14 Jiayang Fan, "How China wants to rate its citizens," *New Yorker*, November 3, 2015.
- 15 Jacob Silverman, "China's troubling new social credit system – and ours," *New Republic*, October 29, 2015. Non-state actors gamify too: "One Britain-based Islamic extremist website called Salafi Media measures a user's engagement level by a 'fundamentalism meter.' The more 'radical' or 'fundamental' a user becomes, the more power and legitimacy he holds in the forum." See Jarret Brachman and Alix Levine, "The World of Holy Warcraft," *Foreign Policy*, April 13, 2011.
- 16 Paul Krugman, "How did economists get it so wrong?," *New York Times*, September 2, 2009.
- 17 Jerry Saltz, "Why does so much New Abstraction look the same?," *New York Magazine*, June 17, 2014.
- 18 Constant Nieuwenhuis, "New Babylon—Ten Years On," in Mark Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-architecture of Desire* (Rotterdam: Witte de With CfCA / 010, 1998), 236.

## 13 Let's Talk about Fascism

- 1 For example Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 151.

## 14 If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!

- 1 Rain Emuscado, "The art world responds to Brexit," *Artnet News*, June 24, 2016.
- 2 Apparently this specific market crashed in the meantime. Art markets in general are still rather stable.
- 3 The idea of art as currency is also explored in fascinating detail by David Joselit in *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), but at a different historic moment, the moment of the expansion of neoliberal globalization. Now, at the end of this historic moment, art as currency seems even more powerful.

- 4 The term “derivative fascisms” refers to a jumble of widespread extreme right-wing movements that relate to twentieth-century fascisms in terms of future options, but not by any means as equivalents, as in: creating and marketing future options for fascism. There is no point in asking whether they are really fascisms or not because fascism is the underlying entity, which may or may not have anything to do with its derivatives.
- 5 I use the term “middle class” in an expanded sense—in the sense of a global middle class (which may well include both working and out-of-work classes in formerly industrialized countries) undercut by outsourcing and expanded competition. However, economic reasons are not the only explanation for the new popularity of derivative fascisms. How is it that in Germany, ninety refugee camps were attacked in 2016 by arson alone (total attacks numbered 901 that year), while at the same time the country is doing very well economically? Why was Austria on the verge of electing a neo-fascist president, when its own unemployment rate hasn't surpassed 6 percent at any point since the mid-1990s? How does one explain the constant and growing presence of extreme right-wing organizations in these two countries that have profited massively from recent crises? It's true that inequality has risen in both countries. In light of hard facts, the correlation between economic hardship and fascist popularity is very much complicated. The latter also requires a part of the population that will, if it feels threatened or just slighted, blackmail the whole of society, vote fascist, destabilize, or kill.
- 6 To make this very clear: art is not a cryptocurrency. Nevertheless, the possibility of art becoming a cryptocurrency is raised in a very informative text by J. Chris Anderson, “Why art could become currency in a cryptocurrency world,” *The New Stack*, May 31, 2015.
- 7 In contrast to cryptocurrencies, in art there is not the slightest pretense to decentralized transparency, nor the pretense to an automated incorruptible set of functions. Art as currency gains its relative stability precisely because of nontransparency, and because of its overwhelming reliance on human relations.
- 8 See Melvin Draupnir, “Bitcoin mining centralization,” [bitcoinmining.com](http://bitcoinmining.com), May 12, 2016.
- 9 This leaves art projects that deal with alternative currencies (or financial options or contracts) on a double scene. They can become

representational and sometimes somewhat misleading because they show something other than what they actually already do themselves.

- 10 For an example of art education denounced as “effete” and feminized, see Jonathan Jones, “Goodbye art history A level, you served the elite well,” *Guardian*, October 13, 2015. On the other hand, I very much agree with Ben Davis’s excellent text “After Brexit, art must break out of its bubble,” *Artnet News*, June 28, 2016.
- 11 By “post-public” I mean semi-public corporate ventures like biennials and many institutions and museums.
- 12 W.A.G.E., Precarious Workers Brigade, etc., are doing a stellar job on this issue, as are new artist unions and other organizations working on related issues, including Liberate Tate, Gulf Labor, etc.
- 13 The use of blockchain technology in art circulation, criticism, and documentation opens up a huge can of worms relating to the quantification of different art phenomena, the manipulation of consensus, submission to the tyranny of averages, etc. Arguably, art’s appeal (and value) derives at least in part from the fact that it does not always reproduce the so-called “wisdom of crowds” or other popularity-driven functions. See, for example, Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, “The Most Wanted Paintings on the Web,” at [awp.diaart.org](http://awp.diaart.org), to understand how it would be both funny and devastating for *all* art to be like this or made on demand according to futures and prediction markets.
- 14 Adapting a set of propositions advanced by Fred Moten and Stefano Harvey in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2013).
- 15 As pointed out by Anton Vidokle in “Art without Market, Art without Education: Political Economy of Art,” *e-flux journal* 43 (March 2013).
- 16 One of many excellent examples is Neue Nachbarschaft in Berlin, where Berliners—both longtime residents and newcomers —come together for art courses and lessons in German or music.
- 17 See the Platform Cooperativism website, [platformcoop.net](http://platformcoop.net). A lot of art projects incorporate different versions of blockchain elements. See, for example, Sami Emory, “BitchCoin is a new cryptocurrency for art,” [thecreatorsproject.vice.com](http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com), February 10, 2015, and Steven Sacks et al. in conversation, “Monegraph and the status of the art object,” [dismagazine.com](http://dismagazine.com). An excellent critical reflection on art projects dealing

with blockchains can be found in Sven Lütticken, "The Coming Exception," *New Left Review* 99 (May–June 2016).

- 18 This question requires a long paragraph reexploring the idea of "delinking" under conditions of simultaneously networked and fragmenting global systems—an idea which has been explored by Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein, Andre Gunder Frank, and Giovanni Arrighi, among others. A more fully developed version of this text will rely heavily on Karatani Kojin's idea of "autonomous modes of exchange." In his book *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), Karatani foregrounds circulation as a mode of production and highlights cooperativism and associationism as sites of creative organization. Art systems combine most modes of circulation mentioned by Karatani: pre-agricultural clan-based modes; modes based on plunder, expropriation, and statehood; and capitalist modes. Art also contains seeds of a potential future mode of circulation based on sharing, the dissolution of enclosures, locally actualized diverse constituencies, and the creation of parallel economies using LETS and other pre-blockchain alternative currencies. On the one hand, this means utter corruption; on the other, a parallel form of exchange. On a related note, see Aria Dean's excellent recent text "Poor Meme, Rich Meme" ([reallifemag.com](http://reallifemag.com), July 25, 2016), which maps vectors of a Black circulationism projected by shared motion, history, movement, and multiplicity.
- 19 How do we defend municipalities under attack, like the twenty-four deposed municipalities administrated by the pro-Kurdish Democratic Regions Party (DBP) in southeast Turkey, including Nusaybin, Cizre, Sur, and Suruç, some of which have declared self-rule and operate on a model of assembly-based autonomy?
- 20 Confluence instead of coalition, a way to let movements move. Overflow: productive loss of control over dynamic developments. See the September 2016 issue of the journal *transversal* on these and other notions ([transversal.at](http://transversal.at)).
- 21 By trying to gauge artists' lifespans or investing according to the number of kids female artists have.
- 22 I learned this from Elie Ayache's fascinating treatise *The Blank Swan: The End of Probability* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010).

## 15 Ripping Reality

- 1 George Steiner, *After Babel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 498.
- 2 [leica-geosystems.us](http://leica-geosystems.us)
- 3 This incident is mentioned in the introduction of Boris Buden's book, *Zone des Übergangs. Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009).
- 4 All information is taken from a report, *Otmica u Štrpcima* [Abduction in Štrpcima], Fond za humanitarno pravo [Humanitarian Law Center], 2003.
- 5 Elaine Sciolino, Roger Cohen and Stephen Engelberg, "21 Days in Dayton," *New York Times*, November 23, 1995.
- 6 Ethan Watters, "Virtual War and Peace," *Wired*, March 1, 1996.
- 7 Even though the lines of partition were already drawn by the creation of a federation of multiple republics as opposed to one republic.
- 8 It was rebuilt in the meantime.
- 9 Jalal Toufic, "The Subtle Dancer," in *Over-Sensitivity*, second edition, 101: "a space that is neither two-dimensional nor three-dimensional, but between the two."
- 10 See Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek on the "anamorphic stain," in Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1977) and Slavoj Žizek, *Looking Awry* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 90.
- 11 John Allen, "The Cultural Spaces of Siegfried Kracauer: The Many Surfaces of Berlin," *New Formations* 61, 2007, 22.
- 12 Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995 [1963, 1927]), 75.
- 13 Siegfried Kracauer, "Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit," in *Schriften*, volume 8 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973), 371.
- 14 Fredric Jameson, "Culture," in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1996), 9.
- 15 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).