

PEER ILLNER (ED.)

UNWORKING

With contributions by Kathrin Busch, Alexander García Düttmann, Alison Hugill, Anthony Iles, Peer Illner, Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, Gertrud Koch, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, Jose Rosales, Marina Vishmidt, and Evan Calder Williams

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INTRODUCTION

Peer Illner

What are they trying to do?
They're trying to build a better world.
What are we trying to do?
We're trying to destroy the world.

— Frank B. Wilderson III

Désœuvrement, variously translated as ‘unworking’ or ‘inoperativity,’¹ is a notion that haunts contemporary political theory and practice. Unworking overturns the typical valuation of work and action as positive and constructive and opens an avenue to think radical passivity and inactivity as aesthetic and political practices that question the modernist mantra of purposeful production and ceaseless activity. At its most basic, unworking is the critique of work and of everything that we imagine as such: the work of community-building for instance, the work of art, work as wage labour, even psychoanalysis, imagined as ‘working through.’ This book is dedicated to unworking in all its forms.

In politics, unworking’s urgency stems directly from the current political conjuncture, in which the winning slogans of “Make America Great Again” and “Take Back Control” testify to the return of the Grand Design in politics. However, if the great work of politics has made a comeback, so too has the

¹ Various translations of *désœuvrement* as unworking and inoperativity, this volume uses both translations of *désœuvrement*, depending on context. Unworking is used to denote a more active stance or disposition, whereas inoperativity is used to refer to the more passive state of being unworked. For a discussion of the translation issues related to unworking, see Pierre Joris’ “Translator’s Preface” to Maurice Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community*. Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, Barrytown: Station Hill Press 1988, pp. xi–xxv, here p. xxiv.

critique of politics as *work*. From the ‘Age of Riots’² and Anonymous’ attacks on global banks to Occupy’s “We have no demands,” a political stance has emerged that spells out the end of the traditional categories of representation, integration and participation. Disillusioned with classical activist campaigns for the extension of civil rights, democratic access and freedom of speech, these actions embrace negation, sabotage and withdrawal as political strategies, turning unworking into “the paradigm of the coming politics.”³

In contemporary aesthetics, too, the legacy of unworking looms large, both in art theory and artistic practice. While computational and generative artistic methods challenge the bounded artwork with the open-ended, process-based and incomplete, art theory has rediscovered aesthetic experience’s roots in radical passivity, which it marshals against society’s pressures of self-optimisation and activation. It is no coincidence that Gilles Deleuze—who coined the term ‘control society’ to describe an age in which externally-imposed discipline gives way to self-imposed mechanisms of responsibility, potentiation and initiative⁴—also invented a small philosophy of exhaustion that points to the control society’s moribund flip-side.⁵ However, rather than merely valorising the incapacitated states of fatigue, depression and dejection as resisting our subjectivised, neoliberal power structures, recent aesthetic theory highlights the constitutive role of radical passivity in our active categories of thought, judgement and action. In thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot and Giorgio Agamben, it is *pathos*, understood as suffering and the capacity to be affected,

² The Age of Riots is how Alain Badiou has characterised the present age. See Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, London/New York: Verso 2012.

³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993, p. 93.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992), pp. 3–7.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, “The Exhausted,” *SubStance* 24.3 (1995), pp. 3–28.

that creates the primary ground upon which our more active states of thinking, acting and judging take place.

How does unworking come to us and what are its roots? While the authors of this volume provide a variety of different conceptual and theoretical histories, in what follows, I'd like to present some historical vantage points that constitute a scattered genealogy of inoperativity:

Summer 1939: Hitler and Stalin agree on a non-aggression pact between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, which allies the two superpowers for a short period of time in a non-belligerence agreement. Seeing this pact with fascism as an early failure of the Soviet Union, Walter Benjamin drafts his *Theses on the Concept of History*, in which he reimagines communism as distinctly separate from Soviet pursuits.⁶ Against Lenin's quip, equating communism with Fordism plus Soviet power, Benjamin breaks with a politics of rationalisation that calculates, haggles and cuts deals. Indeed, he demotes the whole modernist view of politics as a *project* that—stemming from instrumental reason—can be realised through a future-oriented action or plan. If fascism and state socialism are based on the idea of realising history's potential through unfettered progress, communism must “brush history against the grain”.⁷ Indeed, revolutionary politics must be directed *against* the current course of history. When orthodox, progressive history proves to be a high-speed train rushing towards disaster, politics

⁶ In his correspondence with Gershom Sholem, Soma Morgenstern reported that “News from the Hitler-Stalin Pact gave him [Benjamin] an irremediable personal blow [...] Benjamin was so depressed that he came to me almost daily to seek consolation [...] After Benjamin had recovered from the shock, he invited me for dinner and read from ‘Twelve Theses Towards a Revision of Historical-Materialism.’ I recall the First thesis. It was about a chess machine, which defeated all chess experts.” (Morgenstern to Sholem, November 2, 1973, unpublished), cited in Rolf Tiedemann, “Historical materialism or political messianism? An interpretation of the theses ‘on the concept of history,’” in: Peter Osborne (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, Abingdon/Oxon: Routledge 2005, pp. 137–168, here p. 166, fn. 50.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in: idem, *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books 1969, pp. 253–264, here p. 256f.

must be like “activating the emergency break”⁸ in order to exit the vicious cycle of revolution and counter-revolution and arrive at a real change of the situation.

October 1973: Throughout the twentieth century, unworking remained something of a political heresy, obliquely pursued by strands of Left Communism and Ultra-Leftism. If working class parties in the twentieth century embraced industrial production and sought political emancipation via direct control of the productive process, for these groups, the goal was increasingly to break with the traditional Left’s identification with productive labour. Left heretics, from the idleness-praising Paul Lafargue to Council Communist Anton Pannekoek and Anti-Bolshevik Paul Mattick, believed that nothing good was ever to come of work. Instead of empowering the working class by widening its influence over collective production, Left Communists posited that it was the working class itself that had to be overcome to rid the world of capitalism. Rather than working-class empowerment, working-class self-abolition entered the repertoire of communist politics, albeit on the fringes.

For the group *Théorie Communiste*, it is in 1973 that the abolition of the working class first becomes a realisable historical horizon. The world experiences an oil crisis. President Nixon detaches the dollar from the gold standard, tying its value to the constant fluctuations of the stock market. A massive restructuring of capitalism ensues, bringing about the deindustrialisation of the West and the ‘real subsumption’ of workers in menial administration and management jobs. For *Théorie Communiste*, this marks the end of the working class as a coherent socio-historical category, and thus as an identity that can be positively invested. In the face of this, the goal becomes to turn the increasing superfluity of workers to capital accumu-

⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” in: Howard Eiland and Michael J. Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2006, pp. 401–411, here p. 403.

lation into a revolutionary weapon of *communisation*, understood as the immediate abolition of the value form and all other social forms that drive the capitalist economy.⁹ Today, the theoretical legacy of the abolitionist tradition is palpable in various groups of the Ultra-Left, such as The Invisible Committee, Tropolin, and Endnotes. In practice, it was felt in the year 2000, when workers from the French electronics company Moulinex responded to their redundancy by burning down their factory, de facto ridding themselves of their work, rather than demanding continued employment.

Spring 1983: After the upheavals of the 1970s economic crisis, the world is in a firm neoliberal stranglehold. Margaret Thatcher has been in power since 1979 and Ronald Reagan since 1981. No end to the Cold War is in sight. Postmodern theories about the end of history abound. In this time of political depression, Jean-Luc Nancy writes an essay on the meaning of community, in which he diagnoses the source of the current *malaise*. For Nancy, a dual belief has structured our political landscape since the advent of modernity. For too long, Nancy argues, political thinking of the Left and Right has seen it as its task to *either* revive an original community that is said to have been lost, *or* create an entirely new community, in which freedom would finally be attained. Fascism, liberalism and socialism all fall under the purview of Nancy's wide-ranging critique. While Nazism was based on resuscitating the long-lost mythical origins of a hypostasized Greco-German culture, liberalism and socialism both pursue politics as a futuristic mission. While liberals seek to create a fully immanent society of bounded individuals, pursuing their 'natural' self-interest on a rational marketplace, socialism aims to free labour from the fetters of capitalist value extraction and create a collective soci-

⁹ For an overview of how the possibility of communisation emerges from the end of the workers' programme, see *Théorie Communiste*, "Much Ado about Nothing," *Endnotes 1* (2008), pp. 154–206.

ety of socialised production. Shared by all these visions is the idea of community as something that politics has to immanently produce through a collective effort:

Generations of citizens and militants, of workers and servants of the States have imagined their death reabsorbed or sublated in a community, yet to come [...] But by now we have nothing more than the bitter consciousness of the increasing remoteness of such a community, be it the people, the nation, or the society of producers.¹⁰

Similarly to *Théorie Communiste*'s belief that it is only *now*, in the late twentieth century, that we can take leave of exhausted political paradigms because we can finally acknowledge that they do not hold, Nancy sees in the exhaustion of the communitarian paradigm a chance to think the still-unrealised possibility of a community, not centred on work or production. For him, community does not have to be produced. Rather, the communal demand consists in the brute fact of being co-dependent and exposed to other beings in our shared finitude. Rather than attained through work, for Nancy, this 'inoperative community' is both a task and a struggle "that Marx grasped"¹¹ but socialist pragmatics ignored:

We stand perhaps to learn from this that it can no longer be a matter of figuring or modelling a communitarian essence in order to present it to ourselves and to celebrate it, but that it is a matter rather of thinking community, that is, of thinking its insistent and possibly still unheard demand, beyond communitarian models or remodellings.¹²

¹⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press 1991, p. 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 35.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 22.

With this brief survey of the variegated political-theoretical trends, which all grapple with a notion of unworking rather than merely working differently, I have diagnosed important nodal points of contemporary political and aesthetic theory and practice. The contributions in this book address different variants of unworking in their own way, spanning politics, philosophy and art. In her conceptual history of unworking from Martin Heidegger to Giorgio Agamben, Alison Hugill traces the common origin of inoperativity in both aesthetics and politics. Drawing comparisons with current political trends, such as accelerationism and Xenofeminism, Hugill suggests that unworking remains unique, in that it is non-foundational, non-teleological, non-programmatic and non-instrumental. Within the realm of art, Kathrin Busch's essay reflects on the roots of aesthetic experience in *pathos*, understood as the realm of radical exposure and affectability. Tracing the origin of an 'aesthetic pathology' in the works of Baumgarten, Artaud, Deleuze and Agamben, Busch shows the importance of radical passivity in an age that, more than any other, promotes individual responsibility, initiative and self-actualisation. Interrogating artists' increasing activation as politically and socially useful, my contribution takes aim at contemporary art's mapping fad, which basks in the revelatory pathos of unmasking the hidden links between politics and finance, asking why artists today so often wish to be whistleblowers. Why do artists today so often wish to be whistleblowers?

The aesthetic origins of unworking are further addressed in a philo-fictional dialogue by Gertrud Koch and Alexander García Düttmann, which inquires into the nature of the canon. What does it mean to move within a canon today? Are we ever outside an established canon? Can one step outside and unwork the canon? The relation of art to negation, on the one hand, and affirmation, on the other, is at the heart of Marina Vishmidt and Anthony Iles' contribution. If, in the modern era,

art has become a privileged place for critical reflection through its autonomy, how does that autonomy survive art's social integration as a neoliberal asset, capital investment and creative strategy? Rather than simply defending aesthetic autonomy, Vishmidt and Iles turn to artistic discourses of self-abolition in their relation to communist elaborations of self-abolition. Can self-abolition in the form of an art strike constitute a shared horizon for art production and politics today?

The question of tactics is also at the core of Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen's commentary on the recent exchange between the Left Communist Julien Coupat (*The Invisible Committee*), publisher Eric Hazan and philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. When faced with the final exhaustion of parliamentary politics, the dwindling of voter turnouts and the increasing indistinguishability of party politics, Coupat and Hazan suggest an unworking of politics, called 'destitution,' in which existing political categories are rendered moot and faith in the present is withdrawn. Nancy counters destitution with the category of 'engagement,' dampening his interlocutors' revolutionary fervour. In his commentary, Bolt Rasmussen reviews the debate and asks: Can we today still abstain from making a final political choice? Where do we stand on the political spectrum?

Systematising this inquiry, Jose Rosales provides a comparative genealogy of destitution and its paradigmatic treatments by *The Invisible Committee* and Giorgio Agamben. Weaving together theoretical and practical concerns and questioning the concept's single origin in Europe, Rosales draws on the radical Argentinian research group *Colectivo Situaciones* and demonstrates its influence on the *Gilets Jaunes* movement in France. Evan Calder Williams' contribution, too, is firmly rooted in practice. Narrating a history of sabotage, his essay examines prisons as sites in which the panoptic gaze of penal institutions is subverted, dodged and undermined by the inmates, who use the prisons' architecture, its objects and tools for their own pur-

poses—resistant, communicative or otherwise. The final contribution sees inoperativity in full force in an email exchange between Mehdi Belhaj Kacem and myself. Enacting unworking in an epistolary performance, the correspondence touches on inoperativity in relation to writing, autobiography, academism and class struggle, painting a violent picture of the productive imperatives of our time.

COMMUNISM WITHOUT HEIRS

Alison Hugill

In the scheme of political demands, it is possible to draw a thread that would link unworking (*désœuvrement*) to contemporary post-work imaginaries. In Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams recent book *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, the authors argue that the so-called ‘folk politics’ of community-driven reform and incremental change are inadequate responses to our rapidly technologising, late capitalist world. The failure of these bottom-up initiatives, in their opinion, lies in their blindness towards the revolutionary power of surplus populations of unemployed and underemployed people. To combat the stagnation of folk political strategies, we need to demand full automation of waged labour and universal basic income.

Both ‘folk politics’ and what they term ‘accelerationism’ commit the error, however, of hypostasising community—whether in the form of nostalgia for an amorphous and harmonious ‘public,’ or as the social body of the working class. A more nuanced understanding of unworking, and how it differs from the program laid out by Srnicek and Williams (the literal *end of work/wage labour*), requires that we understand the aesthetic and literary origins of Blanchot’s concept and its subsequent adaptation by Nancy and Agamben in the form of a non-programmatic ‘coming’ political community. Through this tracing, we will see that the political subjecthood emerging from the idea of ‘unworking’ more closely resembles the alienated subject (‘no one in particular’) of Xenofeminism—a critically updated offshoot of accelerationism—wherein gender-abolitionism and intersectionality are positioned over identity politics.¹

¹ Laboria Cuboniks, “Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation,” <http://www.laboriacuboniks.net> (accessed 25/1/20).

Maurice Blanchot's idea of 'unworking' (*désœuvrement*),² emerging in his many insightful commentaries on the work (*œuvre*) of art, gives rise to a political ontology that is at once non-foundational, non-teleological and non-instrumental. Though indebted to certain aspects of Martin Heidegger's paradigmatic consideration of the artwork in his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art"—in which art discloses the truth of Being inasmuch as it sets up worlds—Blanchot's notion of art has ultimately been credited with "uprooting the Heideggerian universe."³ The work of art, for Blanchot, reveals the very non-truth and errancy of Being, its *essential* unworking or *deworl*ding. The aesthetic-ontological theory of unworking, contra Heidegger, ultimately exposes an "authenticity that is not truth"⁴ or the impossibility of shared essence and communal hypostasis. In this sense, I argue, it provides a model for Blanchot's political theories of 'literary communism' and 'unavowable' community.

Having first elucidated Blanchotian unworking in its relation to the Heideggerian work, I will then trace several significant manifestations of unworking in the writing of other theorists: 'decreation' in Giorgio Agamben, 'unemployed negativity' in Georges Bataille, and 'inoperativity' in Jean-Luc Nancy. While the simple equation of these terms with Blanchotian unworking could certainly be problematised, my argument will pri-

² Following Pierre Joris in the "Translator's Preface" to Maurice Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*, I will adhere to the translation of *désœuvrement* as 'unworking' in order to maintain its paradoxical 'active-passivity'. Blanchot writes, according to translator Susan Hanson, in his "The Absence of the Book": "To write is to produce absence of the work (worklessness, unworking [*désœuvrement*]). Or again: writing is the absence of the work as it *produces itself* through the work, traversing it throughout. Writing as worklessness (in the active sense of the word) is the insane game, the indeterminacy that lies between reason and unreason." Pierre Joris comments: "It is exactly that little parenthesis, '(in the active sense of the word),' that is problematic in the translation of the term *désœuvrement* with the passive 'worklessness.'" The same difficulty arises with, I would argue, alternative translations as 'inoperativity' or 'inertia.' See Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, Barrytown: Station Hill Press 1988, p. xxiv.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1996, p. 139.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

marily concern what they share; an attention to the ‘non-actualisable reserve’ at the heart of every work, be it artistic or political. I will turn to these other theorists in order to make clear the ‘infinite conversation’ (*entretien infini*) in which Blanchot was implicated, as well as to illuminate the importance of the idea for both aesthetic *and* political thought. For, as Lars Iyer writes in his *Blanchot’s Communism*, “it is [Blanchot’s] account of the happening of the work of art that first allows him to develop his notion of community.”⁵

Adhering to Agamben’s suggestion in his Afterword to *The Coming Community*—a book that is indebted to similar theoretical projects by Blanchot and Nancy⁶—that unworking might form “the paradigm for the coming politics,” I will sketch what this non-teleological, non-instrumental and non-foundational politics might resemble. The anarcho-communist incitement to “affirm the rupture” that underlies nearly all of Blanchot’s post-war, Ultra-Leftist writing—most vehemently in the political tracts of May 1968—has deep connections in its theoretical underpinning to his conception of unworking in literature. Fighting against false notions of immanence at work in both liberal democracy and totalitarian fascism, Blanchot seeks a politics that mirrors the impersonality of literary space, that attaches to the inessentiality of being that he finds exposed in writing. This politics would be non-programmatic and without platform, since it would refuse all positing.

⁵ Lars Iyer, *Blanchot’s Communism: Art, Philosophy and the Political*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2004, p. 7.

⁶ See Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1991.

The Work and Unworking: Heidegger and Blanchot

In order to approach the complexity of this idea, Blanchot's unworking must first be considered in the wake of Martin Heidegger's rigorous investigation of the work (*das Werk*) in his "The Origin of the Work of Art." The essay, written in the late 1930s, is an attempt to distill the essence of the artwork in its relation to the truth or 'unconcealedness' of beings. Responding to Hegel's pronouncement of the end of art, in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* Heidegger writes that the truth of Hegel's judgement has not yet been decided. The question of whether or not art is still an essential way in which historical truth happens remains to be answered, for Heidegger. Nevertheless, until a rigorous consideration of the nature of art is undergone, Hegel's judgement remains in force.⁷ Bringing into view the "work-character of the work," Heidegger first hopes to revisit this question by illuminating what differentiates artworks from mere *things*.

The Work

For Heidegger, the artwork should not be conceived as a thing on top of which artistic qualities are added *through* work but, rather, the work-character of the artwork *precedes* its thingly-character. As Heidegger writes, "the road toward the determination of the thingly reality of the work leads not from thing to work but from work to thing."⁸ In the artwork—which Heidegger entrusts with opening up the Being of beings—the truth of *what is* has set itself to work. The object-being of the work—conserved through the art industry—does not constitute the 'work-being' of the work of art. The work-being of the

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York: Harper Collins 2001, p. 78.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

work is present in, and only in, the opening up that it affects. According to Heidegger, “the work belongs, as work, uniquely within the realm that is opened up by itself.”⁹

The work-character of the artwork is for Heidegger the *happening* of a disclosure in the opening up of the work. What is disclosed for Heidegger is *truth*; in the work, there is a happening of truth *at work*. But it is precisely on this point of truth, as we will see below, that Heidegger and Blanchot’s thought diverges; while art does indeed happen *irruptively* in both of their discussions of the artwork, what is revealed in each case is radically different. The fact that art happens *as truth* in Heidegger entails its ability “to decide the existence of a historical humanity.”¹⁰

Before examining the implications of this, we must further interrogate Heidegger’s notions of work and how it comes to be revelatory of truth.

World and Earth

To exemplify his argument concerning the *work* of art, Heidegger turns to the Greek temple that “simply stands there in the middle of the rock-cleft valley.”¹¹ By means of the temple, the gods are present in the temple. In his discussion of the temple-work (*Tempel-Werk*), Heidegger introduces his important distinction between *earth* and *world*. Earth (*Erde*) is “that whence the arising brings back and shelters everything that arises without violation. In the things that arise, earth is present as the sheltering agent.” World (*Welt*), on the other hand, is “self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and

⁹ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁰ Iyer, *Blanchot’s Communism*, p. 60.

¹¹ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 40.

essential decisions in the destiny of a historical people.”¹² The earth is self-dependent and self-secluding, the world is self-opening and decision-making. Heidegger writes: “wherever those decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us...there the world worlds.”¹³

The earth is the essential materiality of the work that remains hidden in the experience of the world. The Greek temple-work opens up a world and sets this world back again on earth; in setting forth the world, the temple work “does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the very first time and to come into the Open of the work’s world.”¹⁴ In each happening of art, the work-character of the artwork is what arrests us in an experience of materiality that both Heidegger and Blanchot call, in their own way, earth, and which can be understood in terms of a hidden materiality. In the written word, it might be the rhythm of words that seizes the reader before the meaning is grasped. This experience, for Heidegger, is the happening of *truth* in the work: art happens as the singular experience of this arrest, brought about by the sudden appearance of an unconcealed materiality (earth).

In the work, there is a struggle between earth and world that Heidegger calls *striving*: “the work-being of the work consists in the fighting of the battle between world and earth.”¹⁵ Yet, the setting up of a world and the setting forth of earth are two inseparable and essential features of the work-being of the work, and they form in the work a unity (however fraught). The continual struggle between world and earth happens in the unity of the work. The work *rests in itself* in the “simplicity of intimacy” that is striving. In the essential striving between

¹² Ibid., p. 47.

¹³ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

world and earth, “the opponents raise each other into the self-assertion of their natures.”¹⁶ This is *the happening of truth*. The work is the bearer of this happening, or the work *precedes* the thing: “the nature of creation is determined by the nature of the work.”¹⁷ The artist, in this conception, is the one who causes something to emerge as a thing that has been *brought forth*. The work’s becoming a work is the way in which truth, as the ‘openness of beings,’ *happens*. This openness or unconcealedness of beings (Being), however, entails a double experience for Heidegger:

the movement of appearing, the shining forth of the beautiful in the work is accompanied by a counter-movement, a plunge into darkness or invisibility; the brightness of the world also bears witness to a reserve ‘beneath’ or ‘before’ the visible world...*physis* [Being] refuses to yield itself up in its entirety to the happy presence of the life lived in the light of the temple.¹⁸

In this regard, Heidegger’s artwork is not an embodiment of the Absolute or a teleological unfolding of truth, but a “happening” that brings forth a *non-actualisable reserve*. This reserve is the materiality of earth that is not yet measurable, and whose illumination causes it to appear in its very withdrawal. In his conception, “beings cannot come into appearance once and for all; they can only offer themselves to the understanding of the sense of the world that unites a particular people.”¹⁹ The Greek temple, then, represents a happening of truth in the artwork, inasmuch as it sets up a world; it is the appearance of the truth of *a world* not *the world*. The struggle between earth and world

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁸ Iyer, *Blanchot’s Communism*, p. 52.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 53.

is the originary upsurge (*Ursprung*) through which a new sense of beings is given. The temple-work, then, institutes the setting to work of truth of a historical people, not guided by an inner historical necessity, but in a relation between epochs that remains free.

Despite its distance from a world-historical meta-narrative, however, Heidegger's conception does maintain an adherence to a metaphysical idea of truth, inherent in the artwork, that could ground the unified world of a particular people; it presents a communal truth. For Blanchot, by contrast, the work emerges from the very non-truth or errancy of being. Being is "that which escapes all determination and every form of existence."²⁰ In contrast to the notion of 'dwelling' in the world that emerges from Heidegger's thought of truth in the artwork, for Blanchot, art leads to a place of going astray, to a space that is uninhabitable.²¹ In this sense, it does not *lead* anywhere, it has no destination; the 'non-truth' of Being exposed in art is what Emmanuel Levinas has deemed Blanchot's "invitation to leave the Heideggerian world."²²

Unworking and the Errancy of Being

Blanchot's crucial departure from Heidegger, with whom he is in agreement on many points, is his introduction of the *essential-inessential* quality of the work, its *unworking*. Put in Heideggerian terms, Blanchot's unworking is that which "attends to the reserve or the *unconcealment* insofar as it overwhelms any retrospective claim that a particular people was able, unbeknownst to themselves, to achieve an exemplary rela-

²⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1982, p. 42.

²¹ Levinas, *Proper Names*, p. 134.

²² *Ibid.*, 135.

tionship to *aletheia*. The stability of a disclosure, life lived in the light of a work, truth, can never endure for a particular group; there is always the excessiveness of earth over world.”²³ The *work* of art does not inaugurate a historical people. The experience of a hidden materiality (earth), rather than uniting in truth, ceaselessly ruptures all totality. Moreover, the *origin* of the artwork is not truth but non-truth, dissimulation. It is an origin experienced *each time* we read or regard the artwork and, in this way, it can never form the basis of the work but is rather its continuous *originating*. The artwork is a *striving* that refuses to settle itself into a beginning (*Anfang*) and refuses the intimacy of repose in unity. Heidegger’s work, then, undergoes a significant critical reconsideration in Blanchot’s writing. In his thought,

the artwork does not open or illuminate the world so much as disclose its fragility and impermanence. The work of art, for Blanchot, attests to a constitutive *deworlding* of any particular world—to a distance that, in advance, prevents any contextualization of the work of art, any act of truth or inauguration, any setting up of the world of a historical people.²⁴

Importantly, this *deworlding* of the world (unworking of the work) that Blanchot’s thought effects is always already *constitutive* of the work itself, as its ‘non-actualisable reserve.’ In Blanchot’s account, even the Greeks were never at home in their world. There is no primordial truth to the artwork and the artwork can never lead to a disclosing unity. Art is, and always has been—to return to Hegel’s proposition—infinately dead, “refusing itself to determination, to dialectics, to the work of death or the work of mourning.”²⁵ Rather than the illuminating day of the Heideggerian temple-work, Blanchot writes of the ‘temple of

²³ Iyer, *Blanchot’s Communism*, p. 67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

night' and its concealment of the *other* night without sublation. These quotidian images address the demand for a paradoxical, non-dialectical language in Blanchot's discussion of unworking. This paradoxical language in Blanchot results from his attempts to think the very space of *communicativity* or linguistic being. This is the *space of literature*, wherein the work of art communicates communication itself and wherein to write is to exercise the paradoxical *strength* of an inexhaustible *impotence*. What, then, is this original inessentiality that refuses the work?

Georges Bataille: Unemployed Negativity

The idea of *désœuvrement* is also indebted to a formulation emerging in the work of Blanchot's contemporary and friend Georges Bataille, in his exposition of 'general economy' and his debates with Alexandre Kojève regarding the end of history and negativity in Hegel. In his thinly-veiled "Letter to X, Lecturer on Hegel," Bataille most explicitly confronts Kojève with what he calls 'unemployed negativity': "If action ('doing') is—as Hegel says—negativity, the question arises as to whether the negativity of one who has 'nothing more to do' disappears or remains in a state of 'unemployed negativity.'"²⁶ Kojève's main contribution to the study of Hegel, that so influenced an entire generation of French philosophers after the First World War, was the suggestion—in line with Hegel's own teleology—that history had come to an end. This did not, of course, suggest that no further events would take place but rather that nothing new would occur, that everything had already been realised. Consequently, for Kojève, man, *as negativity*, would also disappear.

While Bataille did not fundamentally disagree with Kojève's pronouncement of the end of history, he did take issue with the

²⁶ Georges Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1997, p. 296.

projected consequences. In contrast to Kojève, Bataille argued that even after the end of history, a negativity without sublation would remain, an ‘unemployed negativity.’ This unemployed negativity that remains, when all else has disappeared, is the radically unproductive excess of the system; it concerns all aspects of life that serve no purpose (desire, poetry, play, laughter) and are, therefore, in Bataille’s words, ‘sovereign.’ Sovereignty, in Bataille, is a means without end, a pure expenditure. Subverting the totalising system of Hegelian logic, Bataille’s unemployed negativity is “irreducible to any systems of knowledge, absolute spirit or completion (end of history)” and consists “of sovereign energies without purpose or limit which perpetually break any totality imagined in philosophical or theoretical terms.”²⁷ There remains negativity in excess of teleological action and, to reach forward to the accelerationist proposal, beyond waged work.

As should be clear, Blanchot himself engaged considerably with this notion of unemployed negativity in his own writing. *Désœuvrement* names—most often from a linguistic or literary viewpoint—the unproductive remnant here identified by Bataille. In an essay devoted to a study of Bataille entitled “Affirmation and the Passion of Negative Thought,” Blanchot discusses the idea that man’s future-oriented action, which, in “negating nature and negating [man] as natural being, makes him free through his bondage to work, and produces him in producing the world,” does not, however, transform into power *all* “the nothingness that he is.”²⁸ Blanchot concludes, with Bataille, that man is the being that does not exhaust his negativity in action. The realisation of this takes place as the *affir-*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁸ Maurice Blanchot, “Affirmation and the Passion of Negative Thought,” in: *idem*, *The Infinite Conversation*, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press 1993, pp. 202–210, here p. 205.

mation of radical negation, of negativity that has nothing to negate. Blanchot explains what is at stake in Bataille's approach:

A strange surplus. What is this excess that makes the conclusion ever and always unfinished...What is this 'possibility,' after the realization of every possibility, that would offer itself as the moment capable of reversing or silently withdrawing them all? When Georges Bataille responds to these questions in speaking of *the impossible*...he must be rigorously understood; it must be understood that possibility is not the sole dimension of our existence, and that it is perhaps given to us to 'live' each of the events that is ours by way of a double relation. We live it in one time as something we comprehend, grasp, bear and master...by relating it to some good or to some value...finally by relating it to Unity; we live it another time as something that escapes all employ and all end...as that which escapes our very capacity to undergo it, but whose trial we cannot escape. Yes, as though impossibility, that by which we are no longer able to be able, were waiting for us behind all that we live, think and say.²⁹

The assertion that "possibility is not the sole dimension of our existence," that there is in fact "another time," turns our attention once again to the reserve of *désœuvrement*. Similarly to Agamben's notion of potentiality, wherein "what is at issue...is nothing less than a mode of existence that is irreducible to actuality,"³⁰ Bataille's unemployed negativity also takes on an ontological status; it concerns a mode of being that is sovereign with respect to instrumentality. The impossibility "waiting for us behind all that we live, think and say" is what resists any

²⁹ Ibid., 207.

³⁰ Daniel Heller-Roazen, "Editor's Introduction," in: Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2000, pp. 1–26, here p. 14.

attempts at unified totality, whether in the form of the work of art or of community.

Nancy: Inoperative Community

It is in responding to impossibility in Bataille and its relation to the notion of community in its various Bataillean instantiations,³¹ that Jean-Luc Nancy, several decades later, re-engages with the political significance of this thought in *The Inoperative Community* (*La communauté désœuvrée*). Nancy's inoperative community is thought as a finite totality of relations among singular beings, which confounds any attempts to form itself around a shared essence. It resists any traditional identitarian conceptions of the notion of 'community.' Nancy rejects, on the one hand, notions of a lost fusional communion, an immanent society of harmonious accord and, on the other hand, a neoliberal individualism that he sees as a symptom of our experience of the dissolution of community. Instead, Nancy's community is a shared being-in-common in which what singular beings share is their limits, their finitude. Community, in this sense, is not something in which people are contained but which traverses them. *The Inoperative Community* is largely devoted to Bataille, who, Nancy argues, "is without a doubt the one who experienced first, or most acutely, the modern experience of community as neither work to be produced, nor a lost communion, but rather as space itself, and the spacing of the experience of the outside, of the outside-of-self."³²

³¹ Georges Bataille experimented with two forms of 'community': the occult *Acéphale* community and the later assemblage of disaffected intellectuals in the *Collège de sociologie*. Both communities were explicitly without leadership, acephalic or headless. See Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, "Introduction," in: Georges Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1997, pp. 1–34.

³² Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 19.

Bataille's thinking of community goes by way of his consideration of inner experience and communication. Inner experience, much like his negativity without employ, is "an experience which cannot be gathered, either within language or within the individual"³³ and in this way exposes thought to the very limits of experience, or what Blanchot calls the "limit-experience." Communication, in this regard, becomes not a transmission between stable subjects but a breach of the intact subjectivity of the one who communicates: "in inner experience there is the possibility of an experience of 'the profound lack of all true stability' that this flow of communication produces."³⁴

Bataille problematises conventional understandings of the terms 'inner,' 'community' and 'communication' by attending to this negativity in them. For him, communication becomes "the interruption and opening of community," the acknowledgement of the *impossibility* of communion that, paradoxically, makes community possible. The inner experience, in this light, is not an *internal* experience of the isolated subject. Blanchot describes the basis of communication in Bataille as an "exposure to death, no longer my own exposure but someone else's, whose living and closest presence is already the eternal and unbearable absence, an absence that the travail of deepest mourning does not diminish...a relation without relation, or without relation other than the incommensurable."³⁵ Echoing this idea, Nancy writes: "community does not sublimate the finitude it exposes. Community itself, in sum, is nothing but this exposition."³⁶ In light of this, the 'being-in-common' that characterises community for Nancy does not entail a higher substance or subject uniting individuals but, rather, attends to the *singularity* of beings—apart from any particular determinations

³³ Benjamin Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*, London: Pluto Press 2000, p. 50.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³⁵ Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, p. 25.

³⁶ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 26.

that would be ‘extracted, produced or derived’—in their very common finitude.

Nancy’s aim in *The Inoperative Community* is primarily political: he is responding to the ‘communist exigency’ proposed by Bataille. But the ‘communism’ to which Nancy, Bataille and Blanchot alike respond is one that “resists reduction to the ideology of communism as a support for state power or the power of the party.”³⁷ In a section of the book entitled ‘Literary Communism,’ we find the explicit expansion of what Blanchot and Bataille regard as the radicality of literature and communication into the thinking of community and the political. Nancy clarifies his use of the political, describing it as

a community ordering itself to the unworking of its communication, or destined to this unworking: a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing...undergoing, in whatever manner, the experience of community as communication: it implies writing. We must not stop writing, or letting the singular outline of our being-in-common expose itself.³⁸

It is in language, then, that each of these writers of community (and Agamben should be included here) locates the exposure to the singularity of being, to community and the impossible kernel that both resists and insists upon it. The impossible—as evidenced in Bataille’s ‘unemployed negativity’ and Blanchot’s *désœuvrement*—is the limit that both prevents the solidification of universal knowledge and propels the desire to attain it; the impossible “functions for community as a ‘real limit’ which both sets up a limit and which is a limit as an opening possibility.”³⁹

³⁷ Noys, *Georges Bataille*, p. 56.

³⁸ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 41.

³⁹ Noys, *Georges Bataille*, p. 58.

Nancy's concern is the relation of the community to *work* inasmuch as this seems to be what is at stake in contemporary politics of immanence. The liberal rhetoric of 'communitarianism' (identified as 'folk politics' by Srnicek and Williams) concerns the idea of a 'loss of community' and a need for its restoration by means of the work of inclusion and tolerance and the discourse of equality and human rights. The assumption of a lost communal existence, an originary unity that might be regained, is radically put into question in Nancy's text. By emphasizing *singularity* over identity, the being-in-common Nancy designates resists hypostasising the community. Rather, it attests to the shared negativity, or unworking, of being that would refuse this fusional work. Nancy turns to Blanchotian *désœuvrement* to elaborate his notion of community:

Community necessarily takes place in what Blanchot has called 'unworking,' referring to that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work, and which, no longer having to do either with production or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation and suspension. Community is made of the interruption of singularities, or of the suspension that singular beings *are*. Community is not the work of singular beings, nor can it claim them as its works, just as communication is not a work or even an operation of singular beings, for community is simply their being—their being suspended upon its limit. Communication is the unworking of work that is social, economic, technical and institutional.⁴⁰

Nancy's transposition of Blanchotian unworking into a thinking of political community provoked a response from Blanchot in the form of his *The Unavowable Community* (*La communauté*

⁴⁰ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 31.

inavouable). Some years later, Agamben too engaged in this critical re-thinking of community with his *The Coming Community*. In each work we are confronted with a thinking of being in its finitude and singularity, before beings are claimed by any particular determinations (“Whatever Being,” or being *such as it is*, in Agamben). What is exposed as the ‘authenticity’ of community is its *essential* unworking, that ensures it can never be entirely put to work.

The community theorised by Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy was revealed through literary communication, in the particular sense that they understood it. This experience of literary community meant that “something had taken place which, for a few moments and due to the misunderstanding peculiar to singular existences, gave permission to recognise the possibility of community established previously though at the same time posthumous: nothing of it would remain, which saddened the heart while also exalting it, like the very ordeal of effacement writing demands.”⁴¹ Community would be experienced as a rupture, as an ever-impossible possibility. The unworking at the heart of communication, exposed in the literary work, forecloses in advance the possibility of grounding a totalising work. The experience of writing as expressionless and impersonal, pure means simultaneously and paradoxically exposes a community bound by uncertainty and absolute contingency.

The Coming Politics: Affirming the Rupture

The radical absence of a foundation in this thought of community makes an examination of the *politics of désœuvrement* an exceptionally difficult task. Nevertheless, Blanchot insists that such an examination must be undergone: Bataille’s ‘communist

⁴¹ Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, p. 21.

exigency' demands a critical reconsideration of the terms communication, community and communism.

Blanchot's anarcho-communist political ontology is informed theoretically by his notion of unworking, as it is first developed in relation to the work of art. The concept of "world" that emerges in Heidegger's artwork essay undergoes a rigorous *de-worlding* in Blanchot's writing. The political danger of the Heideggerian world, as it is presented in "The Origin of the Work of Art," is its relation *through truth* to the setting up of a historical people. For Blanchot, rather, the artwork does not open or illuminate the world in the experience of *Ursprung* but leads only to an experience of its innermost unworking. Blanchot's thought denies any possibility of grounding a community, however contingent, in some essential truth.

In this light, what is laid bare in Blanchot's essays on literature cannot be understood independently of his political interventions: unworking names the reserve in the work—of both art and community—that is *in advance* hostile to totalising impulses. In language, the gap between the essential and crude language indicates an incommensurability between the world of instrumental language and its underlying impersonal and expressionless linguistic being. Poetic language, in its proximity to essential language, exposes a constitutive *désœuvrement* at the heart of language that is both its condition and interruption. In its pure *impartability*, before it imparts anything in particular, language is this inessentiality. Nancy's assertion that "community is presuppositionless" aligns community with this space of poetic language that can be experienced only in the singularity of an event (the event of reading or being together). Thus, unworking is not a method of dismantling or abstention but a constitutive element that cannot be overcome by work, similar to Bataille's 'unemployed negativity.' In a political context, unworking is also crucially not a power that could be opposed to other forms of power but, rather, a political gesture

of *pure means*, which affirms nothing but pure refusal. As pure means, this refusal is a potent-impotence or violent-non-violence with respect to the world of means and ends and thus ruptures attempts to conceive of it within this logic.

Contrary to communism's legacy, Blanchot's communism names an *event* through which traditional notions of communication and community come undone and what is exposed is the rupture of incommensurability that concerns our essential-inessential being. Thus, for Blanchot, literary writing is the event of an impersonal and plural speech that traces our communal being without letting it ultimately be designated, it is the writing of the disaster (*dés-astre*, an astral change). Blanchot's notions of communication, communism and unavowable community name this event that is traversed by its own unworking.

THE AESTHETICS OF RADICAL PASSIVITY

Kathrin Busch

The concept of passivity has been radicalised. Interestingly enough, approaches that no longer see passivity as a complement to activity, but rather as its prerequisite, have become more prominent recently. Instead of considering passivity negatively, as merely an interruption of whatever one is doing, it is increasingly being seen as *pathos*, i.e. as the fundamental capacity to be affected. Thus, Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas refer to ‘archi-passivity’ in an attempt to rehabilitate passivity’s potential as an exposure to the world that is not a subjective choice. Understood in this sense, passivity does not refer to voluntary breaks, resolute resistance, or strikes; rather, the states suffered through—such as powerlessness, sleeplessness, exhaustion, or sorrow—become the reference points for a new way of thinking about ‘radical’ passivity.

These states articulate not only the conditions for ethics, but also a form of resistance that can now function as a starting point for an affective politics.¹ Assuming that it is not just reflection that provides the necessary distance to the conditions of existence, hesitancy or failure can also supply the same kind of separation, making it possible to understand a passive emotional state as an expression of critique and rejection. Levels of sensitivity and the ability to be affected become a political field of its own right, particularly in an era when the factors determining existence are becoming increasingly invisible and fall short of our threshold of attention: when technology penetrates

¹ See, for example, Angelika Baier et al. (eds.), *Affekt und Geschlecht: Eine einführende Anthologie*, Vienna: Zaglossus 2014.

bodies; regulatory processes become imperceptible; the digital intersects with the physical; and the biopolitical forms of power have migrated into the organic. Furthermore, if we consider the extent to which today's forms of government are based on the promise of feasibility, and how calls for self-improvement and personal initiative function as techniques of government that operate by assigning personal responsibility and self-reliance to citizens, while at the same time depriving them of possible modes of action, then yet another argument for turning to states of radicalised passivity is won. Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that even though they are being rehabilitated, passive states are suffered. A mere vote for idleness, laziness, or taking breaks misses the impediment to passivity, namely: passion and its involuntariness, the unfeasible, suffering and the pathological. What is shattering about mourning, hopelessness, exhaustion, or sleeplessness cannot be mitigated. Therefore, these "bad feelings,"² which are normally rejected and considered pathological, are increasingly becoming a reference point for a type of 'aesthetic pathology' that is evolving into the foundation for a new concept of *pathos*.

Aesthetic Pathology

If we examine the metaphors of illness in art and ascertain the extent to which illness and health are referred to in art, we might conclude that pathology is a basic concept of aesthetics.

In fact, there is a history behind the concept of 'aesthetic pathology'³ that goes back to ancient philosophy; Baumgarten

² See Käthe von Bose, Ulrike Klöppel, Katrin Köppert, Karin Michalski and Pat Treusch (eds.), *I is for Impasse: Affektive Queerverbindungen in Theorie–Aktivismus–Kunst*, Berlin: b_books 2015.

³ See Dieter Kliche, "Ästhetische Pathologie: Ein Kapitel aus der Begriffsgeschichte der Ästhetik," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 42 (2000), pp. 197–229.

systematised it, but it lost meaning as Kantian philosophy asserted itself, and the concept migrated to the field of medicine. ‘Aesthetic pathology’ itself has been pathologised in a medical sense, since it determines that anything operating according to the logic of *pathos* must be ill. The fate of the concept of ‘aesthetic pathology’ is interesting to art, because the term can be used to make it clear that pathology—‘aesthetic pathology’—is about far more than an illness; it is about a broader understanding of *pathos*, whose limitations art opposes.

Derived from the Greek, pathology is rooted in the word *pathos*, which originally meant “experience.” “It means something that happens to us, or comes to us, without our doing anything.”⁴ *Pathos* initially described any form of suffering caused by the impact of something else.⁵ The difference between doing and suffering is at first free of any value judgement, in that both beautiful and terrible things can happen. Aside from that, the term is used to describe affects, in the sense of being affected; here, the regulation of affects becomes a major theme, not just for ethics but also for rhetoric and poetry, especially the theory of tragedy. In this case, ‘pathology’ means nothing more than the logic of evocation, as well as the moderation of affects and experiences. That the logic behind *pathos* takes on the meaning of pathologising—an imputation of illness—is due not least to the philosophical skepticism toward affect. The hierarchisation of human faculties, which rank sensibility (the ability to be affected) below intellectual capabilities, tends to pathologise *pathos*.

With this type of devaluation, conceptual knowledge is privileged over sensory knowledge, and reason is presented as an active asset. When *pathos* is pathologised, passions and affects are suspected of causing damage, while passivity is reduced to

⁴ See Bernhard Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung: Phänomenologie, Psychoanalyse, Phänomenotechnik*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 2002, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*

an illness. The *pathos* of reason, the violence and affect in thought, is denied, just as the possibilities of sensory knowledge are marginalised to the extent that they are derived from intuition and affect. All of this is still contained in the term ‘aesthetic pathology.’

Baumgarten, who systematised the concept of ‘pathology,’ talks about the rules “according to which emotions are evoked in speech, guided by rhetoric, and used poetically.”⁶ The connection between pathology (as a theory of the passions or emotions) and aesthetics (as sensory knowledge) aids in devising a theory concerning the awakening and moderation of affects in the arts. As a theory of emotions, aesthetic pathology is separate from a medical theory of affects, and later psychological and psychopathological theories, as well as from a practical kind of pathology that addresses the ethical questions regarding the diathesis of affects. In relation to this definition of pathology, Baumgarten has already probed the fields of aesthetics, medicine, and ethics, but without strictly distinguishing one from the others. With Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, aesthetic pathology was banned from the theory of aesthetic judgment, inasmuch as, according to Kant, pleasure in beauty or in the sublime is not fed by sensuality or affect, but springs from the free play of the faculties of imagination and understanding. Kant also removed the “pathology” from practical philosophy, when he defined freedom as the will’s independence “of coercion by sensuous impulses,”⁷ that is, the independence of sensual affection. Kant’s explanation of emotions found its way into the *Anthropology*, and the practical treatment of them shifted to medicine.

⁶ Kliche, “Ästhetische Pathologie,” p. 208. As such, it is relevant to medicine, because it gives an account of how violence can excite, suppress, or regulate emotions.

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Hazelton, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press 2010, p. 317 (A 534 /B 562).

If, however, pathology hibernates in art, as it were, functioning as a common metaphor in it—from Plato’s *Ion*, to Novalis and the decadent artists—, then the antithesis of the normal and healthy is sought in the pathological. At the same time, objections to the devaluation of the emotions in favour of reason are made by exaggerating the sensory and, through open, exposed sensibilities, what Nietzsche called *Erfindsamkeit* (a sense of inventiveness)⁸ is reclaimed: a “sensory knowledge” is gained from hypersensitivity.

What is more significant today, however, in contrast to the nineteenth century, is the second definition of “*pathos*,” namely, passivity. The metaphors of disease are used to react to its subordination to activity. Above all, in terms of incapacity, passivity becomes important to the production aesthetics, which in turn become relevant for a critique of the philosophical definition of thought and for another kind of epistemology derived from aesthetic pathology. Considering today’s politics of emotion, in which the production of affects must be regarded as a form of power, the heightening of sensitivity hardly seems like a form of resistance. Instead, what is considered *pathos* in the image of illness is the idea of radicalised passivity. Artists do not so much object to the normalisation of emotional life that results from society’s production and regulation of affects as they do to the exclusion of passivity, because it is equated with inability. Thus, it is possible to trace a line of thought about incapacity running from Antonin Artaud and Maurice Blanchot to Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, p. 117.

Artaud's Inability

"I suffer from a terrible mental illness. My thoughts desert me at every level."⁹ The twenty-seven-year-old Artaud wrote this on June 5, 1923, to Jacques Rivière, the publisher of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, who had refused to publish Artaud's poems. Artaud did not want to accept this rejection of his poetry and an exchange of letters between author and publisher followed, in which Artaud asserted the significance of incapacity for poetry and, above all, for thought.¹⁰

The "terrible mental illness" that can be seen in his poetry is not a reason to reject it, because an essential aspect of thought itself is confirmed in this *pathos*. In his poetry, he captured "the rarity of certain phenomena of a mental kind,"¹¹ which necessarily brings with it an imperfect form of writing. His incapacity, therefore, has nothing to do with a lack of mastery over language or insufficient understanding of the subject matter. In thought itself there is something that insists upon defying all ability. Even though he could have made the poems formally perfect, it would have missed the point, because they would no longer express the "deformation," the "destructive obstacles of thought."¹² Artaud argued, therefore, that a mind "that exists *literarily*,"¹³ would display this corrosive tendency and is morbidly not entirely itself, and this mental deviation from the self is considered painful. He wrote that he had presented "scraps," which had been torn from "absolutely nothing," in the absence of any inspiration:¹⁴

⁹ Antonin Artaud, "Correspondence with Jacques Rivière," in: idem, *Collected Works Vol. 1*, London: Calder Publishing 1999, pp. 27–45, here p. 27.

¹⁰ Over the course of this correspondence, Rivière suggested to Artaud that he publish the letters, rather than the poems he had sent. Artaud agreed, and the letters were published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* September 1924.

¹¹ Artaud, "Correspondence with Jacques Rivière," p. 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

This fragmentation of my poems, these formal sins, this perpetual abatement of my thoughts, must not be attributed to a lack of practice, a lack of mastery over the instrument I used, or to a lack of *intellectual development*; but to a major collapse of the soul, a kind of essential, yet simultaneously fleeting erosion of thought...¹⁵

The poems themselves testified to something about thought that both constitutes and destroys it.¹⁶ Artaud, therefore, objected to the notion that poetry should represent clear, finished ideas. Instead, he devoted himself to the process of thinking itself, which necessarily evolves from not knowing and incapacity, and is permeated by the slipping away of thought, as well as the expropriation of it.

While Rivière, the publisher, ascribed the imperfection of the poetry to a lack of precision and a lack of skill, Artaud wanted to expose an incapacity of thought that is not the result of a deliberate decision, but instead is something suffered that comes from an affect, a *pathos*, in which painful passion and passivity are inseparable. Sensitivity and extreme weakness go together. As if he were feeding off the unbearable, Artaud writes, "I am a person whose has suffered much in mind, and as such, I have the *right* to speak. I know what it is like inside [the mind]."¹⁷ And later: "I am an intellect that is not yet formed."¹⁸ What is found in the poems, therefore, is the process of forming or reforming the mind, as opposed to an already

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁶ See *ibid.* He calls this a "sort of blissful unconsciousness" (32). This does not refer to Hegel's unhappy consciousness, which fails to maintain sensory certainties. This incomprehensible unconscious is expressed in the decay of writing, and therefore springs from a different truth of the mind. Artaud writes this without any knowledge of Freud's texts, which he first encountered in 1924 through the Surrealists. André Breton contacted him after the correspondence with Rivière was published.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

constituted reason.¹⁹ The *pathos* Artaud is exposed to does not serve to cultivate a finer sensibility, but attacks the underlying conditions which make knowledge possible and mark the limits of its certainty. The “uncertain works”²⁰ remaining after this kind of destruction are not creations of the intellect, but its un-creations (*Ent-schöpfungen*).

Passions of Thought

What interests authors like Blanchot or Deleuze about this exchange of letters (and what Artaud’s correspondent completely misses) is that it is not about bringing into play an overflowing sensuality that does not want to submit to intellectual categories. Artaud does not juxtapose the aesthetic sensibility with the laws of the mind, as was common in nineteenth century aesthetics, which preferred the body, with its sensitivities and capacity for suffering, to the mind. Instead, as Deleuze in particular shows,²¹ he draws a different picture of thought—namely, the image of a kind of thinking that is itself affected by a *pathos*, a passion, and an incapacity. Thinking is not a power against whose violence sensuality must fight. Rather, thought itself is subject to a *pathos*. Art articulates a critique of philosophy and of a false concept of thought as a faculty. What philosophy is missing is its own passivity. Thought is subject to a compulsion, an involuntary force that compels thought: “its central collapse, its fracture, its own natural ‘powerlessness’”²² constituting thought. Deleuze reconstructs Artaud’s issue as “the terrible rev-

¹⁹ Artaud writes: “I can honestly say that I am not in this world.” He wanted to show himself in his “inexistence.” (Artaud, “Correspondence with Jacques Rivière,” p. 40).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²¹ See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, New York: Continuum 1994, p. 145.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 147. For more on this, see Raymond Bellour, “Das Bild des Denkens. Kunst oder Philosophie, oder darüber hinaus?,” in Peter Gente and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Deleuze und die Künste*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 2007, pp. 13–25.

elation of a thought without images,”²³ a mind that can no longer cling to ideas, that is deprived; yet it evolves from this deprivation and disempowerment to reach the limits of the conceivable, in order “to bring into being that which does not yet exist.”²⁴ Starting from affect and involuntary thought, aesthetic pathology manages to press forward toward other ways of thinking.

Even Blanchot, who comments on this correspondence in *The Book to Come* (*Le livre à venir*), underscores the passion of thought. Artaud was “in contact with something so grave that he cannot suffer its reduction.”²⁵ He makes it clear that art has an obligation to experience the impossible in thought. There is an incapacity upon which Artaud insists, or better, from which he suffers; it is not a personal failure but exists in tandem with thought.²⁶ Thinking moves along the edges, where it is extinguished. Artaud is concerned with this extinguishing.

Thought and suffering are secretly connected.²⁷ This connection does not mean that suffering—considered a lack or absence—allows for the elevation of thought. For Blanchot, Artaud opens up a different context. Suffering gives him a space in which suffering is an exploration of thinking. Just as one is trapped inside a painful feeling when it is unbearable, because nothing outside of it can be imagined, we exist inside of thought. Taken to the extreme, both do the same thing: pain, when it seems endless, becomes the element in which the sufferer exists. In the same way, thought is a milieu that we cannot merely decide to be in. Pain that has become absolute draws a true picture of thinking, inasmuch as it is not a faculty that can

²³ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 147.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁵ Maurice Blanchot, “Artaud,” in: idem, *The Book to Come*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2003, pp. 34–40, here p. 35.

²⁶ Derrida used this in a literary philosophical way. The incapacity Artaud refers to is the inevitable expropriation of language, which is at the same time the prerequisite for speech. See Jacques Derrida, “La parole soufflée,” in: idem, *Writing and Difference*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1978, pp. 169–195.

²⁷ See Blanchot, “Artaud,” p. 40.

be exercised, used, or omitted; rather, it is always there, and we exist inside of it. Leaving it in order to have an experience that is not yet upon the horizon of thought is impossible. Therefore, thought is expropriatory; it is not subject to negotiation, and it always amalgamates life. The only place where it is possible to understand thought without already being caught up in it is at the boundary of thought—in pain. Just as it is impossible to imagine something outside of extreme pain when one is within it, it is also impossible to imagine anything outside of thought. This, precisely, shows the entanglement and insurmountable passivity shared by suffering and thinking. Suffering, as Blanchot concludes, is another form of thought.²⁸

Resistance

Artaud's opposition to the faculty of thinking and his preference for a radical incapacity is more crucial today than the intensification of sensibility, because the form of power in contemporary society (as can be established in the wake of Michel Foucault) is not based on repressive forms of power, but on productive ones. This form of power targets the subject in its social, communicative, emotional, or creative abilities, which it is encouraged to continue improving. Today's strategies for normalisation do not aim at self-guidance, but at self-optimisation. Everything becomes a question of potential and ability. The authoritarian system employed by the contemporary 'con-

²⁸ Deleuze comments: "Between Heidegger and Artaud, Maurice Blanchot was able to give the fundamental question of what makes us think, what forces us to think, back to Artaud: what forces us to think is the 'inpower' [*impouvoir*] of thought, the figure of nothingness, the inexistence of a whole which could be thought. What Blanchot diagnoses everywhere in literature is particularly clear in cinema: on the one hand the presence of an unthinkable in thought, which would be both its source and barrier; on the other hand the presence to infinity of another thinker in the thinker, who shatters every monologue of a thinking self." (Gilles Deleuze, *The Time-Image. Cinema 2*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1989, pp. 167f.)

control society' no longer follows the categories of "allowed/forbidden," but has switched to "able/not able."²⁹ Aptitude is tested for the purpose of increasing it. This shift in the forms of subjectivisation is accompanied by the fact that it has become imperative to mobilise potential. The realisation of the self, the formation of expressive subjectivity—what used to be reserved for artists due to their special status—has become the norm.³⁰

Depression and other diseases of exhaustion have been diagnosed as the consequences of this imperative to activate.³¹ They must be regarded as 'social pathology,'³² which creates a form of power based on personal responsibility. The number of people suffering from depression is growing in proportion to the "decline in the type of disciplined individual."³³ Depressive illnesses respond to the appeals made to the subject's ability, to his "personal achievements, freedom of choice, personal responsibility, and the individual initiative,"³⁴ all of which take aim at the individual's utilisation of their own personality. Depression, therefore, is the disease of the subject condemned to self-realisation. It displays the "conflicts and contradictions... that accompany the process of generally increasing the value of autonomy."³⁵ Illnesses related to exhaustion make it possible for society to perceive its own changing demands for competence and autonomy.³⁶ The morbidly exhausted person repre-

²⁹ Andreas Gelhard, *Kritik der Kompetenz*, Zurich: Diaphanes 2011, p. 147.

³⁰ See Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität: Zum Prozess gesellschaftlicher Ästhetisierung*, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2012, p. 220.

³¹ See Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2010.

³² Alain Ehrenberg, "Depression: Unbehagen in der Kultur oder neue Formen der Sozialität," in: Juliane Rebentisch and Christoph Menke (eds.), *Kreation und Depression: Freiheit im gegenwärtigen Kapitalismus*. Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos 2010, p. 52.

³³ Ehrenberg, "Depression," p. 53.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 55. Ehrenberg concludes that the real task of politics today is to empower autonomy in everyone. Autonomy has become a social issue. It is possible to eliminate equality through the ability to make use of opportunities.

sents incapacity in the age of seemingly unlimited possibilities, and its failure is an indication of a compulsion that Alain Ehrenberg calls “automatic obedience,”³⁷ to which the subject is subordinate these days. This kind of failure is suffered involuntarily, and it is in no way experienced as a form of resistance. Nevertheless, it is no coincidence that the aesthetics of exhaustion, passivity, or hesitation provide the current metaphors of illness in art.

Turning to Agamben, this can be formulated somewhat more precisely, as he asserts that the sense of alienation we are exposed to today is not an alienation from the products of our own work, but the alienation from our own incapacities. Thus, we are not divorced from our own abilities, but from our own inabilities, as can be seen in the social taboo of failure or its pathologisation (known as “burnout” or depression), when people are forced into the false belief that they are personally to blame for their failures.

Agamben’s theorem—that we are not separated from the products of our work, but from our own inabilities—explains why today’s disease metaphors in art feed upon inability, and ‘aesthetic pathologies’ consist of exhaustion,³⁸ sleeplessness,³⁹ or hesitation.⁴⁰ Their purpose is to point out the rejection of inability. Artistic activity is permeated by inability. Artistic production includes the experience of not being able to control things, for which no artistic or creative techniques can compensate. It follows a different logic of action, in which partial non-mastery and the potential deviation from original intentions, or the possibility of being driven by them, all make up an essential aspect of activity. In the gap between the intention and

³⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

³⁸ See Gilles Deleuze, “The Exhausted,” *SubStance* 24 (1995), pp. 3–28.

³⁹ See, for example, Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press 1989, pp. 163ff. and 264ff.

⁴⁰ See Joseph Vogl, *On Tarrying*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2011.

its realisation, the impossible enters into art. The motifs of *pathos* suggest that it is not genius, but the rejection of controllability, that in essence comprises the resistance of art.

In his early aesthetic theory, the book *The Man Without Content*, Agamben complained that, as philosophical aesthetics changed from a production aesthetic to a reception aesthetic, this law that there is a certain kind of inability in ability has become unrecognisable.⁴¹ Instead, a fantasy about ability also prevails in aesthetics, which he describes elsewhere as follows:

Separated from his impotentiality, deprived of the experience of what he can not do, today's man believes himself capable of everything, and so he repeats his jovial 'no problem,' and his irresponsible 'I can do it,' precisely when he should instead realize that he has been consigned in unheard of measure to forces and processes over which he has lost all control. He has become blind not to his capacities but to his incapacities, not to what he can do but what he cannot, or can not, do.⁴²

Agamben thinks that this "estrangement from impotentiality"⁴³ makes humans poor and unfree, because at the same time they lose their opportunity for resistance.⁴⁴

Hence, art privileges the various figures of inability—such as exhaustion, sleeplessness, or procrastination—because they

⁴¹ See Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1999, p. 5.

⁴² Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2011, p. 44.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴⁴ Compare this to Adorno, for whom failure takes up so much room (in the *Minima Moralia*, for instance), that it becomes a way out itself. Adorno writes that "completed negativity, once it comes fully into view, shoots into the mirror-writing of its opposite." (Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, London: Verso 1987, p. 247) For a comparison of Agamben and Adorno, see Eva Geulen, "Wirklichkeiten, Möglichkeiten und Unmöglichkeiten: Zum Problem der Lebensform bei Giorgio Agamben und Theodor W. Adorno," *MLN* 125 (2010), pp. 242–260.

block the actualisation of ability. They create distance from the execution of an action, and thus make us aware that the inability to act and failure are also part of action. They also insist that the production of art no longer has anything to do with practices that can be mastered but that, in the process of creating works of art, the artist must expose himself to extremely fragile processes that cannot be completely controlled. Here, the processes of making art are outstanding figures of inability. For the person who creates it, the work of art, as Agamben says, “becomes an increasingly uncanny experience” and even a matter of “life and death,” in which “spiritual health” is at stake.⁴⁵ In the experience of the producer, the “*promesse de bonheur*” (promise of happiness) in art is accompanied by the danger of contaminating their own life.⁴⁶ In this respect, therefore, art is not a question of possibility, to the extent that one wants to understand this as a question about the subject and its ability.⁴⁷ Rather, art is an outstanding form of the impossible. In this sense, the pathologies in art serve as a “dispositive of powerlessness,”⁴⁸ which protect against those forceful injunctions to utilise one’s own abilities.

⁴⁵ Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Here, Agamben quotes van Gogh: “Well, as for my own work, I risk my life in it and my sanity has already half melted away in it,” and Rilke: “Works of art are always the product of a risk one has run, of an experience taken to its extreme limit, to the point where man can no longer go on.” (Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, p. 5)

⁴⁷ See Christoph Menke, “Das Kunstwerk: zwischen Möglichkeit und Unmöglichkeit,” in: idem, *Die Kraft der Kunst*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 2013, pp. 17–40, here p. 22.

⁴⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the College de France*, New York: Columbia University Press 2007.

THE ARTIST AS WHISTLEBLOWER: CARTOGRAPHY, CAPITALISM AND COGNITIVE MAPPING

Peer Illner

In contrast to the elaborations of alternative modernities,¹ post-modern hybrid-identities and minority politics that have characterised contemporary art and popular culture in the last decades, the recent years have witnessed a surprising return to what one might call an aesthetics of social totality. If art production in the 1990s was primarily concerned with the particular and the aleatory,² artists today often attempt to represent abstract social relations and systems, a concern that one is tempted to associate with the counter-cultural art practices of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, according to a recent article by Alberto Toscano, “the past years have witnessed [...] a veritable efflorescence in efforts to provide models, diagrams or narratives that might allow us to orient ourselves around the world-system.”³ When tracing this totalising aesthetic in contemporary art galleries and in popular culture, it becomes

¹ *Altermodern* was the title of a 2009 exhibition by Nicolas Bourriaud at Tate Britain that explored postcolonial themes and sought to unearth and give room to non-Western accounts of modernity.

² The YBAs, in particular Tracy Emin with her interest in the biographical, can be seen as paradigmatic for contemporary art’s interest in the individual, the personal and the anecdotal. In the realm of theory, this trend is epitomised by Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics, which locates the role of art in the production of ephemeral social situations. Rather than any kind of totality, art for Bourriaud is hyperspecific, operating “at the hub of social infra-thinness” or occupying “that minute space of daily gestures”. Any aspiration of art to be relevant outside its own specific context is confidently abandoned. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: Les Presses du réel 2002, p. 17.

³ Alberto Toscano “Seeing it whole: staging totality in social theory and art,” *The Sociological Review* 60 (2012), pp. 64–83, here p. 64.

evident that the geographic imaginary of mapping has proven extremely fruitful for this undertaking. From Allan Sekula's photo-documentaries of the global container trade⁴ and the cartographies of Mark Bradford, to the psychogeographies of Iain Sinclair⁵ or the networked entanglements of the TV series *THE WIRE*, it seems undeniable that "critical representations of society increasingly appear as mediated by cartography."⁶

Critical art theory has greeted the 'cartographic turn' enthusiastically, as revelatory, politically subversive, and providing of orientation in globally confused times.⁷ Two theses undergird the critical endorsement of artistic cartographies that both take Fredric Jameson's writings on late capitalism as their point of departure: first, the view that our current geopolitical conjuncture has become increasingly difficult to grasp due to its high degree of abstraction.⁸ Second, the belief that our political overview has become obfuscated due to a concentration of power in evermore synergised and secretive enterprises of politics, business and technology. Openly critical and incendiary, contemporary cartographies have been heralded as unmasking the

⁴ In his project *Fish Story*, Allan Sekula documents international container shipping as one of the key sites of contemporary logistical capitalism. See Alan Sekula, *Fish story*, Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag 2002.

⁵ Among others, Iain Sinclair's work can be seen to have fundamentally triggered the contemporary interest in psychogeography. In his book *Hackney, the Rose-Red Empire*, he develops his method of mental cartography through extended walks in different locations in London. See Iain Sinclair, *Hackney, the Rose Red Empire*, London: Penguin Books 2009.

⁶ Toscano, "Seeing it whole," p. 65.

⁷ The theoretical enthusiasm also incorporates a renewed practical interest in the practices of mapping. Both Queen Mary University in the UK and the University of North Carolina recently launched counter cartography collectives, which combine geographical mapping technologies with political activism. See <http://countermappingqmary.blogspot.co.uk/> (accessed 25/1/20).

⁸ The idea that late modernity is accompanied by an increasing loss of orientation is one of Fredric Jameson's fundamental theses. In particular, the development of finance capital massively subverted "the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organise its immediate surroundings perceptually, and to cognitively map its position in a mappable external world." See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984), pp. 53–92.

hidden network of distinct local units of power and their global relations. In this context, they have been interpreted as answering Jameson's call for an aesthetic of 'cognitive mapping,' able to unravel the tangled socio-economic threads and situate both artist and spectator productively within the broken totality of a post-industrial and neoliberal world-system.⁹

The following essay asks if the widespread 'cartographic turn' is actually successful in providing a functional 'cognitive map' of current geopolitical concerns. It argues that the information design aesthetic of artistic cartographies falls short of attaining the epistemic goals of cognitive mapping for the three following reasons: firstly, because artistic cartographies presume a straightforward expression of data as knowledge. They thereby confuse collected data with constituted information and ignore the translation process that is necessary to extract epistemic value from any data set. Secondly, because by emphasising abstract knowledge, cartographic practices neglect art's affective dimension that powerfully complements or even firstly triggers a work's cognitive charge. Thirdly, because the investigative dramaturgy of artistic cartographies presumes that power always operates in secret, which is not necessarily the case today. After elaborating these theses in relation to two paradigmatic artistic positions, the article concludes by suggesting to approach cognitive mapping from poetics rather than from cartography.

⁹ In their discussions of contemporary artistic cartographies, Alberto Toscano as well as Brian Holmes and Alexander Galloway unanimously refer to Fredric Jameson as their key theoretical reference. See Brian Holmes, "Network Maps, Energy Diagrams," <https://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2007/04/27/network-maps-energy-diagrams/> (accessed 25/1/20); Alexander Galloway, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28.7–8 (2011), pp. 85–102.

Cognitive Mapping

To begin, let us ask: what is the impetus behind the contemporary aesthetics of social totality? From where does the desire for a new socio-economic realism draw its force? As Fredric Jameson is a key reference for the art-theoretical debate around artistic cartographies, he provides an important starting point to understand the revived interest in the aesthetic of mapping. For Jameson—arguing along a Marxist trajectory—the need for a re-invigorated representational realism arises out of a growing schism between phenomenal everyday experience and its structuring economic conditions, leading to an increased difficulty in understanding global economic processes. In an essay from 1988, Jameson reflected on the “desire called cognitive mapping,” an as yet unformulated representational form, able to chart an increasingly complex socio-political environment.

Drawing on both Ernest Mandel’s three-stage model of capitalism as well as on Kevin Lynch’s urbanism, Jameson constructs a timeline of the mode of production’s increasing spatial abstraction from its material base. Market capitalism, Jameson argues, still maintained a strong grounding in the local. Its spatial analogue is the grid-form, which assigns people, commodities and interactions a fixed and proximate place. For Jameson, both Taylorisation, as the rigorous, scientific management of labour, as well as the disciplinary technologies in factories, barracks and prisons analysed by Michel Foucault, provide the key touchstones for Mandel’s first stage of capitalist development. Jameson argues that market capitalism did

probably not involve problems of figuration so acute as those we will confront in the later stages of capitalism, since here, for the moment, we witness that familiar process long generally associated with the Enlightenment, namely, the desacralization of the world [...] the slow colonization of use

value by exchange value, the “realistic” demystification of the older kinds of transcendent narratives...the standardization of both subject and object.¹⁰

Classical market capitalism is a phase in which processes are newly embedded rather than uprooted, corresponding to fixed productive spaces in which bodies are disciplined and assigned a place. For Jameson, it is only with imperial capitalism—the next step of Mandel’s three-stage model—that the problem of mapping first appears. Following the European colonial expansion, the economic reality of cities like Paris or London is for the first time determined not at home but abroad.

Jameson describes a widening gap between the dominant aesthetic forms of European realism—characterised by the localism of Balzac or Flaubert—and the reality of 19th century life in Britain and France that is increasingly determined globally, by the connections between the metropole and the colony. While individual life continues to be lived as if it were local, a world economy begins to take shape that ties this experience to the threads of colonial exploitation that remain invisible in the homeland. Jameson sees the artistic incapacity to express this fissure as symptomatic of a more fundamental epistemological problem, relating to the widening gap between the local and the global:

At this point the phenomenological experience of the individual subject, traditionally, the supreme raw materials of the work of art becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world, a fixed camera view of a certain section of London or the countryside or whatever. But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place.

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in: Carey Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press 1988, pp. 347–361, here p. 348.

The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people.¹¹

No stranger to structuralist conceptual acrobatics, Jameson likens this gap between phenomenal experience and determining structure to Lacan's theory of the Real as an absent but structuring totality. For Lacan, the Real is the pre-individual realm of experience that escapes and resists symbolisation in language. Once the subject enters into the Symbolic, the Real becomes forever inaccessible. However, it continues to exert the strongest of influences, becoming the foil against which all our fantasies and wishes must necessarily fail. Jameson adopts the Lacanian Real to designate the world economy as the "absent totality," invisible but felt, that unites individual and collective life. Echoing Lacan, he repeatedly emphasises the properly "unrepresentable," "unthinkable," and "unimaginable" nature of global capital. With finance capital, Mandel's third stage of capitalism, the problem of unmappability becomes more exacerbated and gains a new quality, as money, once detached from its material standard, becomes "to a second degree abstract."¹²

Even though Jameson insists on the structural unrepresentability of the totality, he nevertheless delineates a positive concept of cognitive mapping to provide political orientation and reconnect the local experiential level, at least minimally, with its global determinants. In another reference to Lacan, Jameson describes the object of cognitive mapping as

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern*, London/New York: Verso 1998, p. 142.

the thing itself, namely, how the local items of the present and the here-and-now can be made to express and to designate the absent, unrepresentable totality; how individuals can add up to more than their sum; what a global or world system might look like after the end of cosmology.¹³

Betraying a good dose of Leninist paternalism in his belief in art's educational mission, Jameson conceives of cognitive mapping as a novel aesthetic pedagogy with the global space of transnational capital as its object. As "most people" find themselves at a loss to comprehend the increasing complexity of our geopolitical situation, cognitive mapping becomes a much-needed "pedagogical political culture, which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system."¹⁴ This has been called the orienting impulse of cognitive mapping,¹⁵ that, according to Ian Buchanan, "both maps and critiques the various flows that constitute our world situation."¹⁶ Arguing that market capitalism's 'grid' and imperial capitalism's 'territory' have today been replaced by the network, Jameson argues that contemporary cognitive mapping must disentangle and reduce the network's complexity. The task is one of re-centring the decentred subject, of addressing "the problem of the view from above, and of the invention of new forms of representation for what it is properly impossible to think or represent."¹⁷

We can now see why Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping has held such widespread appeal for contemporary artistic

¹³ Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1992, p. 10.

¹⁴ Jameson, "Postmodernism," p. 92.

¹⁵ Brian Ott and Gordana Lazic, "The Pedagogy and Politics of Art in Postmodernity: Cognitive Mapping and The Bothersome Man," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99.3 (2013), pp. 259–282, here p. 263.

¹⁶ Ian Buchanan, *Fredric Jameson: Live Theory*, New York: Continuum 2006, p. 73.

¹⁷ Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 2.

practice. It endows artists with the important task not only of aesthetic innovation but also of political orientation. Connecting to a Marxist lineage from Lukács over Brecht to Gramsci, Jameson defines political art's goal with Cicero's formula "to teach, to delight and to move."¹⁸ While Jameson doesn't claim that the social totality was ever properly transparent, he argues, in Tyson Lewis' words, that, "there is [a particular] problem of mapping the totality of social relations within the disorienting spatial displacements of late capitalism."¹⁹ However, Jameson remains vague on how to create such a new 'political realism.' Moreover, it is unclear whether the difficulty of an adequate representational form is ahistorical and essential or, rather, the result of a specific historical transformation within capitalism.

His reference to Lacan suggests a more structural barring of the possibility to represent the 'real' world economy, whereas his use of Mandel's periodisation of capitalism points to a more subtle, historical argument. It is perhaps because of this vagueness that cartographic practitioners have so quickly appropriated the discourse of cognitive mapping. It does appear that cartography, with its attention both to particular entities and their surrounding environment, can serve as an excellent tool to connect the local to the global and present in-depth knowledge of geopolitical links. Writing on the cartographic turn in the social sciences, Bruno Bosteels has characterised the map as a productive embodiment of *Naturlandschaft* and *Kulturlandschaft*, as the "interface between nature and culture, earth and territory."²⁰

¹⁸ Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," p. 347.

¹⁹ Tyson Lewis, "Too Little, Too Late: Reflections on Fredric Jameson's Pedagogy of Form," *Rethinking Marxism* 21.3 (2009), pp. 438–452, here p. 444.

²⁰ Bruno Bosteels, "Misreading of Maps: The Politics of Cartography in Marxism and Poststructuralism," in: Stephen Barker (ed.), *Signs of Change: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern* Albany: State University of New York Press 1996, pp. 109–139, here p. 117.

Information Aesthetics I: Bureau d'Etudes

These links are what the Parisian artist duo Bureau d'Etudes attempt to show in their work. Bureau d'Etudes are known for their large-scale mural cartographies, charting, in their own words, "contemporary political, social and economic systems."²¹ Showing at galleries worldwide, the Bureau's maps stage the intricate connections between local politics, global corporations, the business elite, and a variety of institutions. Carrying titles such as *Gouvernement des Medias*, *Gouvernement Financier*, or *Gouverner les Ressources*, their works are intensely research-based and often yield a broad scope of historical knowledge, as well as detailed information about global power networks. *Petropol*, a map from 2007, for example, presents a timeline of the worldwide oil trade from 1901 to 2006. Its main axes represent British oil interests and American oil interests respectively and chart the gradual takeover of the latter by the former in the course of the twentieth century.

Branching off from the main timeline, text boxes inform the viewer of the back room deals of Western oil tycoons. The 1928 Achnacarry meeting of executives from BP, Royal Dutch/Shell and Exxon, in which world cartel prices were fixed, is charted, as well as the Red Line agreement from the same year that coordinated joint Western efforts in the Middle East. Detailing the gradual subsumption of the oil-rich Middle East under Western power through corporate deals, political backing (for example, of the Ayatollah Khomeini) as well as the Gulf wars, the map reveals the Western influence in the Middle East and the dynamics of oil pricing. Parallel events, such as the Kyoto agreement or the Soviet Glasnost, are also mentioned and connected to the main timeline through arrows of varying size. The larger the arrow, the more important the event, relative to the global oil

²¹ Bureaudetudes.org/about (accessed 25/1/20).

trade. The intention of the Bureau's works is investigative and unmasking. "Revealing what normally remains invisible and contextualising apparently separate elements within a bigger whole, these visualizations of interests and co-operations re-symbolize the unseen and hidden,"²² they write on their website.

Due to this pedagogical emphasis, their work has often been cited as exemplary in recent critical-theoretical returns to Jameson's aesthetic of cognitive mapping. Writing on the use of cartography for the purposes of political resistance and social movements, Brian Holmes has praised the educational potential of the Bureau's maps that, according to him, combine a didactic emphasis on transmitting technical knowledge about the links between power centres with an activist drive, enabling anti-capitalist resistance:

These maps aspire to be cognitive tools, distributing as broadly as possible the kind of specialized information that was formerly confined to technical publications. Yet on another level they are meant to act as subjective shocks, energy potentials, informing the protest-performances as they are passed from hand to hand, deepening the resolve to resist as they are utilized in common or alone.²³

Similarly, Alexander Galloway has praised the "complex and variegated" vocabulary of the Bureau's works that "denude the apparatuses of power by showing the deep interconnectedness of business, government and the elite."²⁴ The Bureau d'Etudes is evidently successful in convincing critics of its works' critical educational potential. They achieve this authoritative effect by

²² Ibid.

²³ Brian Holmes, "Maps for the Outside: Bureau d'Etudes, or the Revenge of the Concept," in: Ursula Biemann (ed.), *Geography and the Politics of Mobility*, Cologne: Generali Foundation/König Books 2003, pp. 164–194, here p. 167.

²⁴ Galloway, "Unrepresentable," p. 96.

emulating the information aesthetics of the business world, including flow charts, timelines, and business schedules. In this, they rely on the link between data visualisation and cognitive knowledge that Alon Friedman has elaborated as follows:

The communication paradigm of visualisation is often associated with capturing complex data structures found in computer systems, but the term is also affiliated with the domain of human cognition process that gives us accessibility and tracking of information and knowledge.²⁵

However, there is no necessary reason why assembled data on the oil trade should appear in this form. Nor is the visual format of a timeline better suited than others to transmit knowledge on networked political activities. The paradigm of information aesthetics presumes a direct link between collected data and dominant regimes of representing this data. What it thereby denies is the translation process, required to transcribe collected data into any visual format. This point can be illustrated through Alexander Galloway's recent distinction between 'data' and 'information.' Claiming that "data have no necessary visual form,"²⁶ Galloway argues that collected data is first and foremost non-visual and quantitative rather than visual and qualitative. Data is numerical and therefore not essentially visual at all, which complicates the easy conflation that happens when the two terms merge in data-visualisation. In order to appear in a visual form, data needs to be translated into what Galloway calls 'information,' meaning tangible and contextualised knowledge. In data visualisation, this happens in the form of an illustration, a chart, a timeline, or a graph. While we

²⁵ Alon Friedman, "Mark Lombardi's visualisation discovery," in: Michael Hohl (ed.), *Making visible the invisible: art, design and science in data visualisation*, Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Eprints 2012, pp. 12–16, here p. 12.

²⁶ Galloway, "Unrepresentable," p. 88.

are surrounded by a constant stream of data visualisations, these are mere aestheticisations, that—rather than displaying pure data—actually show the translation of raw data into an aesthetic form beyond a purely mathematical value. Galloway thus correctly concludes: “any data visualisation is first and foremost a visualisation of the conversion rules themselves, and only secondarily a visualisation of raw data.”²⁷

By highlighting the constructed nature of data visualisations over and above their taken-for-granted value as neutral carriers of information, we can draw attention to their strong affective capacity. Wherever data charts, maps, and diagrams appear, they have come to symbolise scientific authority, in-depth research and quantitative accuracy. If we see data visualisations as a translation machine that renders numerical data visible according to specific and pre-determined conversion rules, we see that their authoritative affect is a performative effect of the visualisation enterprise. While information aesthetics do have their very own affective power in producing ‘objectivity,’ ‘neutrality’ and ‘scientificity,’ this is something that is seldom exploited artistically and rarely enters the theoretical debate. Aesthetic cartographies are thus primarily interpreted as cognitive and not as aesthetic objects. As such, they are evaluated on their delivery of factual information, while their aesthetic properties—which are the actual carriers of their knowledge-effect—are ignored.

In this neglect of the affective dimension of cartographies, we can see a strong departure from Jameson’s emphasis on cognitive mapping as an aesthetic, meaning sensible form. As Jameson’s treatment of European realism—particularly the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht—shows, aesthetics must be a battle for ways of knowing as well as feeling, as artistic media communicate first and foremost on an affective level. Keenly aware

²⁷ Ibid.

of this in his writings on cognitive mapping, Jameson moved from a discussion of representation, as the possibility for a rational rendering of an invisible truth, to a definition of figuration as the possibility to combine cognitive knowledge with “the tangible medium of daily life in vivid and experiential ways.”²⁸ The contemporary cartographic turn seems to have given up on the development of ‘figurative’ innovation and instead turns to the pre-existing image catalogue of information visualisations for its hackneyed didactic effect.

Information Aesthetics II: Mark Lombardi

Besides the pedagogical possibility of providing orientation in a confusing world, another reason why artistic cartographies have been the source of much recent enthusiasm is their revelatory pathos. A case in point is the reception history of Mark Lombardi’s large-scale drawings of international business and power networks. Similarly research-based as the work of Bureau d’Etudes, Lombardi’s maps merge different styles of information aesthetics into complex and intricate visualisations of unexpected links between politicians, bankers, and businessmen. The drawing *Oliver North, Lake Resources of Panama and Iran-Contra Operation*, for instance, traces the illegal U.S. arms trading with Iran during the Ronald Reagan administration and charts how funds from this operation went into financing anti-communist militias in Nicaragua. The various actors involved—individuals such as Oliver North, the alleged owner of the bank account that was the vehicle for the money transfers, corporations such as American arms manufacturers, as well as entire nations states (Iran, Nicaragua and Costa

²⁸ Fredric Jameson, “Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: Dog Day Afternoon as a Political Film,” *College English* 38.8 (1977), pp. 843–859, here p. 845.

Rica)—serve as nodal points that are connected through a network of lines and arrows. Working in a three-step process from collecting data in the media, organising the collected information on index cards, and finally drawing the diagram, Lombardi mimics a whole range of styles from “business charts, panorama painting and Conceptualism.”²⁹

In contrast to the almost exclusively favourable reaction towards the Bureau d’Etudes, Lombardi’s diagrams have polarised critical attention. Strikingly, however, the debate on Lombardi’s work revolved almost entirely around the degree of accuracy of his application of data visualisation to politics. On the side of the admirers, Alberto Toscano has praised Lombardi’s documentation of “collusion and covert activity.”³⁰ Similarly, Robert Hobbs, the curator of Lombardi’s first major retrospective, has stated the artist made “the first art to visualise the new global order that has seemed to be one of the key resources of power in the late twentieth century and thereafter.”³¹ While the theorist Ryan Bigge has claimed that “Lombardi’s diagrams make abstract movements of capital concrete and comprehensible.”³²

On the critical side, the theorist and fellow artist Trevor Paglen has critiqued Lombardi for “producing beautiful images whose cognitive consistency is as tenuous as the pencil-drawn lines between the named nodes of collusion.”³³ Writing on the relationship between the arts and paradigms of data visualisation, Alon Friedman has equally expressed disappointment at the absence of cognitive depth in Lombardi’s diagrams:

²⁹ Ryan Bigge, “Making the Invisible Visible: The Neo-Conceptual Tentacles of Mark Lombardi,” *Left History* 10.2 (2005), pp. 127–134, here p. 127.

³⁰ Toscano, “Seeing it whole,” p. 75.

³¹ Robert Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi: Global Networks*, New York: Independent Curators International 2004, p. 20.

³² Bigge, “Making the Invisible Visible,” p. 128.

³³ Cited in Toscano, “Seeing it whole,” p. 76.

The majority of his (Lombardi's) concepts did not share any common schemes or themes [...] The list did not provide us with any information about personal job positions at that time, geographical locations, or the personal involvement in the frauds or background ideology.³⁴

The lack of detail concerning the actors supposedly involved in conspiratorial activity has caused even admirers such as Bigge to note the at times obfuscating power of Lombardi's information aesthetics, that risks veering off into a kind of fetishism of data visualisation: "Clusters of activity, like meteorological disturbances, emanate from dozens of nodes [...] Chronological progression is expressed [...] through long horizontal lines that bisect twirls of intrigue."³⁵ The interpretation of Lombardi's works as actual investigative detective work found its epitome when, after 9/11, two FBI agents requested to see some of Lombardi's maps in the New York Metropolitan Museum in the hope of gaining a more thorough insight into the obscure dynamics of Al Qaeda.³⁶

Echoing Jameson's argument about the increasing opacity of local-global ties, for both Lombardi's critics as well as his admirers, the task of the artist is to follow the lines, leading from local structures to big business at the international level. Reflecting a common cultural trope that fuels countless conspiracy narratives, spy novels as well as the contemporary impact of whistleblowing figures such as Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, Lombardi's reception history betrays the idea that power is a secretive agent, spreading its tentacles in hiding. While Jameson himself was generous towards conspiracy theory—which he characterises as "the poor person's cog-

³⁴ Friedman, "Lombardi's Discovery," pp. 12, 15.

³⁵ Bigge, "Making the Invisible Visible," pp. 128, 130.

³⁶ This anecdote is recounted by Toscano in "Seeing it whole," p. 75.

nitive mapping”³⁷ and as an “unconscious collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century”³⁸—I suggest we be more harsh with the good intentions of cartographic practitioners. While there certainly exist back room deals between powerful media moguls, the business elite, and corrupt politicians, the thesis that power holds a dark secret that needs to be revealed can be disproven today.

The media theorist Jodi Dean has recently presented a forceful argument in this direction:

The politics of the public sphere has been based on the idea that power is always hidden and secret. But clearly this is not the case today. We know full well that corporations are destroying the environment, employing slaves, holding populations hostage to their threats and move their operations to locales with cheap labour. All sorts of horrible political processes are perfectly transparent today.³⁹

While it is thus laudable to attempt to reveal those activities that are purposefully kept in the background, revelatory artistic practices tend to give an overly simplified picture of global power by relying on the sensationalising thrust of exposing ‘classified’ information. In a conversation with the WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, Slavoj Žižek has argued against the effectiveness of supposedly ‘revelatory’ information: “What did we really learn? Isn’t it clear that every power in order to function, [needs] to have a certain digression between what you say and what you don’t say?”⁴⁰ While the spy novel imaginary of

³⁷ Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” p. 357.

³⁸ Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 3.

³⁹ Jodi Dean, *Publicity’s Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2002, pp. 173f.

⁴⁰ Slavoj Žižek in conversation with Julian Assange, 02.07.2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1Xmo8uTSDQ>, Minute 18:58 (accessed 25/1/20).

power as a secret agent has dominated the late twentieth century, power in the twenty-first century often operates brazenly and transparently.

Notwithstanding the radical intentions of artists of the whistleblowing type, it is thus possible to see the clichéd figure of the paranoid conspiracy theorist operating in the artistic cartographies discussed above. Suspecting hidden power schemes to operate beneath the visible layer of everyday politics, they set out to visualise these connections and expose them to critique. The intended effect is to spur the viewer into action, producing an activist jolt in the audience by revealing the scandalous workings of power. Laudable as this project may be, for Alexander Galloway:

This would be a noble pursuit if it were not demonstrably false: the photos from the Abu Ghraib prison were released, or they were not (and nothing changed); we grieved and we protested in the proper channels, or we did not (and still nothing changed).⁴¹

Only One Image

Rather than evaluating Lombardi and Bureau d'Etudes' success or failure to adequately represent the entanglements of political power, I want to flip the question and interrogate the ubiquity of data visualisation in the aesthetic field. When sampling contemporary artistic representations of the local-global ties of politics and business, one has to conclude that they all adopt and take for granted the generic network-form. Why is it that art that wants to be political is so keen to reproduce the information aesthetics readily used by power-holders worldwide?

⁴¹ Galloway, "Unrepresentable," p. 95.

Is the desire to expose the workings of power by providing 'information' really the most effective way for artists to offer critique? More importantly, does a counter-map really disclose any information at all? Alexander Galloway has critiqued the uniform nature of information aesthetics, claiming that "there is but one image, from beginning to end, across the decades, a massive repetition of the same and nothing more: only one visualisation has ever been made of an information network."⁴² Let me quote Galloway at length:

The hub-and-spoke aesthetic predominates. Minuscule branching structures cluster together forming intricate three-dimensional spaces. Nodes are connected by links. Small capillaries merge into even greater arteries fabricating massive hierarchies governing flows and prohibitions on flows. Yet through it all, the legibility of the map remains one-sided, even ideologically motivated. The viewer is able to intuit certain vague cosmological 'facts' about the digital firmament, while gleaning little about 'the facts on the ground'[...] No poetics is possible in this uniform aesthetic space.⁴³

While Galloway provides a useful critique of the uniformity of contemporary network art, he remains vague in defining what a more 'poetic' way of approaching the goals of cognitive mapping would be. If we maintain that the enterprise of epistemic mapping is a valuable artistic pursuit, we can differentiate between at least two versions of cognitive mapping. First, there is the dominant information aesthetic of cartographies, put into the service of revealing concealed information and offering leverage for political critique. Our analysis has shown the relative

⁴² Ibid., p. 90.

⁴³ Ibid.

poverty of this artistic option, which remains unconscious of its own medium-character and its rules for translating data into knowledge. Lacking this self-reflexive dimension, information aesthetics' affective power is lost to practitioners and critics who reduce the affective power of art to the level of investigative journalism. They thus foreclose the possibility of poetics by tying themselves to one dominant way of representing information instead of searching for expressive alternatives or questioning the power and the informative value of current representational models.

Secondly, there is Jameson's own account of cognitive mapping, which he characterises as a "matter of form."⁴⁴ Apart from this, Jameson remains equally tentative in making any concrete suggestions as to cognitive mapping's visual format, repeatedly insisting he is "not even sure how to imagine the kind of art"⁴⁵ that would fall under its epistemic purview. Furthermore, any endeavour of cognitive mapping can be sure to confront significant problems of scale, as it involves "think[ing] a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves."⁴⁶

In this, Jameson echoes the familiar Marxist argument of an irreconcilable gap between the transparency of experiential phenomena and the opacity of their determining conditions. While it is unclear what could bridge this chasm, Jameson trusts art's capacity to reveal what normally remains impenetrable. The closest Jameson gets to giving an example of actually existing cognitive mapping is in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, where he suggests that the era of symbolism that has reigned since Romanticism is superseded by a renewed interest in alle-

⁴⁴ Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," p. 357.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

⁴⁶ Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 2.

gory, which allows a story's partial aspect to stand in for a larger narrative.⁴⁷

We can historicise the impulse behind cognitive mapping to abstract it from its late capitalist connotations and embed it within a wider aesthetic problematic, that of unrepresentability. Harking back to the Burkean and Kantian sublime, modern aesthetics is haunted by the possibility of its failure, traditionally framed as an excess of sensory stimuli that overwhelms our cognitive faculties. Art theory has often framed this as a question of the representation of unbearable suffering, epitomised by the debate around the representation of the Holocaust, most recently reinvigorated by Georges Didi-Huberman.⁴⁸ In contrast, Marxist aesthetics has, from Lukács and Brecht to Jameson, framed the unrepresentable as a question of depicting not momentary, eruptive violence, but the structural violence inherent in the capitalist mode of production.

Waiting For An Adequate Image

Contemporary cartographic practices claim this second lineage as their own and answer the representational question through the elaboration of maps, diagrams, and flowcharts. They thereby confirm Jameson's prescience about the desire for new aesthetic formats in conditions of late capitalism, as the mapping of current political and financial networks has become a key occupation for the contemporary art world. This has mostly

⁴⁷ See Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 5. Jameson says "on the global scale, allegory allows the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall, with a fluidity that has no equivalent in those older national allegories."

⁴⁸ On the question of unrepresentable suffering, see Georges Didi-Huberman's discussion of photographs taken clandestinely by Jewish inmates in Auschwitz. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in spite of all: four photographs from Auschwitz*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2008.

taken the form of an appropriation of visual formats developed in information aesthetics, with an emphasis on diagrams, maps, and cartographies. Even though greeted enthusiastically by theorists and critics, we have pointed to a recurring confusion in the reception history of this genre between the artworks' aesthetic properties and their perception as actual investigative knowledge production. The critical endorsement of this new 'capitalist realism' has led to such exaggerated claims as "the TV series *THE WIRE* provides the best ethnography of contemporary U.S. society,"⁴⁹ which is problematic for several reasons. Above all, this view betrays a self-congratulatory attitude on behalf of political critique that views power as always operating behind closed doors and in hiding. The role of criticism thus finds itself reduced to unmasking supposedly hidden, but in reality clearly visible and therefore unsurprising, truths, while the critic appears in the flattering position of a whistleblower.

A close reading of Fredric Jameson's theses on cognitive mapping has shown that Jameson's call for a new aesthetic for our times meant more than the simple application of cartography to art. Jameson repeatedly insisted on the poetic quality of cognitive mapping, while leaving a thorough elaboration of its aesthetic forms open to interpretation. Rather than copying information aesthetics, with which power-holders convey their impressions of objectivity, knowledge, and scientificity, we ought to find more engaging ways to depict, as Steven Shaviro has it, "what it feels like to live in the early twenty-first century."

While in the last decade, it seemed like the most interesting works of (post-)internet art critically reflected the internet as our contemporary mode of production, consisting of networks, algorithms, social media platforms, and big data, its increasing formal mimeticism that makes its products look *just like* Google,

⁴⁹ Cited in Toscano, "Seeing it whole," p. 65.

Uber, and AirBnb has taken away much of its appeal.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the world economy has been in protracted crisis since at least 2007/2008 with no upswing in sight. The political correlate of this crisis is the rise in new fascisms in North America and Europe. While art will not be able to change any of this, generating adequate representations of the ongoing crisis is where successful cognitive mapping today should start.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, the installation *New Ealam* by the British artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas that had a prominent place at DIS Magazine's 2016 Berlin Biennale. Seeking to reimagine the question of housing in an age of intensifying displacement, the artist suggests a series of "global housing subscriptions" that detach from private property to create a shared living space. Sadly, since the artist believes that "technologically accelerated dislocation" is the main factor affecting worldwide displacement, rather than say global warming, all his proposals look as if lifted from Airbnb. While Thomas' piece is symptomatic of the accelerationist belief that Western bourgeois mobility would indeed constitute something like a new global condition, more fundamentally it betrays a great aesthetic poverty in simply mimicking the 'look' of the sharing economy for an allegedly post-capitalist future. See <http://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/participants/kulendran/> (accessed 25/1/20).

LOST IN THE CANON?¹

Gertrud Koch and Alexander García Düttmann

---A canon is a reed stalk that serves as a measuring rod, a yardstick that one applies, a rule that is prescribed, a weapon of culture. If one follows the canon, one cannot go astray and nothing is lost. A canon creates a community of imitative artists who communicate by way of deviations and, perhaps, also by virtue of self-reflexive extensions. In their communication, these artists may try to reach an understanding as to why a deviation, or a self-reflexive extension, may be relevant or not. But the community created by a canon is larger. It does not only include imitative artists. It includes beholders of art, too. Beholders of art expect something from artists because they can more or less anticipate what it is that may count as an artwork in the near future and what it is that will achieve renown. Yet, wherever one recognises a canon, its measure enters into a relation with an excess, an 'outside.' This 'outside' is populated by artists who do not care for imitation and whose deviations do not seek invigoration or validation. It is populated by artists bereft of good reasons for doing what they do. The beholders who dare enter this 'outside' have no expectations and avoid anticipations. If the canon sets boundaries, the 'outside' opens the canonical boundaries towards an infinite. It remains doubtful whether there will be a way back once one has crossed canonical boundaries. But must one not then introduce a distinction between an outside that allows for the construal of an anti-canon and an outside ruled by an arbitrariness that does not necessarily oppose art, an arbitrariness that can be con-

¹ This short text was read out by the authors at the 25th anniversary party for the journal *Texte zur Kunst* in Berlin (November 2015).

trolled neither by a canon nor by an anti-canon, an arbitrariness that escapes any certainty as to whether it opposes art or not? No, this is all wrong. A canon only ever exists retrospectively, once art has long left the scene. What is canonical wants to capture art. Its effect is achieved when an enthused beholder says: "That's it." It is the exemplary within the singular, the unique and the ingenious that gives rise to the canon. But, because it is the exemplary within the singular, the unique and the ingenious, one can never apply the same yardstick twice to an artwork. The concept of the canon thus yields a paradox. The paradox is anti-canonical only to the extent that there would be no canon without it. Where and how does the artist who is lost in the canon move?

---To the extent that the canon exists only retrospectively and that the artist does not fall prey to regression when relating to it, he must stand outside the canon or else reject it. This is what Harold Bloom called the "anxiety of influence." Jumping, one must push back the shoulders upon which one stands. In this way one is always at the same time inside and outside the canon. As one pushes back the art from which one jumps, it can become canonical. The canon is a temporal figure of belatedness. One may only know what belongs to the canon once the canon is formed; but as soon as it is formed, it needs to be changed. On the one hand, the canon requires the abject dimension of the new. Yet, on the other hand, it is also the background against which the new takes shape for the first time and becomes visible as a figure. The canon is both obsolete and in the process of constantly constituting itself. Thus, it is not as stable as it may at first appear. The canon is different from tradition, which is often said to be "blind." Tradition covertly transmits its rules and norms in the guise of habits and demeanour. The canon, however, resembles an open book that anyone can read and that allows one to make as many comparisons as one wishes. It can also lose its legitimacy. A canon demands

explicit consent and differs from tradition in that it allows for discussion. One can also consider its constitution as a manner in which history is narrated, namely the history of the public aspect of art, of collections kept in museums and purchases made by their curators, of new artworks associated with artworks already known, of journals that cast discursive nets. A canon may get caught up in such nets. They may alter it or even trigger its dismissal. The explosiveness of the canon lies in the fact that it highlights the normative side of the judgement of art, once it has become institutionalised. It highlights the demand for universalisation that inheres in such judgement. Criticism turns into expertise and bestows value onto objects.

---No canon ever emerged from discussion. And no canon ever gave itself up to discussion without a moment of violence, without a moment that resists the claim to universalisation. Why? Because a canon can only be a canon if it possesses a binding authority. One has to measure oneself against such authority. Yet, in order to be effective, authority and measure have to interrupt discussion. If a canon did not always presuppose a universalisation to which one has to agree before asking oneself *if* one agrees, it would abolish itself. One may disagree with the canon, discuss it, complete it, extend it, and even question it. However, if there is or ought to be such a thing as a canon, it must also remain untouchable, a static universality, an imperturbable fact, not something produced and created. And it is because it does not emerge from discussion that nothing is more discussed than the canon. Is this correct? Does the idea of the canon play any role in contemporary art? Is it not like driftwood from a distant past, driftwood that has long vanished from view because it has sunk or because no one looks for it anymore, even though critics are still encouraged to list the ten best movies in film history? Internet users, or members of so-called social media sites, like nothing better than to issue value judgements constantly, thereby implicitly creating a

canon or aligning themselves in relation to one. How exhausting it is to talk about canon and anti-canon! How liberating it would be if one could get lost in the canon and surrender to an almost imperceptible drifting! Whatever appears to be lost in the canon does not aim at a universal or communal form of attention. Nor does it elicit the specialised attention of a group of militant outsiders. Idiosyncrasies that cannot be accounted for in terms of the particular and the universal or the private and the public, and that cannot be drawn upon deliberately, as it were, may prove sensitive to such erring. Is art that is lost in the canon not art that quickly fades when one turns towards it and surprises it, as if one expected it to take care of itself? What kind of *weakness* does art that is lost in the canon require?

--When one says that one is lost *in* the canon, that one loses oneself in the canon or that one gets lost in it, one does not take the canon to be something merely external. Rather it functions as a framing device, a horizon, or a background that allows one to appear or to disappear. A canon is like a city that is determined by its architecture, the topography of its streets and the opening of its squares, but that still allows for individual walks, for different series of journeys that keep decentring the urban map. Insofar as the canon is a figure of temporal repetition, it is also a temporally open form that changes visibly or imperceptibly. It changes more slowly than fashion but rapidly enough to flare at the edges and get sucked into the whirl of time. The canon's performative dimension lies in its need for interpretation. When questioned on his relation to his Bavarian homeland, Herbert Achternbusch threatened that he would stay in Bavaria until Bavaria would wear his mark. Perhaps the canon could be put to a similar test. One may also display the canon for such a long time that it becomes translucent—just as paradigms exhaust themselves. But this is not the kind of weakness that interests you. Most probably the weakness you mean cannot be limited to the withdrawal of singular artists

and their objects. It is a possible *strength*, as is the apparent weakness conveyed by the famous phrase that Melville's character Bartleby keeps repeating: "I would prefer not to." When asked to distribute four copies of an important legal document and, in a sense, provide it with a canonical form, Bartleby prefers not to do so. He makes his own choice. He prefers *not* to do something rather than refusing to do *something*, something specific. This active choice of omission may serve as a model for losing oneself in the canon. In the English language an alluring phrase expresses this relation between activity and passivity: "Get lost!" Where does one find oneself when one gets lost *in* the canon? And where can one be found? Will one be considered a figure that, while lost, continues to appear against the backdrop of the canon? Or will one be regarded as the canon's Bartleby, emptying it out and erasing it?

---Artworks that belong to the canon must appear strong and mighty. They have to be works of art, precisely, and can demonstrate only small weaknesses. Artworks that do not belong to the canon may be weak when measured against it. Do they have their own, unique strength? If one has a weakness for artworks that are lost in the canon or if the aspect of artworks one values is the aspect of their abandonment, does one have a weakness for a weakness that is truly a strength, the strength of a resistance that operates from within, so to speak, even though it does not seek to substitute the canon with an anti-canon? Or does one have a weakness for something that is neither weakness nor strength but a strange indifference to power, to the power granted by the canon and the anti-canon, to the power that is countered by the anti-canon as well as by the emptying-out of the canon? The artwork that is lost in the canon leaves it untouched because it does not want anything. It experiences the peculiar bliss of being forgotten by power, or of power no longer forcing it to speak. Perhaps resistance is the misunder-

standing that haunts Bartleby after power makes him say something. Ingrid Caven!

---Lost in the canon? Here is a metaphor. In *GRAVITY*, a science-fiction film by Alfonso Cuarón, the actress Sandra Bullock floats through space in a damaged capsule, looking for help from the Russian and Chinese stations that are both derelict and abandoned. Her companion George Clooney excuses himself in the first third of the movie and rushes off into the universe. When Bullock lands back on Planet Earth at the end of this mute but not silent monodrama, it is as deserted and empty as outer space, but not as beautiful. In this context, getting lost means being afloat, and such floating resists both the force of gravity and the strength of power. It goes unnoticed on the screens of the geolocation systems. Sometimes we are not hunters and gatherers returning with their booty but the lucky discoverers of *objets trouvés* that are lost in the canon. There it is, a lost property office full of missing keys that fit no lock and that no one ever claims.

PLASTIC GIVENS, HARD STOPS: A SHORT OVERVIEW OF FORMS AND FORCES OF NEGATION IN RECENT AND HISTORICAL ART

Marina Vishmidt and Anthony Iles

Art is a social mediation that has, to varying degrees since securing autonomy in the modern era, come to represent a utopian space in which the imperatives of labour, accumulation and instrumental rationality are suspended, if not critically disputed. Such a position, with all the idealist, ameliorative and ethically detached implications that it entails, takes on a different cast in the recent period. This period has seen art pressed into neoliberal social agendas, coming into its own as an “asset class” inflecting the ‘real fictions’ of finance, as well as being inflected by radical discourses of abolition. We would like to keep in mind contemporary political discussions of abolition in communisation, afropessimism, and gender abolition, but here we are focusing on art-immanent gestures of self-abolition. These are played out on a stage illuminated by utopic gesturality, on the one side (as canvassed by theorists like Suhail Malik on ‘CA’, contemporary art, in one relevant debate), and the strictures of neoliberal governmentality, on the other. Both of these movements modify the autonomy of art, albeit in highly differentiated ways. Therefore, we’d need to interrogate the presumptive dismissal of ‘autonomy’ as a reactionary discourse for contemporary art. This dismissal has become an orthodoxy in recent decades, but perhaps is of limited use when there can still be leverage in excavating the negative meanings of autonomy, inasmuch as they connect to practices and theories of autonomy outside the institution of art.

Here, we wish to critically pose the question: if art dissolves into work or life, does its critical capacity become eroded?

Yes: it becomes just another form of precarious labour, or, alternately, management

OR

No: it potentially challenges art's regulative illusions of autonomy in the social division of labour and acts to reconstitute both art and work through strategies of negation or refusal.

In this essay, we'd like to focus on the relationship between discourses of self-abolition as they are played out in contemporary communist theories of negation, and the way negation has been performed in and as art, and then, more specifically, in feminist art and film practices—the question of strike and sabotage seen from the perspective of women's work, be this artwork or housework. Further, abolition needs to be considered as a dynamic that is immanent to art since modernity and into the current era, not simply conjunctural to, say, the impact of social crisis or revolutionary blurrings of the art and life distinction.¹ This is, on the one hand, to flesh out the gendered and

¹ Some recent theoretical tendencies have sought to criticise art's tendency to incorporate extra-aesthetic material. In some of these accounts, contemporary art has become too indeterminate, that is, normatively opposed to any statements or commitments and given solely to 'asking questions' and 'keeping things open'. Yet the suggestion that art could overcome this attitude through 'reason' simply seeks to escape the mediations and the subjectivity which distinguishes art from more instrumental operations. The dynamic of incorporation and production of non-meaning in art cannot simply be reversed by affirming its opposite, as if art could become the production of 'factual' statements about the world. Art attacks and 'gnaws at' its own concept. Nonetheless, enacting 'abolition' in art can never entirely annul meaning's reemergence, or delayed appearance, within an artwork. So-called 'auto-destructive art' was an explicit provocation to a society dominated by irrational reason, that is, the 'dialectic of enlightenment' that shows progress as backing into barbarism as it loses sight of the social and ethical ends of techno-scientific means. The reverse, by which art would become rational, implies an affirmative art which would simply capitulate to what is, a loss of art's own critical and negative modes of navigation and internal differentiation. On the 'provocation of realism' to art see Suhail Malik, "Reason to Destroy Contemporary Art," *Spike Art* 37, <http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/reason-destroy-contemporary-art> (accessed 27/1/20). For an account which considers negativity as a core part of the concept of art see Theodor W. Adorno, "Art and the Arts," in: *ibid.*, *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2003, pp. 385f.

racialised dimensions of the 'refusal of work' or discourses of negation and self-abolition of social forms in this theory and, on the other, to query the moralisation of gendered and racialised 'reproductive' and 'affective' labour in some of the thinking around intersectionality and queerness that poses an alternative or complement to more orthodox Marxist conceptions of class-struggle-driven revolutionary practice.

The relationship between production and reproduction has been a core issue for feminist art practices in recent decades and in the present. The depiction of working women or women's work, in and outside of the market, constitutes a strong strand in the image politics of feminist art and film. However, there is another, perhaps more oblique, strand wherein the artist identifies with being a worker, but it is not clear whether their work is productive, reproductive, or simply unproductive. In this mode, art's relationship to work may at first appear only mimetic. In this sense, we can loosely periodise two phases of such gestures in the art of the twentieth century: a heroic one, often male (think Rodchenko wearing a production suit, or the appeals to industrial work, even if often ironised, made by people like Robert Morris, Edward Kienholz, Richard Serra, and Andy Warhol), in which artists sought to identify with the worker as the agent of history, and an anti-heroic phase, taking hold in a period in which work and its logic had subsequently become generalised for all genders, where artists appropriate the gestures of 'work' to make subaltern forms of labour present and disruptive to the categories and institutions of art and labour (think Mierle Laderman Ukeles washing the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum, Francis Alÿs holding a placard renting himself as a 'Turista' amidst the other day-labourers in Mexico City's Zócalo square, Pilvi Takala turning up to work as a marketing intern to conspicuously do nothing).

In a continuum with this relation to work in its de-heroicising phase are practices (think Mladen Stilinović) that empha-

sis lethargy, failure, entropy, and boredom.² Looking to these practices in dialogue with queer theory, black studies and feminism can sharpen the somewhat routine appeal to ‘purposeless purpose’ (Immanuel Kant) in Western art, by not being content with the performed evacuation of the value of work from a perspective of an always-already sanctioned detachment from use.

Additionally, a critical distinction Frank B. Wilderson III makes between “trying to build a better world” and black opposition to such a project can be traced back to Kant’s project of ‘universal common sense,’ of which art via the critical faculty of judgment is constitutive of universal subjects, from which black life is ontologically excluded. Therefore, against Kant’s positive enlightenment project that enshrines art in the production of (white) universality, which is world building, Wilderson opposes a negative “irreconcilable” project that wants to “destroy the world.”³ One way our account is influ-

² Of course counter-tendencies can be recovered from each historic pole of these phases. Kasimir Malevich’s “Laziness as the Truth of Mankind” sought to push the logic of productivism (i.e. overproduction) towards an edenic workless future supportive of the truly rational (i.e. not rationalised) many-sided development of humankind’s senses and abilities. “Work has to be cursed”. On the other hand myriad tendencies in post-conceptual art seek to affirm the use value of artistic labour (e.g. Joseph Beuys) or make art ‘truly useful’ (e.g. Arte Util). However, need and use contradict one another in capitalism; their fulfillment is dependent upon the expansion of want and privation. Which is to say, in order to eat, one must work (for money), so any satisfaction is to be obtained only through the intense dissatisfaction involved in objectifying one’s own labour for the sake of another’s need for profit. Strictly speaking, need and use as effective categories of social action are irrelevant in a capitalist society—but, ideologically, they are very powerful as incentives to work and as legitimization of the system of production. Hence the double-sided nature of value—use and exchange. In terms of art, then, Beuys’ gesture claims a position for art as ‘useful’, but in fact this gesture can only be an attack on the limited category of utility in the society within which he made it. Structurally artists do not occupy a position with the authority to designate what is useful or not. In a society based on production for value, this is determined ahead of and over them by a system of production which itself produces and authorises needs and uses, and this in turn is secured by a system of law and property.

³ “They [socialists such as the International Socialist Organisation] would say, ‘the capitalist as a category has to be destroyed.’ What freaks them out about an analysis of anti-Blackness is that this applies to the category of the Human, which means that they have to be destroyed regardless of their performance, or of their morality, and

enced by this work is in making a distinction between the employment of art in programs to improve the world, by states, NGOs, or artist communities—where it frequently contributes to, for example, gentrification (improving the world for the middle-class)—and the persistent negativity of art, both vis à vis other art and the world as it stands, a negativity that puts it on the same side, if not in the same mode, as political struggle.

Recent incidents such as the call to remove and destroy Dana Schutz's painting of a press photograph of Emmett Till in his coffin, included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, throw a hard focus on the uneasy dialectic between a standard account of negation-as-autonomy and a more volatile stance of negation-as-struggle that forms the parameters for political action in the sphere of art, particularly attending to the radical cancellation (rather than expansion) of 'the world' enunciated in afropessimism's black radical idea of 'destruction.'⁴

that they occupy a place of power that is completely unethical, regardless of what they do. And they're not going to do that. Because what are they trying to do? They're trying to build a better world. What are we trying to do? We're trying to destroy the world. Two irreconcilable projects." Frank Wilderson III, "We're Trying to Destroy the World," <http://ill-will-editions.tumblr.com/post/103584583009/were-trying-to-destroy-the-world> (accessed 27/1/20).

⁴ The call was first issued by Hannah Black on Facebook in March 2017, and garnered a predictable amount of excited commentary on social, print, and even mainstream media, getting heatedly denounced by Whoopi Goldberg on ABC's daytime chat show, *The View*. Many commentators struck an unpleasantly nationalist note, querying Black's motives in intervening in a debate on U.S. racism as a British and 'mixed-race' woman. A consistent tendency of this coverage was that it was sensationalist and responded to the call in a reified manner, which is to say, as a publicity-seeking gesture and not to its speculative and performative elements of solidarity with historical and current black freedom struggles, in and out of the art institution, as well as to the making of an 'impossible demand'. Unfortunately, some of the same kind of response could be observed on the left, with libertarian communist art journal *Cured Quail* publishing a spoof of the call whose general tone was resolutely oblivious to these dynamics, defending a post-situ stance that viewed the whole incident as a culture industry sideshow with no critical traction. Interestingly, the purity of the avant-garde critique was aided with a dank visual in the spirit of 'alt-lite' takes on 'identity politics'.

Art Strikes

Art, in capitalist society, defines itself and is defined negatively with regard to social labour. Sociologically speaking, an analysis would take in more concrete empirical determinations, with the generally ‘pre-modern’ (non-industrial) conditions of artistic production, as recently highlighted by Dave Beech’s *Art and Value*, to be read against the managerial, administrative, and educational roles that comprise the range of employment roles for many artists who are not sustained solely by market success. But, sticking to the framework of form-analysis—one that is informed both by Marxist categories and their application in the work of Frankfurt School critical theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Alfred Sohn-Rethel—, we emphasise that art is not labour in a capitalist sense. It thus exhibits some of the elements of work refusal, of being on strike. We are interested in how art can be discussed as a refusal of work structurally in capitalism, but also how it can become politically re-configured by refusal of work outside of art. In that case, what is art that it can go on strike? How does this reflect on attempts to politically implement analogies between art and labour (such as the art strike)? Art strikes tend to encounter the problem that, since art is not directly compelled by the division of labour founded in other sectors, its withdrawal of labour is barely noticed. Art strikes therefore tend to be performative propositions.

The earliest explicit use we have found of the term ‘Art Strike’ is in Alain Jouffroy’s essay “What’s To Be Done About Art?”: “The abolition of art can really occur in the actual time and space of a pre-revolutionary situation like that of May 1968. It is essential that the minority advocate the necessity of going on an ‘active art strike’ using the machines of the culture industry to set it in total contradiction to itself. The intention is not to end the rule of production, but to change the most adven-

turous part of ‘artistic’ production into the production of revolutionary ideas, forms and techniques.”⁵

The problem with Jouffroy’s proposal is that without ending the rule of production, avant-garde artists would simply swap one privileged role for another. Instead of providing entertainment for a privileged audience, artists are to form themselves into a vanguard providing ideas, forms and techniques for the masses. While such a role may be attractive to the artist, it does nothing to alter the oppressive domination of a so-called creative elite over the rest of society. It is also the case that so often, when art does take a ‘socially engaged’ role, it is in this professionalised sense, which maintains such class distinctions structurally even if thematically it may question them.

Under the swathe of austerity measures enacted by Western governments in the wake of the 2007/2008 financial crisis, some artists and institutions began to conceive of a positive role for artists, revisiting programmes of the American New Deal’s Works Progress Association (WPA) as an historic convergence of affirmation of work and art, and art as work: “In the highly charged political atmosphere of the Great Depression, left-wing project employees not only painted, acted, and wrote, they demonstrated, published newspapers, and led sit-in strikes to protest WPA personnel and wage cuts. Artists from many different leftist points of view also embraced causes such as industrial unionism, civil rights for black Americans, and support for the anti-fascists in the Spanish Civil War.”⁶

Artists, employed or otherwise directly dependent upon the state, began to identify as workers. Especially when the state threatened to take the work away. In a partial sense, the

⁵ Alain Jouffroy, “What’s To Be Done About Art?,” in: Jean Cassou, Michel Ragon and Alain Jouffroy, *Art and Confrontation*, New York: New York Graphic Society 1968, pp. 175–202.

⁶ US National Archives, “A New Deal for the Arts,” http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/new_deal_for_the_arts/activist_arts1.html (accessed 27/1/20).

International Workers of the World's dream of 'one big company' vs. 'one big union' had, for this brief period, begun to take on the semblance of reality. But all roads led to war. The U.S. policy of depression era pump-priming paid off when it became the largest capitalist producer in the world, rapidly overtaking France and Britain as Europe was decimated in the early 1940s. From this perspective, the affirmation of work—promulgated by Aleksander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and others in the U.S.S.R. in the 1920s and the WPA and other organisations in the U.S.A. in the 1930s—came to mirror each other through their participation in, and championship of, state-building projects.⁷ Artists became more or less directly employed by the state as part of a period of social (re)construction led by states in capital's interests. If the affirmation of labour during this period understood itself as a form of opposition to the inhuman augmentation of capital's powers, the post-war period apparently turned this equation upside down. Art became the expression of the democratic freedoms of triumphant capitalism (as seen with Abstract Expressionism). The problematic then became one of assessing how art was not only integrated with state-building projects, but how art came to legitimate processes of capital accumulation that themselves had vital geopolitical dimensions.

As an asset class, art may briefly store capital in its circuits through the upper echelons of value chains. Yet, art is not capital or value, but, in this sense, only the form of appearance of capital before it moves back into cycles of investment. Art generally circulates via non-profit institutions and contexts, and where it interacts with profit-making institutions (dealers, auction-houses, collectors) these are rigorously defined by their sep-

⁷ A related formation, though less explicitly 'workerist', took place in the U.K., in the formation of the Arts Council in the post-WWII period under the direct influence of economist John Maynard Keynes.

aration from a wider capitalist marketplace.⁸ Were capital to be stored in this way (in the form of art), it would amount simply to a hoard and be exposed to intense devaluation or destruction of value at any point: “CAPITAL is at present the work sustaining ability. Money is not an economic value though. The two genuine economic values involve the connection between ability (creativity) and product. That explains the formula presenting the expanded concept of art: ART=CAPITAL.”⁹

Beuys’ first sentence is entirely reversible: one might say that ‘work/labour’ is the capital sustaining ability (or force). Certain capitalists might see it the other way around. Certainly the artist appears as a sort of entrepreneur, she may even be a capitalist in private life (owning capitalisable assets, extracting rent, employing assistants), but in her art production she is an artist, or she is not. Art depends for its definition on being not-capital and not-labour.

In more recent decades, artists and ‘art workers’ have sought to expand and complicate the range of models of labour politics, with groups such as W.A.G.E. taking their organising cues from the generalised atomisation and competitive habitus that reproduces precarity as norm in a largely privatised and non-state supported cultural field, particularly in the U.S. The intensifying predicament of debt-loaded austerity and political

⁸ This separation, however normative and established, echoes the relation between the ‘de-functionalised’ underpinnings of the autonomy of art and the rest of social production insofar as art markets function as the cypher of the most unregulated, ‘affective’ imaginable form of capitalist exchange, thus acting as a mirror image to the autonomy of finance. Their lack of regulation in turn makes them highly attractive for prosaic financial malfeasances such as money laundering. See Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips, “Tainted Love: Art’s Ethos and Capitalization,” in: Maria Lind and Olav Velthuis (eds.), *Contemporary Art and its Commercial Markets*, Berlin/New York: Sternberg Press 2012, pp. 209–240. Also Katya Kazakina, “An Auction House Learns the Art of Shadow Banking,” <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-07-28/art-of-shadow-banking-how-an-auction-house-got-into-the-picture?cmpid=yhoo.headline&yptr=yahoo> (accessed 27/1/20).

⁹ Joseph Beuys in 1985, quoted in David Winton Bell Gallery, “‘Creativity = Capital’ by Joseph Beuys,” November 15, 2011, <https://bellgallery.wordpress.com/2011/11/15/creativity-capital-by-joseph-beuys/> (accessed 27/1/20).

desires to realise some of the radical thematics of contemporary art practice also subtends moves to recognise the specificities of artistic practice as systemic trends, hence as working conditions with a class component.

But this is not, thereby, to forward the claim that art can be directly socially useful as an outcome of its position in networks of activism or its producers' ethical orientation. This would be to mistake a tactical position for an ontological one: art's politics are embedded in its relationship to the conditions of its own production as art—what Adorno would call its 'heteronomy,' which refers to social infrastructures that are not internal to the discourse and methods of art, but which radically shape its development. It cannot, in this sense, be fully autonomous. How can we make sure this dialectical trajectory doesn't stop there, or get frozen?

Strike and the Negative

Art strikes 'succeed' when they partake of the existing negativity of art, because art is a negation of the conditions and limits of socially useful labour. Labour strikes 'succeed' in limited terms when they extract concessions from an employer; they 'succeed' in an extensive sense when they overcome the logic of the limits within which they were previously contained (e.g. strikes spreading across sectors, from factory strike to rent strike). Where art strikes and labour strikes might converge is in the consistency of their non-labour, their purposeful activity: purposeful because purposeless in capitalist terms. During the strike, workers, beyond the intensely demanding exigencies necessary to keep the strike going, may direct their energies toward anything that isn't value-producing work. In a sense, these are the stringencies that apply to the artist's metier everyday, but this 'autonomy' meets heteronomy in the strictly

defined channels that govern the presentation of art. And both find themselves in the position of un- or de-alienated labour in an alienated capitalist world.

Reproductive Strike

We've been working with many examples of art strikes. We have also conceptualised a number of broader strike genres we are interested in, including: 'reproductive strike.'

Labour becomes visible when it is withdrawn. The strike both negates and materialises labour: this is its politicising function. There are many ways of drawing attention to the fact that forms of 'nature' are actually forms of 'labour,' particularly when it comes to reproductive work (Wages for/against Housework would be a good example). By making tertiary forms of 'work' visible—such as housework and sex work—, the political questions about the structural role of this work can be opened up. Marx talks about following the worker and the boss into the 'hidden abode of production,' as the site where you really see what's going on beneath the apparent equality of contracts and exchange of labour time for money in the market. This is where the domination and exploitation really unfolds as an intrinsic part of capitalist production. Leopoldina Fortunati talks about the 'arcane' or the 'hidden abode of reproduction,' which is even more hidden, because gendered, unmonetised, and in the so-called private sphere, than the 'hiddenness' of the factory floor.

Reproductive labour, in the Marxist feminist narrative, is a category designed to re-cast as work the duties performed in private and coded as natural, which enable the activities that go on in public and are coded as cultural, as a means to move the private into the public and to politicise the enforcement of the distinction in its structural aspect, i.e. as gendered and (if,

at first, less emphasised in the analysis) racialised exploitation. However, reproductive work is not exempt from what Marx had in mind when he said that it is one of the greatest misunderstandings to talk of free, human, social work, or work without private property. ‘Work’ is essentially the unfree, inhuman, unsocial activity, determined by private property and creating private property. The abolition of private property becomes a reality only when it is understood as the abolition of ‘work.’ Thus we have to be aware of the tendency in some current articulations of the feminist politics of reproductive labour to affirm reproductive labour in using it to critique ‘productive’ labour and/or art. This occurs both in autonomist Marxist feminism, which urges the ‘self-valorisation’ of reproductive work and the reproductive worker as a revolutionary subject, as well as in more anarchist positions, which see reproductive work as an unqualified good from the communitarian perspective of withdrawing from capitalist social relations and sustaining communities ‘outside’ the market. This has been elaborated by critics as a question of ‘feminist workerism.’¹⁰ It has, in turn, been subject to critique from writers such as Miranda Joseph and Endnotes, who note that a politics of reproduction that takes as its objective the fostering or defence of sociality, structured by a notion of community or commons, as against the bad abstractions of capital and the state, doesn’t go far enough. What leaves many articulations of the politics of reproduction open to these kinds of critiques is that they affirm reproductive work, but otherwise. However, the space of

¹⁰ There is also great ambiguity across these debates about what ‘reproduction’ actually refers to—is it unwaged domestic maintenance and ‘care work’ or is it also paid employment, whether in the home or in state institutions such as healthcare and education; and what about ‘services’ in the market? The vocabulary of ‘affect,’ ‘care,’ and ‘work’ is where Marxist categories and identity politics find rich but also potentially or actually problematic overlaps. See the *Viewpoint magazine* debate on Cinzia Arruzza’s work: <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/05/04/gender-and-capitalism-debating-cinzia-arruzzas-remarks-on-gender> (accessed 27/1/2020).

this “otherwise,” unless it is filled by some kind of socially transformative process, affirms both work and gender as they are currently constituted, as if it could lead us out of the crisis if only it was ‘valued’ adequately.

Can we look to art for models of anti-reproductive labour and gender practices, a type of ‘anti-workerist feminism’? The 1970s saw a number of feminist art strategies that operated to de-naturalise both art and work from the standpoint of gender politics—emptying feminised domestic tasks of natural content to fill them with social content, in a way that also interrogated the normative aesthetic and institutional claims of art. Many of these allegorised the entropic qualities of reproductive labour, de-naturalising it by making it look foolish, futile or indeed grandly absurd. One well-known example is Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ ‘Maintenance Art.’ This performance of housework in the space of art upended art’s sovereignty and the gendered ‘separate spheres’ ideology it relied upon. While feminist politics named ‘life’ as work, feminist art challenged the transcendent universality of the (male) artistic subject by proposing housework as art. In her “Maintenance Art Manifesto,”¹¹ Ukeles notes something that brings us back to what Claire Fontaine or Precarias a Deriva call the ‘strike within the strike.’ Can labour that socially exists as the unacknowledged maintenance activity that goes on beneath and after work stoppages and revolutionary rupture (to paraphrase the Manifesto: the sourball of every revolution, who will clean up?) also be suspended, and how would we envision the intensity and complexity of the challenge to established social relations introduced by a break in the continuity of care that precisely makes both alienated labour and its refusal possible? This brings us back to Wilderson’s invocation of the shortcomings of a politics of refusal that is limited to the

¹¹ See the scan of the 1969 Manifesto at https://www.queensmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Ukeles_MANIFESTO.pdf (accessed 6/2/20).

frame of the existent and its premises. Revolution is fated to be reformist unless it also attacks the preconditions of its possibility: patriarchy, the (white) human. Such negativity shows up in the current practice of the artist Cameron Rowland, whose installations consist of furniture and accessories often manufactured in local prisons, whose racialised population does not 'own' their labour and cannot freely sell it, unlike the glorified 'non-labour' of the artist.¹² These objects are rented by him and are for rent in turn, eschewing both the status of a work and these objects' imbrication in an art market.

These gestures de-naturalise reproductive labour from both sides, so to speak: they cut away its social embeddedness, showing it purely as an activity that can be de- and re-contextualised and, on the other hand, they highlight the social relationships within which this activity can either acquire or lose an aura of inevitability and necessity. They are also instructive as gestures of negation that recognise the antagonism not just in these art practices but in the everyday life of gender and race in general. They evacuate the work done by women of its necessity and naturalness, evacuate reproduction of its overlooked virtue. They instead point to the entropic quality of reproductive work, highlighting waste as a creative force, pointing to the destruction of representation, with Ukeles' dust paintings making an analogy to Duchamp's "dust breeding." This kind of 'making nothing' uses housework displaced as art to signal the loss of art's heroic signifying power. As Elena Gorfinkel writes in "The Body's Failed Labor: Performance Work in Sexploitation

¹² Our questions about the diversity of labour conditions in U.S. prisons were initially raised by some of the plot points in the hit TV show *ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK*. Not all U.S. prison labour is compulsory, but it is one of the significant 'non-free' labour sectors: <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/09/prison-labor-in-america/406177/> (accessed 27/1/20). See also Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, New York: The New Press 2012 and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2007.

Cinema”: “This work, this labor—deskilled, untrained, and easily replaceable—matters the most because it is the most pervasive, but also because it makes itself visible by virtue of its capacity and inclination, at any moment, to stop working, to not work.” In fact, entropy can be one of the key modalities through which we experience an alienation from the manifest or unarguable ‘usefulness’ of reproductive labour: maintenance as ‘unworking.’¹³

We might here recall Chantal Akerman’s first film, *SAUTE MA VILLE*, which directly collides domestic maintenance, absurdity, and self-abolition: cleaning the kitchen is just a prelude to blowing up the apartment block. Blasting all the housewives out of their kitchens. How can we not only go from art as production to art as reproduction, but at the same time continue on to a truly speculative or communist re-evaluation of the world that produces these separate spheres, that refuses their terms?

Abolition

In Marx’s conception, labour and capital are two poles of a contradictory unity. The contradiction between wealth and its source expresses itself as part of a contradictory and antagonistic whole, with one positive pole (capital) and the other negative (proletariat): “Proletariat and wealth are opposites; as such they form a

¹³ Reproductive work is entropic, it produces nothing: “After a day’s work, no matter how tiring, the housewife has produced no tangible object—except, perhaps, dinner; and that will disappear in less than half the time it took to prepare.” See Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, “The Manufacture of Housework,” *Socialist Revolution* 5.4 (1975), pp. 5–40. A ‘woman’s work is never done’, etc. (and indeed it can be offered that all “socially necessary labour,” wherever it is performed, waged or not, shares this entropic quality as a hallmark of the experience of alienated labour). See *Endnotes* “The Logic of Gender” for reflections on the ‘non-necessity’ of reproductive work, and its persistence as the ‘abject’ that sticks to women even when ostensibly fully integrated into ‘gender-blind’ capitalist employment markets. <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/3/en/endnotes-the-logic-of-gender> (accessed 27/1/20).

single whole. They are both creations of the world of private property. ... The proletariat, on the contrary, is compelled as proletariat to abolish itself and thereby its opposite, private property, which determines its existence, and which makes it proletariat. It is the negative side of the antithesis, its restlessness within its very self, dissolved and self-dissolving private property.”¹⁴

While Marxist parties and movements of the past have tended to emphasise the opposition evident in Marx’s formulation, instead, it is the changes in the way in which these two poles are bound to each other and how that contradiction moves that presently require our precise attention. In terms of the question of abolition, we have to ask: does abolition imply the establishment of autonomy? Or the end of the perverse, but also generative, relationship between autonomy and heteronomy?

The art historian Daniel Spaulding has noted that the “realization and supersession of art” as the Situationist International put it, “constitutes the threshold beyond which we still cannot pass when imagining the politics of art. It represents for us something like the final form of transitivity between political and artistic gestures.”¹⁵ This ‘transitivity’ remains a limit towards which discussions in both politics and art intersect with suggestive formulations from related fields. Situationist supersession posed abolition as a progressive but negative project towards which art advanced. In some sense, this relied on an avant-garde teleology still bound up with the project of the workers’ movement, from which both art and workers have since become uncoupled.

¹⁴ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism. Against Bruno Bauer and Company [1844],” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/holy-family/> (accessed 27/1/20).

¹⁵ Daniel Spaulding, “Value-Form and Avant-Garde,” <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/value-form-and-avant-garde> (accessed 27/1/20).

Recent discussions of self-abolition have intensified, in relation to gender, race, and class (less so art), which is enunciated in explicit resonance with the theory of self-abolition of the working class as the process of communisation.¹⁶ Art can be translated into the terms of self-abolition, perhaps in the interests of the realisation of an autonomy for that practice, insofar as autonomy can be realised for society in general. But can autonomy stake any claim without being stuck in and against heteronomy, which self-abolition will be part of the process of eradicating? In other words, what does it mean to hold a revolutionary position without a revolutionary horizon, to project a certain praxis that requires that horizon as praxis in order to make sense as self-abolition? Or, perhaps, since it would be more accurate to emphasise that abolition does not abolish every mediation, it assumes the space for the invention of newer, better fitting mediations, might we instead call this process of revolutionary abolition self-autonomisation?

Looking back over the long twentieth century, the factory worker and the avant-garde artist appear as two poles of alienated labour fatally held back from self-abolition. If, in the negationist gestures of avant-garde art, art and artists' supersession of art was premised upon the revolutionary agency of a working class, who might abolish both work and class completely, neither seem possible in any programmatic sense anymore.¹⁷

¹⁶ Some notable examples would include P. Valentine, "The Gender Rift in Communisation," <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/gender-rift-communisation> (accessed 27/1/20), *Theorie Communiste*, "Comrades, but women," <https://libcom.org/library/comrades-women-theorie-communiste> (accessed 27/1/20) and R.L., "Wanderings of the Slave: Black life and Social Death," <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wanderings-slave-black-life-and-social-death> (accessed 20/1/20). With regard to poetry see Jasper Bernes, Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr, "The Self-Abolition of the Poet," <https://jacket2.org/commentary/self-abolition-poet-part-2> (accessed 20/1/20).

¹⁷ Adorno's assertion that in the (eliminative) modernist tradition "each artwork is the mortal enemy of the other" seems to require some revision here. Labour competition and the informalisation of labour impinges ever more on the production of art, but

So we end up here with a further angle of conjunction between political autonomy and aesthetic autonomy. Workers seek to be free from capital just as capital dreams to be free from labour, but these cannot both be true, or both be realised. So, these two dreams of autonomy are in conflict. And a third dream, that of art's apparent freedom from labour, which, from one perspective, appears as the absolute commodity (as free from the mediation of labour as finance imagines itself to be) and, from the other, as the espousal of anti-work as the proper disposition of the artist: the non-affirmation of labour, commitment to ideas and ideals, and antagonism to material wealth.

This approach poses the question of how to work with the optic of negation in the space of art. That would involve both acknowledging modernism as a sequence of negations, particularly in the context of the historical avant-garde, and reckoning with the different structural and discursive situation of today. This witnesses the affirmative expansion that characterises contemporary art, which knows few polarities or repudiations in its rhetoric or its operations, and both follows capital and emulates it in its tendency to subsume and convert 'alien' material into its own substance. 'Negation' can, however, still perform as a sort of baseline condition for art, insofar as art is a space of non-identity and de-functionalisation of subjectivities, in the words of Claire Fontaine, and of use values. As Carl Andre said, "a thing is a hole in a thing it is not." This is often revised to say "art is a hole in a thing it is not." So, insofar as art poses this structure of 'weak negation,' even, as Daniel Spaulding observes,¹⁸ it must constantly rely on positivities to ground its negations (positivities being the social infrastruc-

does the other dialectical unity still hold and if so, in what relationship? See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, New York: Continuum 2004, p. 35.

¹⁸ Daniel Spaulding, "The Problem With The Destruction Of Art Is That It Preserves Too Much," *Third Rail Quarterly* 1 (2013), http://thirdrailquarterly.org/wp-content/uploads/thirdrail_fall2013_06_dspaulding.pdf (accessed 27/1/20).

tures that condition and support the existence of art, such as class society, the art market, labour, money, the belief in art itself) and, insofar as it constantly negates that which it is not (through incorporation, juxtaposition, parataxis), it is always moving the parameters for both how it makes claims and how those claims are evaluated. Can we think of what would constitute a, so to speak, 'determinate negation' for art?

The recent call to 'remove' and 'destroy' a painting from the 2017 Whitney Biennial acts against a concrete instance of art by enacting a refusal of its claim to universality—it moves against the putative scope for a prominent museum to preside over the memorialising of 'Black pain' as national tragedy—, countering that this universality has 'been founded on the constraint of others' and noting the painter's participation in this erasure through operative transparency. Over the transparency of white freedom a black *bilderverbot* is implied and it is not surprising that arguments against the legitimacy of such a ban draw their oppositional strength from claims for the universality of free speech on principle—rather than the concrete specificity of the inequalities the ban addresses—or by challenging the apparent weakness of a letter that sought redress by directing its demands towards the institution's curatorial team or by claiming the letter distracted from work by black artists in the show and calling instead for a more *affirmative* approach to the application of race politics in art. Such a determinate negation may, paradoxically, take the shape of a making visible or drawing connections where they are hidden, not to moralise what is seen and known over the hidden, but to express how ways of seeing are themselves dependent on what is structurally made invisible. This is the non-identity between art's particularity and its universality, enabling art as thought and practice to turn its culturalisation as a powerful contradiction.

In our contemporary scene, it is more likely a workless surplus humanity which might meaningfully unify to abolish both

art and labour from outside rather than from within poles of either art-non-art or capital-labour. This spectre of an involuntary abolition of art or work is, in a certain sense, prefigured in Giorgio Agamben's scattered accounts of *désœuvrement*, 'unworking,' or 'inoperativity.'¹⁹ The 'destitution of work' is a possibility that arises in modern art, establishing the indeterminacy of life and work as a goal, but never actually achieving this. Therefore, Agamben opposes Marx, who saw self-consciousness of work as the definitive distinction between human and animal, and a concept that allowed humanity to reconstruct its own dependencies and reproduction, thus transforming itself and nature. Instead Agamben seeks an exit from the thorough penetration of utilitarianism and work as the "destiny of mankind" by emphasising the division of potential and act in language, but maintaining a trace of their potential unity. In this sense, any naturalisation of reproduction or production is negated in favour of an inoperative potential open to new uses and possibilities.²⁰

¹⁹ Originally an interactive computer game and a web series, Benjamin Nuel's work, *HOTEL*, eventually became a feature length film first screened on TV: Arte, May 2014. The work takes a typical gaming scenario and resituates the characters in a position of *désœuvrement*, de-activation or unworking. "Peace now reigns between the Terrorists and Policemen who have escaped from a video game and have now retired to the country, to a strange hotel guarded by a chicken. Unused to being idle, they struggle with boredom, they play games, chat and philosophize—while the world around them is slowly crumbling..." Through recursion, glitches, entropy and threatening black abstraction the algorithmic abstraction of an increasingly synthetic world is brought into alignment with the refuse (of) personas left in the wake of deactivated, or redundant, social roles. We are left to ponder the space that nothing opens up. It is a space of critical boredom, a world picture of social things and persons without use or determination. Benjamin Nuel, *HOTEL* (trailer), 2012, <https://vimeo.com/38380296> (accessed 27/1/20).

²⁰ "Contemplation and inoperativity are, in this sense, the metaphysical operators of anthropogenesis, which, freeing the living being from every biological or social destiny and from every predetermined task, renders it open for that particular absence of work that we are accustomed to calling 'politics' and 'art.' Politics and art are neither tasks nor simply 'works': they name, rather, the dimension in which the linguistic and corporeal, material and immaterial, biological and social operations are made inoperative and contemplated as such." Giorgio Agamben, "What is a destituent power (or potentiality)?," *Society and Space* 32.1 (2014), pp. 65–74, here p. 70.

What comes to mind here is also a distinction we have been making for some time between ‘use value’ and ‘use.’ Peter Osborne notes in a recent lecture that ‘use value’ is a vague and abstractly negative counter to exchange value, because all it stands for is ‘some’ quality, a qualitative dimension, as opposed to the exact quantification of exchange. He then called on the concept of ‘use’ as having more potential to escape this weak negativity of ‘use value,’ to the extent that it could reflect and antagonise the social and historical content of ‘use value’ and reveal it as alienated from ‘authentic experience’ as it is dependent, conceptually and empirically, on exchange.²¹ Thus, it is not enough, perhaps, for art to negate ‘use value’ that belongs to a society dominated by production for profit, that is, by the capitalist form of value, for art to be useless in the classical sense; to be autonomous, thus, in a simply residual, factual sense that it is exceptional in its mode of production, an aberration itself linked to histories and actualities of global colonialism and plunder-funded welfare states. Rather, it may be an issue of materialising uses not currently recognised as such or re-functionalised of capitalist material and relations, as much as their de-functionalisation.

²¹ Peter Osborne, “Use! Value! Exchange! Inside and Outside Relations of Exchange,” lecture given at Central Saint Martins, London, 23 November 2014.

* APPENDIX

Year of Women Strike

On October 24th, 1975 (the UN-designated “International Year of Women”), 90% of Iceland’s women refused to work, cook, or look after children (by 2005, women still only earn about 64.15% of men’s wages in Iceland).

Recent Women’s Strikes

On October 3rd, 2016 women gathered in 90 Polish cities to protest a national abortion ban. While the ‘Black Monday’ protests sought to build on the success of the 1975 Icelandic women’s strike, in Poland the normal running of business was affected only very marginally, but the protest did apparently steer the course towards the ban being voted down in parliament. With the unprecedented menace of Trump’s election and the turbulent political climate in the United States leading to a wave of feminist organising, a Women’s Strike was called there but unfolded worldwide on March 8, 2017 (International Women’s Day, originally International Working Women’s Day when it was first organised by the U.S. Socialist Party in 1909).

Sex Strike

In Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* a sex strike is initiated by the women of Athens in order to compel the ‘citizens’ (men) to vote against continuing a war. As above, the strike serves to make visible previously invisible forms of compulsion, labour, and dependence. Relations are turned on their head, and the social fabric unstitched in order for us to see the truth from another perspective.

LYSISTRATA: Kalonike, my heart is burning,
and I’m very upset with us women,

because all the men think we are very devious
—KALONIKE—and they're right—!²²

Based on Aristophanes' play, something along these lines—a sex-strike—is seen in Spike Lee's recent film *CHI-RAQ*. Though this is a pantomime, a form of carnival after which gender relations return very quickly to their norms; norms that elide class as much as they do sexualities excluded from the black heterosexuality Lee's films caricature.

Birth Strike

Earlier in the last century, IWW activist Elizabeth Gurley-Flynn conceptualised the strike as one of a myriad of possible forms of 'sabotage,' theorised as the "conscious withdrawal of workers' efficiency." Extending the IWW's drive to create 'one big union,' Gurley-Flynn attempted to join together both sides of workers' power: to go too fast and diminish quality, to go slow and diminish quantity. To break the rules and break the machines and tools of labour, or to adhere too closely to the rules. To unite the house-bound reproductive labour of women and that of women and male workers in the factories, she advocated a kind of 'birth strike:' "to limit the supply of producers... to limit the supply of workers on the market."

Human Strike

Artist collective Claire Fontaine have formulated the idea of the 'human strike' as a way of addressing the role of production of subjectivity in the 'withdrawal of efficiency' represented by the strike.²³ The 'strike within the strike' is a way to consider the complexities of negation for those who are not counted as being

²² Aristophanes, *Lysistrata, The Women's Festival, and Frogs*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 2011, p. 35.

²³ Claire Fontaine, *Human Strike Has Already Begun and Other Writings*, Lüneburg: Mute and Post-Media Lab 2013.

at work, whose work is the invisible one of reproducing social relations. This idea cuts to the depth of negation that a general strike would need to reach if it is to generate forms of life that are not simply suspending work for capital as an economic formation, but the work of capital as a social relation. It thus engages the very construction of the self as 'productive' for capitalism. Drawing on examples of critical negation and self-negation within political currents and the historical avant-garde, they propose to make the self useless for capital, for valorisation—a veritable human strike.

DESTITUTE OR SITUATE: A FEW REMARKS ON THE EXCHANGE BETWEEN JULIEN COUPAT AND ERIC HAZAN AND JEAN-LUC NANCY (JANUARY–FEBRUARY 2016)

Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen

“It seems to me nonetheless necessary to note the following: the word chosen to describe the desired process, *destitution*, is not especially convincing, not stirring enough and too tied to what it has to be separated from.”¹ This is Jean-Luc Nancy replying to the call published by Julien Coupat and Eric Hazan in late January 2016 in *Libération* titled “*Pour un processus destituant: Invitation au voyage*” (In Favour of a Destituent Process: An Invitation to Travel).² Nancy’s reply, “*Pour répondre à l’appel de Julien Coupat et d’Eric Hazan*” (To Reply to Julien Coupat and Eric Hazan’s Call), was published a little more than a fortnight after Coupat and Hazan’s initial sweeping critique of nation-state-based democracy and the French Left’s attempt to mobilise the political public sphere, denouncing President Hollande’s proposal to revoke the citizenship of convicted terrorists in the wake of the attack in Paris on November 13th, in which 130 people were killed. Nancy was well-disposed to Coupat and Hazan’s call and their critique of politics, but had doubts that destitution was the next step in the process.

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Pour répondre à l’appel de Julien Coupat et d’Eric Hazan,” in: *Libération*, 11 February 2016, http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/02/11/pour-repondre-a-l-appel-de-julien-coupat-et-d-eric-hazan_1432682 (accessed 27/1/20), my translation.

² Julien Coupat and Eric Hazan, “Pour un processus destituant: Invitation au voyage,” in: *Libération*, 25 January 2016, http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/01/24/pour-un-processus-destituant-invitation-au-voyage_1428639 (accessed 27/1/20), my translation.

A brief note on what follows: I have opted for a montage in which I put the two texts side by side, outlining their arguments and differences. I think this is the right way to proceed in the present situation, where the camp and the state of exception are the starting points; each day refugees are ‘disappearing’ while trying to reach Europe, fleeing from the wars, terror and economic strangulation pursued by Western powers in an attempt to kill the ‘Arab Spring.’ The negation of capital does not (yet?) produce a critique that can clear up the philosophical situation. Any attempt to clarify the positions must thus be established horizontally and with focus directly on the positions themselves. I end the exposé with a brief historical comparison.

Destitution

In their text, Coupat and Hazan—the young Left communist accused of sabotaging a high-speed train and writing *L'insurrection qui vient* (*The Coming Insurrection*) and the old publisher turned public intellectual—start off by denouncing the French Left’s attempt to critique Hollande’s turn to the Right and bid for a new, Left-wing presidential candidate. This all amounts to nothing but a new round of political in-fighting, Coupat and Hazan note. “They [the Left] want to continue believing in politics.” But politics is dead and the opposition between Left and Right has no meaning whatsoever today, Coupat and Hazan argue, rejecting these debates and the attempt to reignite a dampened Leftist or socialist political program: “We have no reason to endure a year and half of electoral campaigns, when it’s already set to end in some democratic blackmail. To stop being subjected to this countdown any longer it’s enough to go against the clock: We have instead a year and a half to be done with the sad domesticity of aspiring

leaders and end the comfortable role of spectator to their race. To denounce, take sides, try to persuade serves no purpose.”

Coupat and Hazan rearticulate this critique in a manifesto-like mode where they argue that any attempt to restore meaning to politics or do things differently will miss what is in fact already taking place, namely an abandonment of politics, with a catchphrase: “Time is up for politics.” It is already over. Politicians have themselves emptied politics of any meaning whatsoever, the course of affairs in Greece—where one election followed another without changing the terms of the bailout—is telling, Coupat and Hazan write, quoting the German Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schäuble’s statement that “we cannot let elections change anything.” But, more importantly than politicians showing the futility of politics themselves, people all over Europe have stopped being interested in politics, voting for Right-wing parties or not voting at all. “Nobody... cares,” Coupat and Hazan write, continuing the analyses of *Tiqqun* and *The Invisible Committee*, where politics has collapsed but has not been replaced by anything, continuing to live on as its own shadow, with politicians and journalists pretending to ‘do politics,’ or showing images of people doing politics: debating, discussing, negotiating. But the electorate has already left the building (of parliamentary democracy). And what might look like passivity or political fatigue is, in fact, Coupat and Hazan argue, when seen from the proper perspective, from outside the system, an active process of “destitution.” The insurrection is already taking place, at least as an inarticulate refusal of ‘proper’ politics. Coupat and Hazan talk about an “interior desertion” that is “diffuse but wide as a continent.” Their proposal is, of course, to escalate the process. Instead of engaging in party politics or trying to infuse meaning into politics in the usual sense, we must deepen this collapse, the young activist philosopher and the old publisher write.

Coupat and Hazan articulate a critique of politics we could call Situationist, where politics is a spectacle and democracy a ruling representation where politicians are performing ‘politics’ in front of passive voters disconnected from any kind of real participation. In line with The Invisible Committee’s stance, it is a Situationist or a Creative Autonomist vocabulary the two are using, and not a more Marxist critique, like the one Marx himself formulated in the 1840s in texts like “Kritische Randglossen zu dem Artikel ‘Der König der Preußen und die Sozialreform. Von einem Preußen’” (“Critical Notes on the Article ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian’”) where he criticised the idea of political revolution in favour of social revolution.³ Coupat and Hazan refrain from using more explicitly Marxist terms and do not engage in a critique of the separation of politics and political economy, where a formal political equality masks social and economic inequality. Instead, they rework a Situationist critique of democracy, where the opposing parties of parliamentary politics are shown to be in cahoots and performing a spectacle whose function is to transform people into voters, bereft of any kind of agency when it comes to changing the world. Elections are nothing but traps for fools, as Sartre famously put it in 1973.⁴

Coupat and Hazan have had enough of the usual ‘political’ procedures—being for or against this or that candidate, for or against this or that law—and instead propose to engage in what they term a process of destitution, where one refrains from participating in a system whose primary function is clearly preservation of the status quo. It is time to do something different, time to break away from the rigmarole of modern politics; it is

³ Karl Marx, “Critical Notes on the Article ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian,’” in: idem, *Marx: Early Political Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994, pp. 97–114.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Elections: A Trap for Fools,” in: idem, *Life/Situations: Essays Written and Spoken*, New York: Pantheon Books 1977, pp. 198–210.

not a question of constituting something but of dismissing, ridiculing the empty gesture of voting, and leaving the political public sphere. And this is already taking place all over the world, according to Coupat and Hazan. Not constitution, but destitution. This is “not an attack, but a movement of continual withdrawal, an attentive, gentle and methodological destruction of any politics that hover over the sensible world.”

Coupat and Hazan do not really enter into any detailed discussion of the notion of destitution in their call, preferring to advance a critique of politics and French national democracy, but the term plays a central role in *À nos amis (To Our Friends)*, the second book by The Invisible Committee, which came out in 2014.⁵ There, destitution is described as the attempt to exit from the vicious circle of constituent and constituted power, where revolution always ends up creating a new power. The revolutionary project must refrain from establishing a new sovereign. Revolution has to be rethought as destitution, where one deprives power of its foundation without erecting it anew. Destitution is thus an attempt to undo both the constituent moment that creates a new order and the restoring moment that repairs and tries to recreate the connections between the constituent and the constituted, the pre-existing constitution. The problem is, of course, that both the constituent and the constituted power are repressive and more or less immediately require some kind of defence and persecution of the enemies of the constitution. This is the vicious deadlock Walter Benjamin already talked about in his “Kritik der Gewalt” (“Critique of Violence”), asking how we might unlock the tight interlacing of law and violence.⁶ It is a question of developing modes of life in which law and power (constituent and constituted) no longer have a monopoly in defining life, the world

⁵ The Invisible Committee, *To our Friends*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2015.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in: idem, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume I: 1913–1926*, Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press 1996, pp. 236–252.

and its objects. How do we create a political power that suspends the law's power on people and instead make it possible to do something different without recreating a particular political order?

This is the ambitious task Coupat and The Invisible Committee have set for themselves. They go about this task combining Ultra-Leftism and Situationism with a large dose of Foucault. This mix sometimes results in slippery slopes on which it's not always clear what the Committee means when they write about contemporary power, whether it is the contemporary capitalist system or power as cybernetics, an almost all-encompassing but invisible network-based figure with a capital P. It is not always clear in the analysis how we get from capital accumulation to sovereignty, from the creation of surplus value to the nation state's exclusions. The project, of course, is to always block power (capital and the state), or to somehow slip free of its meshes, disappearing from its maps.

The attempt to think destitution is an on-going collective endeavour already being tested and put into practice in France and Italy in the construction of autonomous communes, most famously the *zone à défendre* in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, outside Nantes, where people are blocking the construction of a new airport. The Committee is heavily involved in this struggle. The more 'theoretical' part of the development of the notion of destitution is also a collective process—*À nos amis* circulated among a large readership before being finished and sent to the press—in which, among others, Giorgio Agamben is also active. Agamben has recently picked up the term and put it to use in the last volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, *L'uso dei corpi* (*The Use of Bodies*).⁷ Agamben uses the term in more or less the same way as the Committee, describing a negative operation that deactivates existing distributions and undoes the law and its separa-

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2016.

tions. Destitution is a destructive act where one blocks power using whatever is at hand, making room for another relationship with the living body. Whereas *À nos amis* is a kind of *compte rendu* of the new cycles of revolts they foresaw in their first book *L'insurrection qui vient* (2007), Agamben is, of course, primarily engaged in philosophical analysis of sovereignty, where destitution becomes another term for inoperativity or form-of-life, attempts at describing man's original openness or resistance towards predicates or definitions. Inoperativity is thus both a deactivating operation and the final state of humanity after the withering away of production and self-reproduction.

Situation

Nancy is quick to respond to Coupat and Hazan's call and starts off by saying that he is indeed very well disposed towards testing other forms than the usual political ones. But he is equally quick to sound alarm bells at the nature of the term Coupat and Hazan present as a new rallying call. Nancy is reluctant to go down the road of "negative terms." He is in complete agreement with Coupat and Hazan regarding the bankruptcy of elections and party politics, it is indeed necessary to stop being "accomplices in the political farce." He writes: "We are many that know more or less clearly that politics has been defeated, dissolved in commerce, on the Stock Exchange and no doubt also in mutations even deeper than these frequently mentioned figures." Politics is dead. But what is to be done, then? Nancy hesitates, he is not sure Coupat and Hazan's proposal is the right one. Destitution is filled with problems according to Nancy. Not only is it too negative, it is last in a long list of negative concepts that almost inevitably ends up confirming what it set out to challenge. "We know very well that to discount [*démarquer*] something that you want to get rid of very often risks making

it more marketable [*remarquer*].” The danger of recuperation is massive, Nancy warns. Destitution remains too attached to the sphere of politics, he writes, the sovereign is precisely left destitute by the people. We remain within the framework of the same political procedures. Although Coupat and Hazan do not rely on its terms, the operation remains the same, Nancy writes. And this is a political function. Destitution “requires the constitution of a supra-political authority.” Nancy warns against raising “all the questions that has to do with constituting powers and instituting imaginations.”

Destitution is not the right word; it remains within the framework of negation and subtraction, Nancy writes. In places, he is somewhat opaque and does not develop this critique of negation, but it would be reasonable to suppose that he is referring to the tragic history of the revolutionary movement in the twentieth century. The long lists of failed attempts to create a different world, from Russia 1917 to Berlin 1919, Barcelona 1936, Budapest 1956 etc. Each in their own way, these events come down to us with a heavy dose of despair, their promises and hopes crushed by counter-revolutionary forces or turned upside down by the revolutionaries themselves. The visions of the revolutionary tradition turned out to be prone to extremely violent political practices in the period from 1917 to 1989. Destitution risks bringing us back to these visions of a world to come or, more precisely, a negative task to be undertaken, conjuring up images of destructive gestures and violent manoeuvres. The attempts to create a new world *ex nihilo* not only never took place but always led to extreme brutality and suffering, as Nancy has argued in *La communauté désœuvrée* (*The Inoperative Community*).⁸ Nancy is sceptical of any attempt to remove all obstacles in order to erect a new structure, and des-

⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis/Oxford: University of Minnesota Press 1991.

titution looks a lot like the latest negative move in the repertoire of destructive revolutionary gestures, which so often turned out to be a horrid inversion of capital's own modernising terror, as part and parcel of the capitalist modernity it half-opposed, half-embodied.

The problem no doubt also has to do with the difficulty of distinguishing between positions, from the 1930s we know how easy it is to stage the revolutionaries as fascists, as the Stalinists did to the anarchists and POUM in the Spanish Civil War. Today, this takes place within the framework of the state of emergency and the war on terror where anti-systemic movements are being labelled terrorists. Already before 9/11 this was the order of the day, when the Italian state came down hard on the alter-globalisation movement in Genoa in July 2001, where Carlo Giuliani was shot and subsequently run over by the police. The ability of the ruling order to complicate or distort the revolutionary perspective has to be taken into account; Nancy is well aware of the function of the lie in the confrontation between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces. The lie makes it very difficult to advance or present any kind of revolutionary position. The developments in North Africa and the Middle East speaks volumes to this, from the alliance between the mosque and the army in Egypt, which broke down surprisingly quickly and left the army and the old regime in power, to Assad and Putin's attempt to transform the Syrian revolution into a civil war with extremely complicated fault lines, where large parts of the so-called opposition took on an Islamic shape. The lie is probably one reason for Nancy's cautious reply.

It is complicated, Nancy warns Coupat and Hazan. Who knows what will happen when we unleash the furies? So often in history, revolutionary projects turned out to be further violence and more misery for the wretched of the Earth. There's also a humanitarian perspective lurking somewhere in Nancy's

answer. It is always important to prevent violence and further suffering.

We need to critique politics and stop reproducing the democratic spectacle. Nancy is in agreement with Coupat and Hazan on this but is reluctant to go further. Or, at least, to follow them in the transformative process they set out. What does destitution mean, he asks? Destitution is overthrow and avoidance. It is a process of destruction. Thus destitution is just the last entry in the long lists of words that begin with de-, Nancy writes, mentioning deconstruction, *désœuvrement* or dissensus. These are all negative words that all too easily lose their power when they are disconnected from the specific use Derrida, Blanchot, and Rancière put them to in their particular analyses. “Words quickly lose their power,” Nancy writes, warning against turning them into programs. Derrida warned against the use of the word deconstruction, Nancy says, and we would be ill advised to dismiss his cautious approach.

Nancy’s critique of Coupat and Hazan’s analysis, or his reluctance to go from a critique of politics to destitution, is interesting and in many regards perfectly understandable. As Nancy has shown several times—most recently in *Que faire?* (What is to be done?)—, the necessity of doing something is forcing itself upon us, it’s on everybody’s lips, we have to do something.⁹ There is indeed a lot that has to be done, a lot that has to be undone or made differently. But the temptation to do something, the revolutionary desire, the need to do something or just anything, Nancy warns, often not only risks foreclosing the question before it has even been posed, but even ends up consolidating what had to be deposed in the first place.

⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Que faire?*, Paris: Galilée 2016. Nancy has previously written about the ‘what is to be done?’ question in “What is to be done?,” in: Simon Sparks (ed.), *Retreating the Political: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy*, London/New York: Routledge 1997, pp. 157–158.

In accordance with his deconstructive approach Nancy insists on the necessity to rethink the notion of politics beyond any kind of program or project where we already know the answer to the question (or even what it is the question poses), as if merely asking 'what is to be done?' supposes having the answer readymade. As if it is just a question of setting to work, realising the political program.

Today, we are bereft of a program and we are, for better or worse, without the self-assurance Lenin could exhibit in 1902, when it was a question of the right means to achieve an already stated and clearly defined goal, namely the abolition of capitalism and the coming into being of socialism and a different distribution of material goods. Today, we are in a different situation, Nancy argues, without the confidence Lenin had. Hegel has so to speak exited through the gift shop; the proletariat is missing or at least has gone into hiding. That's the challenge. There are no ready-to-be-implemented answers; the passage from thought to action is anything but straightforward. Transforming the world cannot be a matter of realising an already given interpretation of the world, Nancy repeats. It is important to avoid the teleological discourse implicit in the question 'what is to be done?,' as though we have finished analysing and now must proceed to action.

Nancy is left in a position in which he both tries to be affirmative to the question, but at the same time displaces it, trying to introduce or locate an open-ended dimension in the question, where both 'thinking' and 'doing' are somehow held open, clearing the way for a kind of infinite responsibility for the already existing world. This is, of course, why Nancy ends his answer to Coupat and Hazan by writing that the process is in fact already underway. It is about being responsible now and to the *here and now*, being present to the present, so to speak. Being affirmative to the openness of the situation, freed from the shackles of the past and open to the uncertainty of the

future. This is freedom, for Nancy, not as a political project but as an existential condition. This is Nancy's existentialism and it seems fitting that he ends his short reply by proposing to substitute the term 'destitute' with two terms that played an important role in Sartre's existentialism, namely 'situation' and 'engagement.'¹⁰ He writes:

Let us prefer then to do something different. Neither destitute, nor constitute, nor restitute. It is neither sufficiently clear nor sufficiently lively. I would like to say, because of its resonance, that 'situate' would do. But that would be nostalgic (to death/enough to kill). Let's try simply, as this is a call, to respond, which in good Latin would mean engaging oneself.

This is as far as Nancy is willing to go. Destitution is too far. Destitution is dependent on the toppling of the sovereign, it cannot but be contaminated by the instance it wants to get rid of.

Urgency

Nancy affirms Coupat and Hazan's critique of both the political situation in France and of politics in general but, nonetheless, disentangles himself from the process that seems to have been initiated by Coupat and Hazan's gesture, where destitution, according to Nancy, remains somehow attached to the negative impetus that has to be displaced. Nancy is afraid that this process will end in a kind of hall of mirrors, where the destituting act recreates an authority (that can destitute or exclude, as a new sovereign). It is crucial for Nancy that the infinite is not transformed into a program or work. If there's a kind of com-

¹⁰ A few years ago Frédéric Neyrat wrote a short book on Nancy's "communist existentialism," *Le communisme existentiel de Jean-Luc Nancy*, Paris: Lignes 2013.

munism in Nancy it is a fact, something in existence, it is not something that has to be realised or put into a program. The risk is that nothing happens, that he misses the opening, that his analysis of the ontological conditions always merely postpones ‘what is to be done.’ The question is always both affirmed (‘yes, we have to do something...we have to create the world today’) and deconstructed and, thus, suspended, because all identities are violent programs or *œuvres*.

What, then, of the historical conjuncture? It is important to note that Nancy’s response was written *before* the Nuit Debout movement began, but the French authorities were already engaged in low intensity civil war with the so-called European refugee crisis in full bloom. So time is pressing, “*nous sommes dans l’urgence*,” as Nancy’s good friend Lacoue-Labarthe once wrote.¹¹

“Time’s all a shimmer,” wrote Paul Valéry in “Le cimetière marin” (“The Graveyard by the Sea”), suggesting that time is always creating sparks that differ in size and direction according to the situation, there can thus be something emergent or pressing in a particular historical situation.¹² We have to act and act now. We are responding to something urgent (and not only building towards the future, ‘re-treating’ the political, as Nancy would have it). There are tasks that are impossible to refuse, where you have to take a stand and choose sides, there’s a barricade and there are just two sides to the conflict (there are, of course, a lot of different positions, but when it comes down to it, it’s a question of for or against the revolution). Marx talked about these tasks as “the tasks of the time” [*die Aufgaben der*

¹¹ Lacoue-Labarthe was addressing the rise of Front National and the right-wing resurgence in Europe in the mid 1990s. “*Nous sommes dans l’urgence*,” *Lignes* 31 (1997), pp. 78–87.

¹² Paul Valéry, “The Graveyard by the Sea,” *The Sewanee Review* 77/1 (1969), pp. 1–7, here p. 1.

Zeit].¹³ And, as we know from testimonies from revolutionaries (the Paris Commune, Russia 1917, the Spanish Civil War, the Syrian Revolution etc.), there is a particular temporality in revolutionary processes. It is as if time becomes different. In his *Blood of Spain*, Ronald Fraser quotes a revolutionary comparing the revolution to a toothache: “You don’t eat, hardly sleep, you forget where you’ve been, what you’ve been doing.”¹⁴

Commitment

The exchange between Coupat and Nancy recalls a previous dialogue about engagement and revolutionary politics in French philosophy. In 1971, Jacques Derrida wrote a letter to Jean Genet as a response to Genet’s attempt to rally French intellectuals in support of the imprisoned Black Panther George Jackson, on trial for shooting a prison guard while serving a sentence for driving the getaway car in a seventy-one dollar gas station robbery. Jackson had been sentenced to “one year to life” following the indefinite sentencing guidelines in California at that time. Genet had been active in the Black Panther’s fight against an oppressive, racist U.S. state for a few years and quickly organised a petition in support of Jackson, demanding not only his release and an end to the repression of the Black Panther Party, but also an end to white supremacy. Jackson was a political prisoner and was to be set free, Genet wrote in the petition. Derrida signed the petition, as did a number of other French intellectuals including Marguerite Duras and Maurice Blanchot, but he also wrote a letter to Genet analysing the petition and the position of enunciation of the sig-

¹³ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, New York: Charles H. Kerr & Company 1907, p. 5.

¹⁴ Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War*, London: Pimlico 1986, p. 141.

natories. Derrida was not sure the petition was the right thing to do.¹⁵

He was afraid that Genet, himself, and the others in Paris were merely repeating the very process of subjectification Jackson had been the victim of in the first place; it was Genet and Derrida who were speaking, not Jackson. As he wrote: “With the best intentions in the world, with the most sincere moral indignation in the face of what, in effect, remains unbearable and inadmissible, one could then lock up again that which one wants to liberate?”¹⁶ Derrida was afraid the petition would amount to nothing but the usual, almost ritual condemnation where French intellectuals could voice their critique of some event in the world with a clear conscience.

Derrida’s “yes of course, but...” raises a hugely important question about the risk of foreclosing the critical or emancipatory movement one is acting in solidarity with and wants to see happen. But Derrida is also dangerously close to pulling the rug from under political commitment, leaving him safely inside philosophy, preferring to do yet another round of deconstructive analysis of the pitfalls of radical engagement. The meticulous and sensitive close reading of speaking positions (are we, Genet and Derrida, speaking for Jackson?) and contexts (how is Paris related to the U.S. and its prison system?), came close to a kind of paralysis where Derrida could refrain from doing anything.

Nancy’s reply to Coupat and Hazan is oddly similar to Derrida’s reply to Genet. We don’t really have the same enun-

¹⁵ Derrida’s letter to Genet has not yet been published in its entirety but has appeared in two different extracts: “Letter to Jean Genet (Fragments)” [“Lettre à Jean Genet,” 1971], in: Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002, pp. 41–45; and “Jacques Derrida à Jean Genet,” in: *Magazine Littéraire* 464 (2007), pp. 96f. I attempted an analysis of the exchange between Genet and Derrida in Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, “Yes of course, but... Derrida to Genet on Commitment in favour of Jackson,” in: *New Formations* 75 (2011) pp. 134–147.

¹⁶ Derrida, “Letter to Jean Genet (Fragments),” p. 42.

ciative complications, who is speaking for whom and where, in the exchange between Coupat and Hazan and Nancy. But like Derrida, Nancy is hesitant; he is, of course, as was Derrida in 1971, trying to be both affirmative (“I’m with you, I’m with the movement”) and critical, stressing the need to analyse the terms Coupat and Hazan are proposing. We have to do something but... I will answer your call and join the discussion all the while trying to take a step back. There is no question that it remains important to analyse the conditions of possibility of engaging in political activities, but the philosophical questioning should not be allowed to postpone revolutionary positioning forever. And there’s always bad timing involved in revolutionary processes: just look at the developments in 2011, when the European and U.S. movements were never able to pick up the baton from the revolting masses in North Africa and the Middle East.

Derrida was surely right in asking whether Genet and himself were engaged in a kind of ‘critical bragging,’ denouncing the U.S. prison system and its use of violence on black revolutionaries from the safety of Paris. But it did not remove the necessity to get involved, that was, at least, Genet’s response. And he was right. The deconstruction of political engagement is necessary but it does not remove its urgency; it remains necessary to fight back, to resist, and this will always take place on uncertain terms or in a hostile environment. The essentialising moment cannot be postponed forever.¹⁷

It’s a question of time. And the times are forcing us to take sides. Western European nation states are busy keeping the fleeing masses from Syria and elsewhere out of Europe, protecting the national sovereignty that legitimises them. But more

¹⁷ This is, of course, a riff on Spivak’s remarks on the “strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” from “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in: idem, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, London/New York: Routledge 1988, pp. 197–221, here p. 205.

and more young people in high-income countries like France are denouncing the Western nation state system that is only capable of banning refugees and asylum seekers. In that context, destitution is not a bad position. How we get from that to the negation of capital is still a real question, but displacing the sovereignty of the nation state would amount to half a revolution (and in Western Europe that would already be quite a lot).¹⁸

¹⁸ Thanks to Carsten Juhl, James Day and Jason E. Smith for suggestions and comments.

THE REALITY OF DESTITUTION IS THE DESTITUTION OF REALITY: PRELIMINARY MATERIALS FOR A GENEALOGY OF DESTITUENT POWER¹

Jose Rosales

During the 1970s, in Europe, a disenchanted but not hopeless generation came to the fore to lay claim to the political not as an autonomous and totalitarian sphere, but as an ethical community of singularities; history not as linear continuity, but a history whose realization has been deferred too long; not work as economically finalized toward the production of commodities, but an inoperativity deprived of end [*priva di scopi*] and yet not unproductive.²

Communism is the real movement that destitutes the existing state of things.³

Introduction

On the 19th and 20th of December, 2001, 1 million people took to the streets of Buenos Aires to protest the collapse of Argentina's economy—a collapse set to the tune of 150 billion

¹ The writing of this article would not be what it is, if it were not for the feedback of Iman Ganji, whose unrepentant commitment to revolution has been nothing short of inspiring, and Mariana Silva, whose comradely patience and critical eye taught me what it means to think with *cautious* rigor. It is for them and our comrades that we continue to struggle, think, and live.

² Giorgio Agamben, "Nota alla prima edizione," in: Paolo Virno, *Convenzione e materialismo: L'unicità senza aura*, Rome: DeriveApprodi 2011, pp. 8f., here p. 9, my translation.

³ Invisible Committee, *Now*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2017, p. 89.

U.S. Dollars (the amount of debt owed to the IMF). In the midst of what would prove to be the opening salvo of a decade long crisis, there appeared new forms of struggle, which subsequently gave rise to the invention of new forms of theorising and political practice. For example, while traditional models of workers organisations in the 1960s and 1970s revolved around the factory (e.g. sit-ins, work slow-downs, strikes, and so on), these nascent social movements found themselves displaced from the point of production. And, given the decades long increase in unemployment leading up to the 2001 crisis, Argentina witnessed the emergence of the *Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupandos* (Unemployed Workers Movement or MTD), for whom the *piquete* (blockade) served as the new form of struggle outside of the factory site. The *piquetes*, which first appeared in the center of the country, had as its aim the obstruction of the circulation of commodities. Thus, the blockade was the practical resolution devised by MTD to the following questions: What would it mean to strike outside of the workplace as the traditional site of struggle? Or, as one unemployed worker put it, “who is going to be in control? The people in struggle or the bastards in the government?”⁴ Devoid of any particular place to strike, MTD attacked the world of the commodity that extended beyond the factory walls.

It was in light of the emergence of these new social movements and their corresponding forms of struggle that the militant research collective, *Colectivo Situaciones*, developed the concept of counterpower *or* de-instituent power; a category of political theorising that has now come to be known simply as destituent power:

⁴ ARGENTINA IN REVOLT—BUENOS AIRES & THE 2001/2002 IMF RIOTS, produced by massproduced collective. April 23, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBLmOo3evfo>, (19:13) (accessed 27/1/20).

[A]t long last we have learned that power—the state, understood as a privileged locus of change—is not the site, par excellence, of the political. As Spinoza stated long ago, such power is the place of *sadness* and of the most absolute *impotence*. Thus we turn to counterpower. For us, emancipatory thought does not look to seize the state apparatus in order to implement change; rather, it looks to flee those sites, to renounce instituting any centre or centrality.⁵

Despite the eighteen year difference that separates the present moment from that of the early days of Colectivo Situaciones, the current cycle of struggles appear to have found themselves in a similar situation.

Approximately one month into the *gilets jaunes* uprising, the French online magazine *Lundi Matin* published an editorial entitled, “Next Stop: Destitution,” wherein one encounters the following passage:

The question is as follows: *what does it concretely mean to destitute the system in practice?* Obviously, it cannot mean electing new representatives, since the bankruptcy of the current regime issues precisely from the bankruptcy of its representative system. To destitute the system means to take over locally, canton by canton, the material and symbolic organization of life. It is precisely the current organization of life that is today in question, that is itself the catastrophe. We

⁵ Colectivo Situaciones, “On the Researcher-Militant,” <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/colectivosituaciones/en> (accessed 27/1/20). Additionally, and while it remains beyond the scope of this present article, it should be noted that there is a genealogy yet to be written that traces the philosophical lineage that was brought to bear upon the Argentinian situation by the militant-research work undertaken by Colectivo Situaciones; a lineage that begins with Bataille’s letter to Kojève and his concept of ‘unemployed negativity,’ through Maurice Blanchot’s reflections on May ’68 and his notion of ‘organising the rupture,’ where rupture is tantamount to a ‘nothingness in the process of its realisation;’ and then through the work of Agamben and the Invisible Committee, respectively.

must not fear the unknown: we have never seen millions of people allow themselves to die of hunger. Just as we are perfectly capable of organizing ourselves horizontally to set up blockades, we have the capacity to organize ourselves to relaunch a more sensible organization of existence. As revolt is organized locally, so it is at the local level that our solutions will be found. The “national” level is only ever the echo that issues from local initiatives.⁶

While the number of articles and analyses regarding the *gilets jaunes* uprising increases with each of its ‘Acts,’ it is worth emphasising that destituent power, as it is proposed here, is not simply an attempt to implement in practice the concepts developed by “ultra-left” theorising done in isolation. Rather, in light of the concerns that emerged early on regarding the presence of far-right and fascist elements within various locales of this nation-wide mobilisation, destituent power is seen as the means of attempting to give determinate form to the indeterminate character of the movement as a whole. For as the Italian comrades at *Common Ware* have correctly noted:

In the streets and in the squares of France over the last few weeks it was not only this impoverished middle class in its crisis of mediation that was present, of course. From time to time, in different cities and urban conflict zones, there were various proletarian and sub-proletarian segments, stratified and held in tension by generation and race. It is precisely the recomposition between the middle class in its crisis of mediation and a proletariat deprived of a future that, as we have said for some years, constitutes the decisive political point of the movements within the crisis ...To be clear: we are not

⁶ *Lundi Matin*, “Next Stop: Destitution,” <http://ill-will-editions.tumblr.com/post/180774090884/next-stop-destitution-published-on-lundi-matin> (accessed 23/2/19), emphasis mine.

saying that insurgencies such as that of the *Gilets Jaunes* have in fact solved the problem of recomposition. We are simply saying that within this terrain the question has been materially and spontaneously posed.⁷

The crucial point is this: it is within the context of the dissolution and recomposition of class relations within French society that we must understand this call for ‘destituting the economy;’ for it is only by grasping the condition and problem that defines the *gilets jaunes* uprising as one of recomposition that destituent power can be understood as an attempt at giving determinate form to what is still an underdetermined movement. In what follows, we begin with an interrogation into our present conjuncture as one in which Marx’s original formulation of communism as the real movement of abolition, and Agamben’s “coming community” appeals to its destituent power, encounter one another; a moment that has perhaps been captured best by the Invisible Committee’s provocative reworking of this Marxian dictum when they write, “Communism is the real movement that *destitutes* the existing state of things.”⁸

However, a statement such as this necessarily raises the following question: What becomes of communism if it is said to be the real movement that “destitutes” the present state of things? Does the substitution of “destitution” for “abolition” signal a principled divergence from the vision of communism found in those pages of the *German Ideology* and as intended by Marx and Engels? Or does this destituent movement mark a progressive refinement in light of the failures of historical communism and its various workers movements? As the above epigraphs already suggest, the beginnings of an answer to such questions can be

⁷ Common Ware, “The Vests Are Yellower On The Other Side,” <https://ediciones-ineditas.com/2018/12/05/the-vests-are-always-yellower-on-the-other-side-an-italian-dispatch-editorial/> (accessed 18/4/19).

⁸ Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 89.

found in the works of Giorgio Agamben and the Invisible Committee, both of whom have perhaps gone furthest in reconceiving communism via the category of destituent power.

When one reads Agamben's more recent political writings alongside his 1993 text, "Form-of-Life," as Jason E. Smith has noted, what becomes clear is that through Agamben's reworking of the set of ideas that came out of the workerist tradition, the author is led to view capitalist society and its attendant social relations as asymmetric and antagonistic to the community that is claimed to be the content proper to forms-of-life:

The workerist and post-workerist traditions understand the concept of antagonism in terms of the dynamic of capitalist social relations. This conflictual and asymmetric relation between living and dead labour is one in which living labour is always 'primary,'...whose resistance to that form of capture drives capitalist development itself...Agamben's rewriting of this scenario situates the antagonism less within the dynamics of capitalist production than within the relation between 'massive inscription of social knowledge in productive processes,' on the one hand, and 'intellectuality as antagonist potentiality and form-of-life,' on the other...Communism is the enemy of the social, that is, the objective or factual partitioning of society into classes...To the divisions of society Agamben opposes the multitude of community. The overcoming of capitalist society assumes the name not of socialism but of community: communism.⁹

It is for these reasons that, over a decade later, Agamben reformulated the anti-work thesis of *operaismo* and *autonomia* as follows: "If the fundamental ontological question today is not

⁹ Jason E. Smith, "Form-of-Life and Antagonism: On Homo Sacer and Operaismo," in: Daniel McLoughlin (ed.), *Agamben and Radical Politics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2016, pp. 189–206, here p. 203.

work but inoperativity...then the corresponding concept can no longer be that of 'constituent power' [*potere costituente*] but something that could be called 'destituent power' [*potenza destituente*]."¹⁰

Now, with respect to the Invisible Committee, their reconceptualisation of communism as the real movement of destituent power may appear especially deceptive to some, or lead to a fundamental misunderstanding, if such an invocation of destituent power is taken to mean a tacit affinity and endorsement of Agamben's equation of the communal content of forms-of-life with the potential realisation of communism as such. As will be seen in what follows, nothing could be further from the truth, for the Committee's usage of the concept of destituent power actually finds common ground with the very figures (*operaismo/autonomia*) from which Agamben sought to distance himself. If the Committee privileges destituent, as opposed to constituent, power, it is not due to destituent acts being the very means of arriving at the pure potentiality at the heart of forms-of-life (i.e. "intellectuality as antagonistic potentiality of forms-of-life"). Rather, theirs is a vision of communism as the real movement that destitutes the existing state of things insofar as we understand 'the destitution of the present' as meaning: (i) affirming the rupture with the current state of affairs in order to (ii) organise and render this rupture ever more real, and with the hopes of bringing this state of affairs to the point where the crises and social problems that have long persisted as the open and public secret of everyday life under capital are now directly confronted—and precisely because they can no longer be avoided. It is with respect to these two aspects of destituent power that Samuel Hayat's analysis of the *gilets jaunes* is worth recalling here:

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, "What is a destituent power (or potentiality)?," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32.1 (2014), pp. 65–74, here p. 70.

Today, far from disappearing, social antagonisms have multiplied, something which constitutes both a resource and a challenge to emancipatory politics. The old socialist solutions, centered around the question of class, already in 1848 contributed to invisibilizing the question of women and of race, even though the voices existed to put these questions front and center. A new emancipatory politics, which remains to be invented, should be based on making the ensemble of relations of domination visible, without hierarchy and by remaining open and responsive to new antagonisms which will inevitably come to light.¹¹

And so, the conclusion to be drawn from this comparative analysis is not simply that Agamben and the Invisible Committee arrive at qualitatively different understandings of the concept of destituent power; a disagreement that appears as nothing more than a difference in how each position themselves toward a shared philosophical heritage. More importantly, their respective analyses propose two distinct and competing frameworks by which we can think through the problems that determine the historical and material conditions in which communist struggle is waged today. And insofar as destituent power has appeared once again, an incommensurable difference at the level of analysis translates into a mutual antagonism at the level of practice. At the very least we can say that what is at stake, in light of ongoing social movements, is nothing short of the possibility for theoretical activity to materially effect collective practice and re-potentiate the antagonism at the heart of capitalist social life.

¹¹ Samuel Hayat, "The Gilets Jaunes and the Democratic Question," *Viewpoint Magazine*, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2019/02/13/the-gilets-jaunes-and-the-democratic-question/> (accessed 23/2/19).

Humanity's Innocence: From Proletarian Struggle to Prelapsarian Life

In the Summer and Fall of 2013, Giorgio Agamben delivered a series of lectures in central France and Athens, Greece, under the heading, "What is destituent power?" Now, despite the particularities to which Agamben was responding to in each lecture—the recent occupations and insurrections in Cairo, Istanbul, London, and New York; the necessity to think the end of democracy in the place of its birth—, what is consistent throughout is that, for Agamben, destituent power functions as a third term that is said to overcome the static opposition between constituent and constituted power (the former being counter-hegemonic practices and the latter being acts that defend or uphold the existing institutions of the state).¹²

Perhaps more importantly, this series of lectures also marks a key development in Agamben's overall thinking since destituent power appears as the means of theorising one of the central ideas of his work as a whole—inoperativity—, a concept which Agamben discovers time and again, regardless of the object of his analysis, be it theology, politics, or aesthetic and art practices. So, whether one considers his study of St. Augustine's reflections on the salvation of humanity, where human nature is conceived as "blessed inactivity, which is neither doing nor not doing;"¹³ or Walter Benjamin, who relates destituent power to Sorel's proletarian general strike in his

¹² As Agamben puts it, "if revolutions and insurrections correspond to constituent power, that is, a violence that establishes and constitutes the new law, in order to think a destituent power we have to imagine completely other strategies, whose definition is the task of the coming politics. A power that was only just overthrown by violence will rise again in another form, in the incessant, inevitable dialectic between constituent power and constituted power, violence which makes the law and violence that preserves it" (Agamben, "What is Destituent Power?," p. 70).

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, "Art, Inactivity, Politics," in: Fundação de Serralves Conference on Politics, *Criticism of Contemporary Issues*, Serralves: Fundação de Serralves 2007, p. 131–141, here p. 138.

essay “Critique of Violence;” or regarding the relationship between poetry, communication, and language as such (“What is a poem...if not an operation taking place in language that consists in rendering inoperative, in deactivating its communicative and informative function, in order to open it to a new possible use?”¹⁴); what is always at issue is how best to conceive the reality of a form-of-life whose actions, when viewed from the vantage point of the existing order of things, cannot be understood as anything other than blessed or idle in essence, non-productive of value, and impractical for deliberation.

The salient point here is that, for Agamben, these characteristics of idleness, non-productivity, and inoperativity, are not understood to be products of history. Idleness, non-productivity, and inoperativity are *ontological* facts of human existence; so much so that Agamben will go on to claim that it is precisely these attributes, which are proper to the being of humanity, that capital appropriates and exploits:

Human life is idle and aimless, but it is precisely this lack of action and aim which makes possible the incomparable busyness of the human race. And *the machinery of government functions because it has captured within its empty heart the inactivity of the human essence. This inactivity is the political substance of the West, the glorious nourishment of all power.* This is why feasting and idleness resurface continually in the dreams and political utopias of the West...They are the enigmatic relics which the economic-theological machine abandons on the shoreline of civilization; mankind returns to them wonderingly, but always uselessly and nostalgically. Nostalgically because they seem to contain something that clings jealously to the human essence; uselessly because in reality they are nothing more than the ashes of the immate-

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 140.

rial, glorious fuel burnt by the motor of the machine during its inexorable, relentless rotation.¹⁵

For Agamben, it is humanity's originary idleness and inoperativity that one must centre in any engagement with the questions posed by politics. In other words, it is only by attending to what is ontological regarding humanity (to that which pertains to our originary inoperativity) that we can adequately determine how best to overcome the political fact of life separated from its form; a fact imposed on us and continuously reproduced by history.

Hence, says Agamben, the shape of the politics to come is not that of a struggle over the state or between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. To the contrary, "the coming politics will no longer be a struggle to conquer or to control the state on the part of either new or old social subjects, but rather a struggle between the state and the nonstate (*humanity*), that is, an irresolvable disjunction between whatever singularities and the state organization."¹⁶ Given such an analysis, one is led to the logical conclusion that the politics to come will be defined, not by its struggle with and over the state, but by the struggle between "humanity" (as the nonstate) and the state, as various social forms of sovereign or governmental power, which pervert what we have always, originally, been in truth: inoperative, idle, and therefore free.

However, confronted with a conclusion as bold as this (i.e. the coming politics begins by positing an originary idleness against history as a series of state-sponsored perversions of this essence), a few questions necessarily arise: Insofar as inoperativity and destituent power is said to be the essence of the being

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 138, emphasis mine.

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, "Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*," in: idem, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, University of Minnesota Press 2000, pp. 73–89, here p. 88.

of humanity, does this not lead to an understanding of communist politics as a struggle between the ontological, on the one hand, and the historical and material, on the other? And, to what extent does the notion of destituent power refer to what are allegedly the echoes of an ontological essence from which we have become estranged under capital? In any event, the crucial point to be emphasised is that what is operative behind such strong claims regarding the substance of humanity, is an equivocation between two conceptions of time: the time of eschatology and that of history. For it is this equivocation of eschatological and historical time that grounds Agamben's understanding of inoperativity and destituent power as what is most essential to human being.

To make matters worse, one equivocation inevitably leads to another, but this time with respect to political analysis, for insofar as inoperativity/destituent power is said to be the originary substance of (human) being, the proletariat as the classical figure of revolutionary politics is now nothing but a means of returning to our once innocent, unspoiled, prelapsarian life. For Agamben, politics is the price paid by humanity's original sin of state-craft and the various, historical, forms of sovereign power that are each time realised through specific *dispositifs* of capture:

The originary place of Western politics consists of an *ex-ceptio*, an inclusive exclusion of human life in the form of bare life. Consider the peculiarities of this operation: life is not in itself political, it is what must be excluded, and, at the same time, included by way of its exclusion. Life—that is, the Impolitical (*l'Impolitico*)—must be politicized through a complex operation that has the structure of an exception. The autonomy of the political is founded, in this sense, on a divi-

sion, an articulation, and an exception of life. From the outset, Western politics is biopolitical.¹⁷

That said, one may still wonder if we have been unfair with such a characterisation of Agamben, for in his 2013 lectures Agamben goes on to provide further clarification to the way in which destituent power can be said to be the shape of politics to come; a politics made possible by virtue of living in such a way

...that a form-of-life can constitute itself as the inoperativity immanent in every life. The constitution of a form-of-life coincides...completely with the destitution of the social and biological conditions into which it finds itself thrown. The form-of-life is...the revocation of all factual vocations...It is not a question of thinking a better or more authentic form of life...Inoperativity is not another work...it coincides completely and constitutively with their destitution, *with a life*. And this destitution is the coming politics.¹⁸

A passage such as this merits our interest for at least two reasons. On the one hand, destituent power is now said to be something innately bound to, yet distinct from, humanity's originary inoperativity. And while it remains the case that it is by destituent means that we are returned to our non-alienated inoperative living, Agamben qualifies this previous iteration with the inclusion of *forms-of-life* as that previously missing mediator capable of overcoming the dilemma of capital's historical separation of humanity, ontologically considered, and its alienated being, which takes the form of *bare life*. Given this formulation, destituent power must now be understood as a collective capacity accessible only through this experience of living a life inseparable

¹⁷ Agamben, "What is a destituent power (or potentiality)?," p. 65.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 74.

arable from its (communal) form: “the destitution of power and of its works is an arduous task, because it is first of all and only in a form-of-life that it can be carried out. Only a form-of-life is constitutively destituent.”¹⁹ Thus, says Agamben, it is only by means of a collectivity that it becomes possible for individuals to “return it [the human activity that is the substance of value production] to the potentiality from which it originates.”²⁰

On this account it would appear that destituent power is no longer simply the immediate recuperation of alienated (human) being and rather an always-latent possibility of non-alienated living perpetually deferred and rendered increasingly impossible. Thus, Agamben writes:

*Contemplation and inoperativity are...the metaphysical operators of anthropogenesis, which, freeing the living being from every biological or social destiny and from every predetermined task, renders it open for that particular absence of work that we are accustomed to calling ‘politics’ and ‘art.’ Politics and art are neither tasks nor simply ‘works’: they name...the dimension in which the linguistic and corporeal, material and immaterial, biological and social operations are made inoperative and contemplated as such.*²¹

Significant in this account of destituent power is the fact that Agamben now appears capable of addressing the issue of how originary being and our future inoperativity can be said to have any relation to one another (insofar as it is the history of sovereign governmentality that has successfully functioned as that which perpetually obstructs our non-alienated living). That said, what is gained in logical consistency is simultaneously lost in terms of its concrete specificity. For while Agamben con-

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 72.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 73.

²¹ Ibid, p. 74, emphasis mine.

ceives of the destitution of capital as the process of transforming an overdetermined set of possible forms-of-life into an underdetermined and constrained set of possible forms, humanity cannot be said to be the sole proprietor of the potentiality (re)discovered at the end of this procedure; whether considered ontologically, or historically and materially.²² Thus we are led to wonder, is a *non-ontological* conception of destituent power possible?

Destituons le Monde: **Against the Management of Everyday Life**

According to the Invisible Committee, destituent acts or gestures are realised according to the fusion of the positive-creative logic of founding the conditions for an *other* world in which many worlds fit and the negative-destructive logic of ending, once and for all, the present world fashioned in the image and likeness of capital. That is to say, destituent gestures abide by a logic where ‘the One divides into Two’ (“The destituent gesture is thus desertion and attack, creation and wrecking, and all at once, *in the same gesture*”²³); actions that are simultaneously creative and destructive. Moreover, these collective gestures belong to that class of acts, which rely upon the temporality proper to social reproduction and are actualised in times of decision, which is to say, in times of crisis. And what is ultimately realised along the way, in bringing about an end to *this*

²² Logically speaking, potentiality pure and simple is first an attribute or predicate of being in general before being a predicate of human subjectivity lest we succumb to the traps of metaphysical voluntarism that posits the being of humanity as ontologically prior to being in general. For as we have already known since Spinoza’s criticisms of the illusory approaches to theorizing forms of human living, “Most of those who have written about...men’s way of living...seem to conceive man in Nature as a dominion within a dominion.” (Spinoza, *Ethics* (Preface, BKIII), in: Edwin Curley (ed.), *A Spinoza Reader*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994, pp. 85–265, here p. 152, emphasis mine).

²³ Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 88f.

world, is an altogether different solution to the two-fold problem of the *estrangement of bodies*²⁴ and *fragmentation of worlds*.²⁵

However, destituent power is said to resolve the issue of separated bodies and of the discontinuity that structures the possible worlds of every form-of-life *not* by rehabilitating some sense of ‘unity,’ conceived as the coming-into-being of a still underdetermined (though latently possible) counter-hegemonic Left. To the contrary, destituent acts resolve this crisis through the construction of a different organisation of the fragmentation already underway; a structuring process, which ensures that estranged bodies remain isolated from each other, trapped within their own solitude:

Here is the paradox, then: being constrained to unity undoes us, the lie of social life makes us psychotic, and embracing fragmentation is what allows us to regain a serene presence to the world. There is a certain mental position where this fact ceases to be perceived in a contradictory way. That is where we place ourselves.²⁶

What, then, is intended in this redefinition of “the real movement” as a process that abides by a destituent (as opposed to an abolitionist) logic? According to the terms that determine a properly destituent political logic, the virtue of any struggle against the state and capital is to be found in the potential har-

²⁴ “All the reasons for making a revolution are there...All the reasons are there together, but it’s *not* reasons that make revolution, it’s bodies. And the bodies are in front of screens” (Ibid, p. 7, emphasis mine).

²⁵ “...the world is *fragmenting*...Zone after zone, the fragmentation of the world continues, unceremoniously and without interruption...The wage-work system is breaking up into niches, exceptions, dispensatory conditions. The idea of a ‘precariat’ conveniently hides the fact that there is simply no longer a shared experience of work, even precarious work. With the consequence that there can no longer be a shared experience of its stoppage either, and the old myth of the general strike must be put on the shelf of useless accessories” (Ibid, p. 15).

²⁶ Ibid, p. 46, emphasis mine.

bored within each action that suggests a future that has finally done away with everything that encourages us to 'hate Mondays,' when it is capital that is the cause behind the *whatever-object* of our lamentations. That is to say, the actualisation of destituent power is to give material reality to the potential of establishing the distance between movements and established institutions, in order for the former to better desert, or flee, or take flight from, everything that is involved in rendering vacuous the relation we maintain to ourselves, to those we call comrade, friend, or lover, and to the world insofar as it is made in the image and likeness of capital. As a fellow accomplice has recently pointed out with regard to the *gilet jaunes* movement in France, "[I]t is not the radicals who are making the movement, it is the movement that is radicalizing people."²⁷

So, unlike those collectivities which tend toward 'constituent' or 'constituted' power and situate their strategy within the dialectical relation of recognition/negotiation with the ruling authority (i.e. organising in the hopes of realising a situation of dual power), collectivities that abide by a destituent logic adhere to, and seek to actualise, the vital need to *disengage* and distance itself from the dialectical trap of constituent-constituted power. But what would this alleged other form of unity mean, when conceived as a collective 'abandonment' of the economy and 'disengagement' from the dialectic between constituted and constituent power? At the very least, says the Committee, it would mean the reformulation of the communist question itself; for the equivocation that began with Lenin²⁸ regarding the

²⁷ *Lundi Matin*, "Next Stop: Destitution."

²⁸ "With the breakdown of European social democracy faced with World War One, Lenin decides to restyle the facade of the crumbling old socialism by painting the pretty word 'communism' on it. Rather comically, he borrows it from anarchists who have already made it their banner. This convenient confusion between socialism and communism contributed a good deal, in the last century, to making this synonymous with catastrophe, massacre, dictatorship, and genocide" (Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 135).

terms “socialism” and “communism” has given rise to a more profound confusion whereby liberal economists, socialists, and Marxists have all agreed that the question with which we are confronted is nothing but “a question of management.”²⁹

To destitute or ‘abandon’ the economy not only means acknowledging the illusory gains of constituent power *in theory*; to abandon the economy implies an organisation of collective struggle founded upon the fact that “capitalism is not a mode of *management* but a mode of *production* based on specific *productive relations*, and revolution targets these relations.”³⁰ Thus, the need for an other mode of organisation and struggle than that of constituent power (a form of struggle, which poses the problem of the abolition of the present state of things as being a question of management), which begins from the recognition that

Communism is not a “superior economic organization of society” but the *destitution of the economy*. Economy rests on a pair of fictions, therefore, that of society and that of the individual. Destituting it involves *situating* this false antinomy and bringing to light that which it means to cover up.³¹

²⁹ Ibid, p. 138. Moreover, it should be noted that this is not intended as a *novel* insight on the part of the author and is rather a recapitulation of Marx and Engels’ tripartite classification of socialism: reactionary, bourgeois, and democratic. For Marx and Engels, reactionary socialists are defined by their impossible attempt at protecting feudal social relations, their attempt at establishing the rule of aristocracy sympathetic to the concerns of small producers, and their alignment with the bourgeoisie in the face of a revolutionary (communist) proletariat. By contrast, bourgeois socialists are those who “propose mere welfare measures...under the pretense of re-organizing society, [but] are in fact intended to preserve the foundations, and hence the life, of existing society,” and democratic socialists are those who advocate the same measures as communists but “not as a part of the transition to communism” as if these “will be sufficient to abolish the misery and evils of present-day society.” Friedrich Engels, “The Principles of Communism,” in: Karl Marx and idem, *Marx/Engels Selected Works Vol. I*. Moscow: Progress Publishers 1969, pp. 81–97, here p. 95.

³⁰ Gilles Dauvé, “Leninism and the Ultra-Left,” in: idem and François Martin, *Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement*, PM Press: Oakland, CA 2015, pp. 101–108, here p. 107.

³¹ Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 137.

Thus, it can be said that, for the Invisible Committee, destituent acts are those which are grounded upon a rejection of developing better and more equitable strategies of economic management insofar as communism is not a “superior economic organization.” So, insofar as this notion of destituent power seeks to give form to the problems and crises capital “means to cover up” and thereby rendering them as that which can no longer be avoided or ignored within everyday life, destituent gestures necessarily involve a certain level of organisation of struggle in order to achieve the “bringing to light” of the problems and crises that affect society as a whole. What is more, it is by virtue of the Committee’s understanding of destituent power as organising struggles such that they are able to (i) resolve the problems of social reproduction through decidedly anti-capitalist (i.e. communist) measures while (ii) rendering social problems unavoidable and impossible to ignore, that we are returned to what Marx and Engels originally understood regarding that most general phase of the development of the proletariat:

In...the most general phases of the development of the proletariat, we traced the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where the war breaks out into open revolution, and where violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat.³²

³² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” in: idem, *Marx/Engels Selected Works Vol. I*. Moscow: Progress Publishers 1969, pp. 98–137, here p. 119. For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that while the Committee and Marx and Engels share in the idea that capital wages a ‘more or less thinly veiled *civil war*’ on social totality, the Committee break with them on the question of the proletariat as History’s revolutionary subject. Against the suggestions of the *Manifesto* and its authors, the Committee views the contemporary form of capitalist social organisation as having done away with that feature of social life (i.e. a mass and shared experience of work) required for the transformation of the objective category of workers into the subjective agent of the proletariat. For the Committee, rather than any prolongation of a shared experience of alienation definitive of the ‘mass worker,’ “[T]he majestic figure of the Worker is being succeeded by the puny figure of the Needy Opportunist

Here we arrive at the central difference between Agamben's and the Invisible Committee's understandings of destituent power: while Agamben consistently conceives of destituent power as the capacity for forms-of-life to redeem humanity from that which it has been ontologically estranged vis-à-vis capital, the Committee, by contrast, understands destituent power as the general phase of development of insurrection centered around anti-state, anti-bureaucratic, and communist *social relations*. Thus, it is due to this discrepancy between destitution as messianic capacity of forms-of-life and destitution as the form and organisation insurrectionary struggle takes when founded upon anti-state communist social relations, that it comes as no surprise to read the Committee issue this decidedly anti-Agambenian statement:

Only by means of this type of confusion did it become possible to imagine that a subject like "Humanity" could exist. Humanity—that is, all human beings, stripped of what weaves together their concrete situated existence, and gathered up phantasmally into one great something-or-other, nowhere to be found. By wiping out all the attachments that make up the specific texture of worlds, on the pretext of abolishing private ownership of the means of

[*le Crevard*—because if money and control are to infiltrate everywhere, it's necessary for money to be lacking everywhere. Henceforth, everything must be an occasion for generating a little money, a little value, for earning "a little cash" (Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 96). The outcome of the 'Needy Opportunist' supplanting 'the Worker,' being that, today, "Capital no longer just determines the forms of cities, the content of work and leisure, the imaginary of the crowds, the language of real life and that of intimacy, the ways of being in fashion, the needs and their satisfaction, it also produces *its own people*. It engenders its own *optimizing* humanity" (Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 100). Regardless as to whether this break from Marx and Engels is due to philosophical differences or the changes in the historical and material structure of capitalist production, it is clear that, for the Committee, any figure that identifies as the 'revolutionary subject' (whether founded upon some new and shared experience of precarious labour or otherwise) would still aim towards re-unifying the ongoing fragmentation; a gesture that necessarily leads struggles back into the dialectical dead-end of constituent/constituted power.

production, modern “communism” has effectively made a tabula rasa—of everything. That’s what happens to those who practice economy, even by criticizing it.³³

In other words, such appeals to humanity are possible only insofar as one assumes that the lives of individuals are adequately defined in isolation from the attributes they come to assume in the course of living; that is, insofar as one follows Agamben in confusing what is ontologically possible with what is actually an historical and material potentiality.

At stake, then, in this debate regarding destituent power is the material possibility of directly appropriating the forces and relations of capitalist production. Moreover, in contrast to Agamben’s understanding of destitution in relation to law upholding (constituted power) and law establishing violence (constituent power), the Committee conceive of destituent power as being ‘against the economy’ insofar as the question isn’t that of appropriating the means of production and rather poses the question of how to go about constructing the relations of social reproduction measured by something other than labour-time (or what is required for production). For the Committee, what has become evident is that given the present organisation of global society vis-à-vis capital, any politics geared toward the reappropriation of the forces of production will continue to fall short of abolishing the *relations of production* that organise and form daily life for the simple reason that,

As we know...the Russians have always imported their technology from the west; but since Khrushchev’s day, they have also taken their economic models from there too [...] Obviously it will not be by importing models of desire...that the Soviet bureaucrats will escape the fundamental impasse

³³ Invisible Committee, *Now*, pp. 136f.

they have got themselves into, with their endless Five-Year Plans of which absolutely everyone is sick to death. Not merely are they starting no institutionalizing process by importing prefabricated car factories, but by the same token *they are transplanting forms of human relationship[s] quite foreign to socialism, a hierarchization of technological functions proper to a society based on individual profits, a split between research and industry, between intellectual and manual work, an alienating style of mass consumption and so on...Not only are car factories imported, then, but also social neuroses and in hyperactive form.*³⁴

Thus, destituent power is said to be a mode of collective struggle that prioritises transforming the way in which individuals relate to the production process, such that the distinction between labour-time and leisure-time is no longer that which structures and organises everyday life. Or, as they put it:

The traditional revolutionary program involved a reclaiming of the world, an expropriation of the expropriators, a violent appropriation of that which is ours, but which we have been deprived of. But here's the problem: capital has taken hold of every detail and every dimension of existence...It has configured, equipped, and made desirable the ways of speaking, thinking, eating, working and vacationing, of obeying and rebelling, that suit its purpose. In doing so, it has reduced to very little the share of things in this world that one might want to reappropriate. Who would wish to reappropriate nuclear power plants, Amazon's warehouses, the expressways, ad agencies, high-speed trains, Dassault, La Defense business complex, auditing firms, nanotechnologies, supermarkets and

³⁴ Félix Guattari, "Causality, Subjectivity and History," in: idem, *Psychoanalysis and Transversality*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2015, pp. 235–281, here pp. 243f.

their poisonous merchandise?...What complicates the task for revolutionaries is that the old constituent gesture no longer works there either. With the result that the most desperate, the most determined to save it, have finally found the winning formula: in order to have done with capitalism, all we have to do is reappropriate money itself!³⁵

It is for these reasons that destituent power takes aim at capitalist social relations by giving a form and organisation to struggle that not only sustains friendship as “fraternity in combat,” but that produces the necessary conditions for what comes after the barricades and the insurrectionary fervour, which inevitably subside. To destitute the economy, then, is but the collective construction of what is necessary for the actualisation and generalisation of our non-alienated living, or what they simply call *community*:

Without at least the occasional experience of community, we die inside, we dry out, become cynical, harsh, desert-life. Life becomes that ghost city peopled by smiling mannequins, which functions. Our need for community is so pressing that after having ravaged all the existing bonds, capitalism is running on nothing but the promise of “community.” What are the social networks, the dating apps, if not that promise perpetually disappointed? What are all the modes, all the technologies of communication, all the love songs, if not a way to maintain the dream of a continuity between beings where in the end every contact melts away?...In 2015, a single website of pornographic videos called PornHub was visited for 4,392,486,580 hours, which amounts to two and a half times the hours spent on Earth by *Homo sapiens*. Even this epoch’s obsession with sexuality and its hyper-indulgence in

³⁵ Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 85.

pornography attests to the need for community, in the very extremeness of the latter's deprivation.³⁶

To seek out the organisational requirements for reproducing “what is lived in the fight itself;”³⁷ for reproducing “that experience of fraternity in combat, of friendship;”³⁸ for the reproduction of the fleeting experiences of a form of non-alienated living one encounters in the midst of struggle; all of these are so many iterations of the fundamental principle that what is revolutionary in moments of insurrection is the fact that individuals become accustomed to, comfortable with, and desiring of that form-of-life that no longer structures our existence according to the demands and temporality of the circuits of production and circulation. As one of the many participants in the 2013 Gezi Park protests remarked, perfectly capturing such a sentiment, “[t]he people who are coming here, for the past 18 days, are not spending money. And when they get used to not spending money, it's like a revolution within themselves.”³⁹

Eighteen Years of Giving Form To Shapeless Things: 2001–2019

Roughly thirteen years after the events that led *Colectivo Situaciones* to construct this notion of destitution power, they would come to identify this mode of struggle as more of a problematic impasse that needs revisiting than a simple set of prescriptions to be implemented:

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

³⁹ *TAKSIM COMMUNE: GEZI PARK AND THE UPRISING IN TURKEY*, direct. Marianne Maeckelbergh and Brandon Jourdan, August 5, <http://www.globaluprisings.org/taksim-commune-gezi-park-and-the-uprising-in-turkey/>, (11:18–11:32) (accessed 12/11/18).

If during what we call the ‘de-instituent’ phase, social movements attacked the neoliberal state constituting practices capable of confrontation in areas such as the control of money, or bartering; of counterviolence, as in road blocks; and of political command over diverse territories, as in assemblies; social movements, if we can still call them that, currently confront new dilemmas about whether to participate or not (and when, and how) in what could be called a ‘new governmentality,’ thus expressing the distinguishing features of a new phase of the state form and requiring us to problematize the concept of social movement itself.⁴⁰

What, then, are we to make of this recent and complicated history of destituent power? Is it the case that destituent power can once again be implemented given that the current cycle of struggles resemble those of Argentina in 2001 (i.e. a struggle between social movements and capitalist nation-states)? Or is it rather the case that we remain caught in the impasse *Colectivo Situaciones* already identified in 2014, thus making destituent power more of a problem than a resolution to the multiplication of crises of capital and the increased immiseration, which inevitably follows? With respect to the current conjuncture, it would appear that social movements have chosen to side with the former analysis; for destituent power is being hailed, once more, as the necessary organisational form that is to be assumed by present day social movements as well as the coming struggles against capital and its nation-states; and particularly with respect to the *gilets jaunes* movement in France and the impend-

⁴⁰ *Colectivo Situaciones*, “Crisis, governmentality and new social conflict: Argentina as a laboratory,” *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* 14.3 (2014), pp. 395–409, here p. 397.

ing climate catastrophe expected to make itself fully felt in little over a decade.⁴¹

In line with *Lundi Matin*'s editorial, with which this article began, Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright make similar claims in their 2018 text, *Climate Leviathan*, when reflecting upon the possible paths toward an anti-authoritarian and internationalist climate justice movement capable of integrating the history and lessons of anti-capitalist struggles and the knowledges and practices of indigenous and colonised peoples into a single movement—a mode of organisation, which they tentatively nominate as 'Climate X.'⁴² For Mann and Wainwright, it is equally important for climate justice movements to avoid the seductive fantasy of a planetary communist sovereignty that would strictly regulate and police the world's energy consumption (what they dub 'Climate Mao')⁴³ as it is important to reject

⁴¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report> (accessed 27/1/20).

⁴² As Mann and Wainwright put it, "There are, we might say, two broad but distinct trajectories that might lead to Climate X. The first is a radical analysis and practice based in an open embrace of the tradition of the anticapitalist Left, spring from Marxist roots...The second trajectory gets its momentum from very different sources: the knowledge and lifeways of peoples who have long historical experience with ways of being that are not overdetermined by capital and the sovereign state. It is no accident that Indigenous and colonized peoples are at the frontlines in the struggles sowing the seeds of any realizable Climate X...The challenge that defines Climate X is bringing these two trajectories together; not to merge them, or subordinate one to the other, but to find some means by which they support each other, give each other energy and momentum. This is not impossible, although a left turn toward Leviathan or Mao will almost certainly undo the potential for synergy." Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*, London/New York: Verso 2018, pp. 189f.

⁴³ It is Andreas Malm who perhaps summarises Climate Mao best in his reflections on the recommendation by Kevin Anderson, deputy director of the Tyndall Centre and leading authority on emissions and mitigation scenarios, for a "planned economic recession" in order to avoid climate collapse and reduce CO₂ emissions at a rate of 10 percent per annum: "Anderson uses the term 'planned economic recession' (Anderson and Bows 2008, 3880). He does not say it loud, but 'planned economic recession' does of course objectively constitute a war against capital. More precisely, and to be perfectly honest, upward of 10 percent annual reductions in CO₂ emissions is a program for war communism. This is Trotsky vintage 1920. Needless to say, the militarisation of labor, the shooting of strikers and all the other inexcusable excesses should be avoided, but cuts of this depth would demand rationing and requisitions, warlike state

the trappings of any liberal optimism that encourages movements to reinvest their political energy into stricter cap-and-trade deals and the passage of legally binding environmental agreements between nation-states and international governing bodies. Against these two options, Mann and Wainwright view a fusion of the vision of communism articulated in *The German Ideology*, with the Benjaminian-Agambenian appeals to destituent power as the revolutionary way forward in light of an ever-warming planet:

The first opening might find inspiration in the categorical refusal that underwrites Marx's critique of sovereignty and of communism...His clearest statement on the matter is a refusal of the possibility that revolutionary thought can "know" in a definitive manner where revolutionary activity is going. Communism, he wrote, is "not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things, the conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence." The second opening might be grounded in Benjamin's call for politically resolute witness to crisis, a stance that finds affirmation in Agamben's appeal to a "coming community" and "destituent" power. We wager we need to say yes and yes, affirming both positions at once. In this view, Climate X is at

management of all industries, premature liquidation of astronomic amounts of capital sunk in fossil infrastructure, centralized decisions on who can consume what goods in what amounts, punishment of transgressors threatening the annual emissions targets (cf. Delina and Diesendorf 2013). They can only be feasible under an exceptional regime dealing with an unheard of emergency—or, to quote *Terrorism and Communism*, surely Trotsky's least palatable book: 'Comrades, we stand face to face with a very difficult period, perhaps the most difficult period of all. To difficult periods in the life of peoples and classes there correspond harsh measures.'" Andreas Malm, "Tahrir Submerged? Five Theses on Revolution in the Era of Climate Change," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 25.3 (2014), pp. 28–44, here p. 38.

once a means, a regulative ideal, and, perhaps, a necessary condition for climate justice.⁴⁴

And so it appears that there remains at least one more chapter in the history of destituent power that is yet to be written; one more attempt made at testing the efficacy of the concept against the structure of capitalist reality. In any event, and given the preceding analyses, what is clear by now is that rather than a shared and working definition, the Committee and Agamben, in fact, operate under qualitatively different, if not altogether incommensurable, conceptions of the very term itself. While Agamben views destituent acts as the type of activity that all those coming communities of whatever-singularities must undertake in order to wrest back the pure potency of inoperativity from which it has been alienated from by Western political sovereignty, the Invisible Committee, following Guattari's critical appraisal of the Russian Revolution, understand destituent power as the necessary means of resolving the problems that plagued the Bolshevik government from the outset ("they are transplanting forms of human relationship[s] quite foreign to socialism...between intellectual and manual work, an alienating style of mass consumption and so on...Not only are car factories imported, then, but also social neuroses and in hyperactive form"⁴⁵). So, with respect to the current cycle of struggles and the conjuncture in which they find themselves, if communism is now said to be the real movement that *destitutes* the existing state of affairs, and if destituent power is the necessary organisational form struggles must take today given the objective material conditions of globally integrated capital, communism as the real movement of *destitution* remains a contested form of struggle.

⁴⁴ Mann and Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan*, p. 183.

⁴⁵ Guattari, *Psychoanalysis and Transversality*, pp. 243f.

For those who side with Agamben, destitution as the practical means for rehabilitating the originary being of humanity (inoperativity) implies a certain vision of politics that posits emancipation as a fundamentally ontological problem, before being a problem for politics. To detourn Heidegger's well known dictum, destituent power is necessary because, says Agamben, we have forgotten the originary question of the meaning of the being of humanity. Thus, despite the best efforts of thinkers such as Bruce Braun and Stephanie Wakefield,⁴⁶ who attempt to find the resources within the work of Agamben to overcome the lingering Heideggerianism that plagues his thought as a whole, Agamben's notion of destituent power describes the type of collective action proper to all current and coming communities of whatever-singularities who struggle against the *historical* separation of life from its form, on behalf of a form of life that can only be conceived as existing prior to the history of Western governmentality. In the end, it is due to the idealist trappings that ground the opposition of the originary inoperativity of humanity to the separation of life from its form via political sovereignty that Agamben, abstractly, "calls out to Humanity. He tears the veils from universal History, destroys myths and lies, uncovers the truth of man and restores it to him. The fullness of time has come. Humanity is pregnant with the imminent revolution which will give it possession of its own being. Let men at last become conscious of this, and

⁴⁶ "Ultimately, a politics of destitution puts us in uncertain territory where being is again a *question*. If Western philosophy has always tried to determine life/being by giving it a name, a ground, a foundation, then following Agamben and Heidegger... we might begin to acknowledge that we cannot know what it means to "be" in advance...Being is not a state or a fact but rather a *question*, whose answers are rooted in space and time. The fatal, ongoing error of Western thought has been to forget this." For more see Bruce Braun and Stephanie Wakefield, "Destituent power and common use: reading Agamben in the Anthropocene," in: Mat Coleman and John Agnew (eds.), *Handbook on the Geographies of Power*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing 2018, pp. 259–272, here p. 271.

they will be in reality what they are in truth: free, equal and fraternal beings.”⁴⁷

By contrast, for those who side with the Invisible Committee (as well as Guattari and Colectivo Situaciones), destituent power is the necessary measure and organisational form that communities must take in order for the struggle against capital and its nation-states to succeed. For the Committee, *human emancipation* has never been a problem first posed at the level of Being and only subsequently to be addressed at the level of concrete material collective *praxis*. Rather, for the Committee, there has never been any ‘originary’ meaning of the being of humanity toward which struggles can orient and organise themselves. The ‘truth’ of the being of humanity has never been a mere given, or an accomplished fact; it is discovered to be subject to the perpetual becoming of what is made, re-made, and *un-made*. For it is only by taking aim at, and ultimately transforming, the very “ensemble of social relations”—which is the essence of a humanity everywhere confronted by the accumulation of capital⁴⁸—that struggles realise the necessary conditions for bringing about a *real* and *concrete* genesis of what Agamben uncovered in an idealist manner: the revolution immanent to the potency of inoperativity.

⁴⁷ Louis Althusser, “Feuerbach’s *Philosophical Manifestoes*,” in: idem, *For Marx*, London/ New York: Verso 2006, pp.41–48, here p. 43.

⁴⁸ “But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of...social relations.” Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in: Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York: Norton 1978, pp. 143–145, here p. 145.

THE STONE MICROPHONE

Evan Calder Williams

In an 1837 British report on the state of incarceration, the Inspectors of Prisons for the Home District confront a fundamental contradiction facing those who design spaces for the forcible containment and isolation of other humans: those humans need air to breathe, yet that air is also the medium through which the sound of their voices will reach each other. Two possible solutions prove dead ends. The first, a vacuum, literally: it would kill the sound but also the occupant. The second would be to resort to external means to ensure silence, through a human-operated system of surveillance and punishment. This was the option taken by one of the significant paths of prison design and administration in the nineteenth century, the so-called “silent system” of enforced silent collective work in the day and solitary confinement in tiny cells at night, most associated with New York State’s Auburn Prison. However, the report of the Inspectors is in large part an explicit attempt to argue against the fundamental inefficacy of the silent system in policing contact among the prison population. Rather, they write in favour of the “separate system,” which centers instead on extended solitary confinement and the attempted blockage of any contact or mutual recognition between prisoners and, hence, gives even greater emphasis to technical solutions.¹

A third option is the one proffered by the separate system itself: prison administrations can be relatively unconcerned

¹ The separate system first took concrete architectural form a decade prior to the report in the 1829 construction of Eastern State Penitentiary in Cherry Hill, Pennsylvania. It would prove massively influential throughout nineteenth-century prison design in the Global North more generally, although overtaken by variants of the silent system in the United States.

about possible efforts at exchange between inmates, trusting that the physical form of the prison itself can sever the prospect of communication. Indeed, the separate system dictates an architecture of separation set in stone, a built diagram of and for the isolation of inmates. This is the path the Inspectors take. They aim, “by means of good construction, to guard, with the greatest possible success, against the carrying on of intercourse between prisoners confined in contiguous apartments. The necessity of this is infinitely more obvious than its *difficulty*.”² They therefore obsess over an attempt to ventilate the cells in a way that would “prevent the means by which this necessary end was accomplished from becoming a channel through which prisoners in adjoining cells might carry on conversation.” But, as they note, “the difficulty of preventing intercommunication still recurred,” and so they turn to the construction of the walls themselves, employing Bath stone, folds of sail cloth, voids between walls, sand in the voids, and jagged brick “to break up and interrupt the regular propagation of sound.”³ All this is not an attempt to cancel sound fully, which they recognise would be impossible. It seeks instead to turn the prison itself into a signal jammer, to reduce words to garbled vibrations, to engineer it such that the effort of the speaker to “make himself understood became quite painful, and could not be kept up for more than a few minutes.”

It is an effort, we might therefore say, to reduce the prisoners to the condition that the Inspectors already see them as incarnating: brutes and beasts deserving to be caged, devolved away from speaking subjectivity. It both produces and confirms an operation central not just to incarceration’s degradation of

² *Extracts from the Second Report of the Inspectors of Prisons for the Home District*, London: W. Clowes and Sons 1837, p. 32.

³ They eventually settle upon jagged walls “so as to break up and interrupt the regular propagation of sound,” with “two thicknesses of sail-cloth, hung in loose folds, between the walls.” (*Ibid.*, p. 34).

those it traps but also to the hierarchical structures of colonial history, narrative, and epistemology. Those are the forms in which, as Ranajit Guha describes, the language and activity of those under colonial occupation or expansion gets treated as inscrutable and chaotic: as “eyes which glow in the bush as evidence of a numerous but unseen presence; the gathering and dispersal of shadows there after the logic of some mysterious movement; voices which drone like chants, rise like cries, and die back into silence signifying nothing[.]”⁴ For such a framework, what “passes as the story of conquest is therefore only half a story pretending to be the whole,” canceling the other story to insist that, “the unknown is altogether unknowable. If what was seen and heard in the bush could be said to constitute a language, it was, according to this explanation which explained nothing, a hieroglyph that had lost its code irretrievably.”⁵ This is the same condition of scrambled signal actualised by the proposed prison walls, which grind the complexity of their possible expression and exchange down to its barest principles, until “[m]onosyllables alone could be heard, and those only by allowing long intervals between each: words of two or three syllables were confused, and quite unintelligible.”⁶ In short, it reduces information to noise, to what “has no signification,” and, in the process, it exhausts and degrades sender and receiver alike.⁷

⁴ Ranajit Guha, “A Conquest Foretold,” *Social Text* 54 (1998), pp. 85–99, here p. 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Extracts*, p. 34.

⁷ My reference here is to Gilbert Simondon’s analysis of the amplifier in *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*: “Noise, however, has no signification whereas information has signification. By contrast, information distinguishes itself from noise because it can be assigned a certain code, a relative uniformization; in any case where noise cannot be directly reduced below a certain level, a reduction of the margin of indeterminacy and unpredictability of the information signals is performed[.]” The relevant point in this context is the way that the reverse process, which the Inspectors envision, of turning information into noise involves the negation of the possibility of a stable code, and of sound being recognised as language itself (rather than the noise of the building, for instance). In this way, the technical process of scrambling the speech of

This is a distinct cruelty. It is not content to simply block contact, because the Inspectors also desire to make the very attempt at speech *hurt*. They hope that, “any attempt to communicate, on the part of the prisoners [would be] an effort at once so painful and exhausting, that the agent would feel the continued exertion of it almost as a punishment.”⁸ They want to make language a trap, barbed to hook those who stubbornly persist in trying to make themselves heard. But, in spite of the Inspectors’ hunger to make dialogue into self-flagellation, their report is undermined by a different awareness: not only that prisoners will continually strive to evade systems of control but also that the systems themselves will spur on and impel increasingly ingenious ways of doing so. “It is impossible,” the text notes,

to convey to your Lordship an adequate idea of the successful dexterity in fraud and artifice in which this System has been the means of training the prisoners... we do not hesitate to say that we defy the most vigilant and zealous superintendence to defeat the contrivances which the prisoners would employ to baffle it.⁹

In other words, the project of incarceration is continually unsettled by something more obdurate than the unavoidable need for oxygen, or the inability to neutralise the volition and intelligence of inmates who refuse to accept the conditions imposed on them. It also runs up against what it truly cannot cancel, no matter what it wedges between the walls: the fact that systems of management, discipline, and coercion are simultaneously

the prisoners precisely mirrors their perceived degradation. Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, Minneapolis: Univocal 2017, p. 149.

⁸ *Extracts*, p. 36.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 3f. Their reference to the “System” here is to the silent system specifically, but as my further discussion of communication via the architecture of the separate system makes clear, this is a dynamic operative through all forms of attempted isolation and control via design and surveillance.

systems that train their targets in “dexterity” and how to dodge and undercut them. They produce the very noise they try to ban from existence, revealing techniques, operations, and material possibilities in excess of their supposed purpose and open to inversion, especially when they form the environment, routine, and space from which one is allowed no exit.

This particular process of analysing structures, spaces, and mechanisms in order to antagonistically turn their specific conditions back onto them is best placed under the sign of ‘sabotage,’ an idea and a practice that wouldn’t be formally named for another six decades after the report. The idea of sabotage is at once expansive and restricted. Although it only received its specific designation as a political tactic at the 1897 conference of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) in France, transposing a slang term for *bad* or *shoddy work* (and a wider range of linguistic echoes, including a *clattering racket* spelled out in its early double-t orthography of *sabottage*), the word exceeds that narrower frame both temporally and conceptually. It suggests a mode of reading a situation in order to locate and amplify its latent frictions, and to camouflage that amplification within the codes and structures of that situation itself, so as to dissimulate one’s activity under the sign of the possibly accidental. Such a tactic is manifestly operative well before and long after the end of that century, and both the act and the word have a polysemic range that will come to span colonial resistance, infrastructural disruption, sex strikes, military espionage, management discourse, political theory, and, by the turn of the twentieth century, self-help discourse and concerns that any form of bad diet or lack of sleep are fundamentally sabotaging one’s capacity to be a productive member of society.

Yet it is also restricted by two recurrent and related tendencies. First, efforts on the part of states, corporations, unions, and political parties almost across the board to criminalise and denounce sabotage consistently involved intentionally dis-

torted descriptions of what it was, ignoring what any of its advocates and nascent theorists spelled out in order to instead reduce it to flat accounts of violence and a pathological behaviour that was alternately chaotic, individualist, devious, cowardly, counter-productive, and shameful. Second, in large part as a result of such efforts, the precise and startling form of activity that sabotage suggested, and which exceeds the strictures of what is allowed to count as political, came to be predominantly defined in terms of the discourses of *labour* and *war*, thereby crystallising a reduced image of the saboteur as an unruly waged worker or a daring spy or soldier.

My larger project on the genealogy and fractured paths that the idea of sabotage has taken tries to counter this, in order to develop an adequate theory of what I argue becomes one of the most continually denounced yet massively influential political concepts and acts over the last century and a half.¹⁰ It ventures a distinct practice of negation, one that has no fantasy of exodus, distance, or purity, and that reveals the often unseen metapolitical strictures of visible representation, accountability, publicness, and presentness that underwrite a dominant account of the project of politics itself. In this instance, though, I won't attempt any sort of recapitulation of that larger work and its arguments. Rather, I'll sketch a different line of thinking specific to the conditions of this volume, in order to delineate some points of contact and deviation between this theory of sabotage in the making and theories of *désœuvrement*. The possible echoes are immediate, especially because sabotage constitutes a significant, if still misunderstood, version of unworking, not restricting such a condition to a lost community of free association or towards a horizon of discrete autonomous activity beyond work (whether in the sense of labour or in the bour-

¹⁰ See Evan Calder Williams, *Manual Override: A Theory of Sabotage*, London/New York: Verso 2021 (forthcoming).

geois model of a work of art). Moreover, the very concepts championed by theories of unworking and their extended network—lack of work, inoperative negativity, and inertia, for instance—form many of the aspects of sabotage (and the assumed subjectivity of the saboteur) that its opponents have so consistently leveled as an accusation.

What follows will focus particularly on three elements that generatively cross between these two theories, despite and perhaps because of crucial differences. First, if, as Alison Hugill puts it adeptly in this volume, the “earth is the essential materiality of the work that remains hidden in the experience of the world,”¹¹ we might begin to understand sabotage as taking shape precisely in the prospect of detecting and activating the hidden frictions of the fundamental materiality through which a process or system takes place, yet which are not fully enclosed by its organisation. Second, sabotage involves a key sense of what I here call the *inoperational*, a term intended to mark the charged relation between the non-operational (that which has been placed into stasis or breakdown as the result of sabotage), the inoperable (the illusion of wholeness, autonomy, and closure of systems or devices that sabotage challenges by insisting that they are open to intervention and inflection), and the inoperative (the temporary state of the one who refuses to carry out their expected or demanded tasks). The inoperational, then, names this strange interplay of action and stillness, the activation and counter-instrumentality of this capacity to *not* function: to be unworking, to get unworked. Third and last, sabotage—not in the abstract but in all its granular instances—enacts again and again a refusal of the condition of politics as predicated on the management and reproduction of “the false unities of subjectivity or identity,” as Jasmine Wallace puts it in her discussion of the relation between unworking and decolonial

¹¹ See Alison Hugill, “Communism without Heir,” in this volume p. 24.

writing.¹² It reflects the very image of community that theorists of unworking and inoperativity have aimed to erode.

My inquiry starts, however, in a space in which even that image of individual agency, mediated representation, and free community has been foreclosed, or at least subjected to vigorous attempts to do so. In other words, in the prison. This is in part because of an aim to disrupt those primary coordinates of *labour* and *war* within which sabotage has been historically framed. In larger part, it is to consider the relation between the silence of unworking—a silence of the disaster, “that has its source in the effacement toward which the writer is drawn” (Blanchot)—and the imposed silence of the prison, “a silence forced onto, rather than adopted by, communities” that sabotage works to keep incomplete, by means of listening to the noise of an apparatus as the sign of its frictions, and hence its possibilities of unmaking.¹³

Of the constitutive built spaces of modernity, the prison is the one most rigorously designed, down to its smallest components, in order to cancel all such possibility of dissent, collective association, or flight, or to absolutely contain such possibility and channel it back into itself, as frustration and hostility amongst prisoners. It is therefore continually suffused with human efforts to counter that cancellation, in ways that necessarily avoid structures of explicit visibility, representation, or organisation that are either expressly forbidden or that can be immediately and often lethally punished. Such an attempt to refuse rigid structure and coercion can of course take visible and incendiary form, unmistakable in prison strikes and riots across the past two centuries and into this one. It’s there, for

¹² Jasmine Wallace, “The Fragments of the Disaster: Blanchot and Galeano on Decolonial Writing,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 30.3 (2016) (Special Issue with The Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy), pp. 292–302, here p. 293.

¹³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1982, p. 27; Wallace, “Fragments,” p. 296.

instance, in New York City's Newgate Prison¹⁴ in the early nineteenth century, where "[w]hen prisoners set fire to a workshop, communal labor came to a stop," according to Jennifer Graber.¹⁵ Still, an excess focus on such events can lead us to misunderstand quieter and more prevalent modes of refusal. Regarding Newgate, Graber continues:

Milder forms of inmate intransigence took place everyday, mainly in the form of work stoppage and workshop sabotage. The new slate of civil servants assigned to administer Newgate encountered an expanding criminal population that overwhelmed the prison's physical space. Prison keepers found it nearly impossible to maintain silence in common rooms. Inmates, it seems, found myriad ways to resist the inspectors' effort to establish strict discipline.¹⁶

The designs and protocols of such attempted discipline are by no means static. Rather, they form a feedback loop that continually responds to the attempts to speak and to steal time, forming an ongoing process of restriction and subsequent evasion. The prison is, in this way, always less solid than the image of absolute stability and control that its architecture tries to project and enact. It is instead a porous space, undermined by the response that its plan produces. In his study of Michigan's Jackson State Penitentiary during the mid-twentieth century, Charles Bright writes that while resistance in prison

is often a full-throated defiance, ringing with verbal aggression and violent hostility, it almost never topples and rarely directly challenges authority. Rather, it tends to be capped,

¹⁴ Not to be confused with the British prison of the same name.

¹⁵ Jennifer Graber, *The Furnace of Affliction: Prisons and Religion in Antebellum America*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2011, p. 48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

contained, and turned inward, finding interior channels of expression and becoming compressed in the narrow and unyielding spaces behind the walls. Prisons ooze anger and resentment. And it is here, in the corners and interstices, that patterns of resistance, defiance, or oppositional posturing take on more polymorphous forms of grumbling, backtalking, conniving, pilfering, evasion, and sabotage. These are the weapons of the weak in any circumstance, and in prison they produce the complex Brechtian maneuvers of space taking and self-activity that Alf Lüdtke, in another context, has called *Eigensinn*.¹⁷

Eigensinn, often translated from German as “obstinacy,” provides a further crucial way to start thinking through this sort of informal refusal at the heart of sabotage, and we might set it alongside “dexterity” as its counterpoint and twin.¹⁸ For Alexander Kluge, whose 1981 book with Oskar Negt *Geschichte und Eigensinn [History and Obstinacy]* is the most nuanced and extended defense of the importance of obstinacy, *Eigensinn* names “the guerrilla warfare [*Partisanentum*] of the mind.”¹⁹ It is an intrinsic rejoinder to structures of management, a fundamental seed of dissent, an almost innate impulse to refuse to participate in those sanctioned forms that aim to nullify any

¹⁷ Charles Bright, *The Powers That Punish: Prison and Politics in the Era of the “Big House,” 1920–1955*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1996, p. 25. Bright’s further comments are worth including here: “I have found this notion extremely helpful. For the practice of cooperating while holding out, getting along without going over, playing the game without buying into it—seeking a space in which to be, not in resistance or in complicity—captures, in prison, precisely that ambivalence of compliance that Lüdtke saw as fundamental to the patchwork of appropriation and response, acceptance and distance, that defined ‘workers’ spaces’ as their own: being by oneself or with one’s mates but, in all events, ‘winning distance’ from the commands or norms from above and from the ‘outside.’” (Ibid.)

¹⁸ For Lüdtke, and Bright after him, the inflection is somewhat different, preferring a translation of “*willfulness*, in the sense of ‘self-will’ or ‘one’s own meaning,’ but linked semantically with *aneignen* (to appropriate or reclaim).” Ibid., p. 25, n. 32.

¹⁹ Quoted by Devin Fore in his superb introduction to Kluge and Oskar Negt’s *History and Obstinacy*, New York: Zone Books 2014, p. 36.

possibility of real change. In his reading of Kluge and Negt's thought, Devin Fore aptly remarks that,

Obstinacy is the underside of history: for each entry in the valorized record of human culture—a record that, as [Walter] Benjamin wrote, is always a documentation of barbarism—a countervailing act of obstinacy pushes back against the thrust of so-called progress; for each luminous vista cleared by instrumental reason, a dense scotoma of stupidity emerges to blight the view; for every human trait that is singled out and capitalized, a resistant trait gathers force underground.²⁰

Fore gets at something critical here. Obstinacy marks the centrality of that basic recalcitrance to imposed order, and, like dexterity, it deserves to be centered in any adequate account of social history. Yet, especially in terms of sabotage, it is important not to reduce it to some vitalist spark of individual creativity and, in this regard, the problem forms a key bridge to theories of *désœuvrement*. In her translator's notes to Blanchot's *The Space of Literature*, Ann Smock notes that she has

most often translated *désœuvrement* as 'inertia,' thereby emphasizing the paradox whereby the artist's relation to the work, the demand which he feels is made of him that there be a work, overwhelms him, not with creative powers, but on the contrary, with their exhaustion. The approach of the work does not elicit in him the strength to reach and achieve it, but immobilizes him.²¹

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ann Smock, "Translator's Introduction," in: Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1982, pp. 1–18, here p. 13.

In one regard, this kind of self-immobilisation (via the conduit of the work and its demand that “there be a work,” that work be done towards a work) seems at direct odds with sabotage’s *inoperational* quality, which involves the active effort of a subject to bring about the immobilisation of an external process of work. In the terms raised above, an obstinate act of turning flows and demands into obstinate blockages of their own function, or into unwitting accomplices of a use they were designed to block, such as the transmission of voice. However, as I’ll return to, the specific condition and mode of reading a situation that makes possible this kind of activation and radical extension of one’s capacities via external systems is a conceptual self-paralysis of sorts; a way of seeing oneself as potentially inanimate and comparable to other non-living elements of a productive apparatus that also need to be animated.²² And, crucially, this isn’t merely a self-conception, because forms of obstinate yet dexterous slow-down, accident, and evasion themselves open one up to being considered as fundamentally inert. Given what obstinacy refuses—the “thrust of so-called progress,” the horizons “cleared by instrumental reason,” the capitalisation of human capacities, etc.—this resistance necessarily appears as *against* the purported advance written into such a history. It is backwards, stubborn, stupid, unwavering, and out of step with the supposedly developmental march of time. From the perspective of what it challenges, and especially within systems that privilege efficiency and control, such resistance is itself almost object-like, dense and immune to the discourses that try to convince it otherwise. Its mascots are the donkey and the stone.

This quality will be crucial for sabotage, marking a kind of slowing and redirection that necessarily leads those who enact

²² It’s fitting that *paralysis* will itself become one of the primary metaphors in the discourse of sabotage, especially in its first two decades, where it names the temporary, rather than destructive, freezing of labour processes or infrastructural circulation.

it to being considered as inept, “slow,” unknowing, and—in the often racialised and gendered hierarchies that gather around such implicit binaries—essentially lacking the characteristics that will be used to define what a productive, free-thinking human subject should be. (We can here hear the echo of those voices reduced to bare syllables, to thumps and vibrations.) Indeed, what the idea of sabotage will suggest—and one of the primary reasons it will be so thoroughly denounced—is that there is something to be gained from the willingness to tactically act in *precisely* the terms that one’s enemies have already presumed to be the case: as Frantz Fanon suggests in his interpretation of the coloniser’s accusation of laziness, the “colonized’s indolence is a conscious way of sabotaging the colonial machine.”²³ It urges, instead, that one dodge the trap of participation and representation and instead become obstinate, clumsy, and unyielding, and in a way that keeps this disruption of expected flow, behavior, or production from being fully proven to be willful, let alone organised.

It’s unsurprising that such a position has remained hard to openly advocate. Because if one side of the hatred of sabotage concerns how it seems to involve either “violence against property” and/or what will gradually be known as *terrorism*, the dual quality of obstinacy and dexterity—its inoperationality—underwrites much of what else opens it to being seen as loathsome, deceitful, counterproductive, and underhanded. After all, it cuts hard against many of the efforts central to a wide legacy of political organising, which justifiably seek to gain a modicum

²³ The full passage is worth quoting: “How many times in Paris or Aix, in Algiers or Basse-Terre have we seen the colonized vehemently protest the so-called indolence of the black, the Algerian, and the Vietnamese. And yet in a colonial regime if a fellah were a zealous worker or a black were to refuse a break from work, they would be quite simply considered pathological cases. The colonized’s indolence is a conscious way of sabotaging the colonial machine; on the biological level it is a remarkable system of self-preservation and, if nothing else, a positive curb on the occupier’s stranglehold over the entire country.” Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press 2004, p. 220.

of respect, to be proud of one's own community and history, and to be counted as a subject worthy of public representation and speech. But, if sabotage historically proves of starkest necessity in situations like prisons and plantations, where that sort of legally defensible representation as a citizen has already been barred as a possibility, the decision to be both obstinate and dexterous means that sabotage gains a quality that extends beyond those most oppressive spaces and beyond a resistance that might be understood as bound only to one individual's singular stubbornness or refusal to comply. It produces a creeping crisis of control and legitimacy for forces of order that seek simultaneously to see all that happens and to dictate the terms of what can happen, even behind barred doors.

This, for instance, is the anxiety lurking in a seemingly minor complaint in another Western European survey of prison conditions from the late 1830s, one by the Inspector General of the Prisons of France, Louis-Maturin Moreau-Christophe: namely, that in addition to making that unholy racket of *sabottage*, “the prisoners went to the toilet more frequently than usual.”²⁴ In one sense, this suggests a theft of time, the crafty use of a request that's hard to deny—*I just have to go, and you'd rather I not piss here in the yard, right?*—and opens up a brief reprieve from omnipresent attempts at oversight.²⁵

²⁴ M.L. Moreau-Christophe, *Rapport à M. le Cte de Montalivet, Pair de France, Ministre Secrétaire d'État au Département de l'Intérieur, sur les prisons de l'Angleterre, de l'Écosse, de la Hollande, de la Belgique et de la Suisse*, Paris: Imprimerie Royale 1839, p. 128, my translation.

²⁵ Increasingly, carceral architectures will seek to deny even this, refusing any sort of partition around toilets in cells, so that even that tiny moment, one so culturally thick with models of shame and privacy, is closed by being made to happen in the open. The sense of the bathroom as a site of desired privacy and as a break in supervised routine or expected productivity isn't by no means unique to the prison. It opens out to a diffuse history of struggles over the right both to have time to oneself and to dictate the terms of that time. In his study of the contested modernization of Egyptian infrastructural systems, for instance, On Barak details a remarkable example of such resistance in 1910, when “chronometers were installed in the workers' toilets in al-'Anābir, the railways' central repairs facility in Cairo, to enforce a new regulation whereby a worker who spent more than five minutes on the toilet was to be fined.”

Moreau-Christophe's complaint also involves a different kind of fear, a pseudo-warden's doubt fusing with a broader moral panic: not only that the request to go use the bathroom might be disingenuous, but that what happens out of sight might not be so innocent as catching breath or sneaking a smoke. Instead, conspiracies might foment in whispers, or, against every effort of the prison to crush any semblance of desire, it might be an erotic site.²⁶

However, nothing speaks so directly to this as the use of bathrooms not just to fuck and rest, but also to *speak*, inside and through an architecture expressly designed to eradicate that possibility. When, for instance, Pentonville prison was constructed on the northern outskirts of London, it featured extensive and carefully designed plumbing so as to have a "water closet" in each individual cell, a choice itself necessitated by the attempt to keep prisoners segregated from each other. However, in a foreshadowing of Pentonville's long future history of neglect and the atrocious conditions in which prisoners were expected to live, the new toilets were continually blocked and ceased to function (in part due to willful damage to them), leading the administration to shift towards communal corners to shit in. Yet the failure of, and attack on, the plumbing wasn't

Workers responded to such imposition in the only appropriate way: after "collecting their salaries"—crucially, not before—"workers demolished the chronometers and the toilets, then cut the rail line to Upper Egypt. Unable to internalize and embrace the logic of their subjugation, they made clear that certain tasks should not be clocked or monetized." On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2013, p. 13.

²⁶ In describing the built chaos inside nineteenth-century American prisons that resulted from growing populations of the incarcerated, Stephen Cox notes that, "When a state legislature appropriated money for a new building, the current warden often simply decided, 'Might as well put it there.' The result was a jumble of buildings that inmates were able to convert into their own private worlds. A convict at the Maine state prison considered it common knowledge that homosexual inmates could be alone with one another 'in such places as the bathroom [bathhouse], salt-pork cellar, Sherm's shack, the cannery, and perhaps the laundry.'" That's a lot of places, whatever "Sherm's shack" may have been. See Stephen Cox, *The Big House*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2009, p. 31.

the only reason to abandon this elaborately designed sewage system in favor of ad hoc latrines. It was also because prisoners realised that the pipes running through the prison could be put to another use: to speak to each other, routing words through the plumbing, toilet to toilet. The same occurred at Eastern State Penitentiary itself, the foundational prison for the development of the separate system. John Haviland's design featured individual toilets with individual pipes that led directly to a central sewer underneath, in part to avoid that possibility of sound being transmitted between cells.²⁷ Yet, as Norman Johnston notes, "[d]espite Haviland's intentions, plumbing technology of the time allowed sewer gas to enter the cells through the privy device, and inmates frequently were able to communicate through the pipes, which were often without water."²⁸

And so they continue to today, no matter if prison design has honed itself for nearly two centuries since the construction of Eastern State. Those who are incarcerated still find a way, not around but snaking *through*, emptying water from toilets to turn their resonant pipes into "bowl phones" capable of conversation from cell to cell, across floors and divisions, with codes of knocks developed to signal who's calling for whom. It is, in this sense, the transformation of the building into a medium, through finding the properties and channels that persist against what that building aims to be. We might see in it echoes of

²⁷ The toilets were flushed not by the inmates, when they needed to, but centrally, to prevent sewer gas from building up.

²⁸ Johnston, *Forms of Constraint*, p. 73. And toilets aren't the only instance of this interplay of the desire for human contact with the efforts to stop it at almost any cost. In Auburn, for instance, in the north building (itself constructed by forced inmate labour), the torturously small scale of the cells—seven feet six inches by three feet eight inches, and seven feet high—and the use of solid doors, instead of open bars that might allow air to circulate, made small ventilation pipes necessary. These, in turn, became the small conduit through which prisoners could speak to each other. Small as they are, these ventilation pipes cast a long shadow: in Attica, just prior to the uprising in 1971, it was through the ventilation system that news passed of the reprisals taken against those in the machine shop.

haunted transmissions and spectral connections, those that reside in any medium: “Wherever phones are ringing, a ghost resides in the receiver.”²⁹ Still, we don’t need to reach to speculative fiction to find them emanating across the void. The warden of Allegheny County Jail in Pennsylvania “can hear muffled chatter through the water in his office’s commode all the time,” the voices resonating through the bleach and piss. “[I]nmates will strike up a conversation about anything,” he notes. “They have 24/7 to think of ways to beat the system.” In such a system, designed expressly to punish by cancelling the choice of who you talk to, think with, and take comfort in, it takes innovation and secret knowledge, born of that “24/7” boredom and of what is passed between prisoners, to invert the separation into a device for transmission. And so the drained “metal toilets are used as megaphones to build friendships, carry out courtship, fall in love—although the lovers may never meet—, have phone sex, pray and carry out religious conversion, pass news about court cases and families and exchange gossip.”³⁰

In the history of the architectures of incarceration, the medieval castle and Gothic dungeon aesthetic of many late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century prison exteriors functioned as a sort of *architecture parlante*, a “speaking architecture” that itself signifies the use of the building. Contemporary prisons have conversely tended to refuse this option, settling instead on a generic municipal or light industrial look whose

²⁹ Friedrich Kittler, *Grammophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1999, p. 75. This trope can, of course, take on more fantastic figurations. In Greg Bear’s 2004 novel *Dead Lines*, for instance, a new telecommunications medium called “Trans” makes possible lossless, crystal-clear calling across great distances. There’s a small catch, though: the system is housed in the execution chamber of the San Andreas prison, and the subatomic bandwidth used happens to be the one that transmits the memories of the dead.

³⁰ Chris Hedges, “In Jail ‘Bowl Phone’ takes Edge off Inmates’ Isolation”, *Truthout* 2013, <https://truthout.org/articles/in-jail-bowl-phone-takes-edge-off-inmates-isolation/> (accessed 28/1/20).

true purpose is externally signaled only by its peripheral razor wire and the signs dotting the highways that skirt them:

CORRECTIONAL FACILITY AREA DO NOT PICK UP HITCHHIKERS

Yet, within the walls, the prison is made into a “speaking architecture” for a different reason, one never designed to happen—and designed to never happen—yet which puts that design to other use all the same. It finds what in the prison inverts the point of the prison. It turns the hulking building itself into a circuit of communication, comfort, and counter-planning. As they say, *the call is coming from inside the house*. And whether that transmission against all odds inspires us or horrifies us is as clear a marker as any of a political stance, even if such speech is too rarely understood as it deserves to be and even if its stakes point to the very limits of the political itself. It is a conspiracy of shared breath, the degree zero of collectivity, the obstinate establishment of contact against everything that tries to obliterate this possibility. It is the germ of being plural, not population.

This speech beyond domination gestures to perhaps the most crucial aspect of what sabotage will come to be, as well as to its most salient links to a theory of unworking within, between, and against political and aesthetic thought. It’s an aspect that must be written in both the positive and the negative, as its force and future importance lies partially in how it runs counter to so much of what is commonly understood as agency, subjectivity, and legible action. In the negative, it designates a capacity and decision to *not*: to not work, to not be productive, to not play fair, to not be a responsible citizen. To not predicate possibility on escape, to not withdraw from, yet to not participate as required. To not configure oneself in sanctioned and visible

opposition to processes and systems that reproduce conditions of power and that demand their antagonists appear as expected within the sanctioned arenas. To refuse recourse to the conceptual bedrock of a community of individuals, or to the assumption that such a community alone could ground a collective autonomy, let alone its persistence through the transpositions of public representation.

In the positive, it is the process by which people decide to instead route and amplify their intelligence, anger, volition, and desire through the very conduits and particularities of those systems that makes such negativity necessary, even if unavowable and inoperative. In this case, it means quite literally amplifying a voice across a distance it could not carry on its own: taking that technology designed to enforce—the individual toilet not for privacy but for privation of contact—and making it into a weapon against the purpose of isolation and segregation it was designed expressly to serve. It is, in that regard, a precise inversion of the very principle that the British Inspectors sought to enact, by making even the interstitial gaps within the prison a means towards their end of enforced silence.

These uses of a means against both the ends for which it was designed and the social order it reinforces (and which structures this very relation of means and ends itself) are always configured differently in discrete instances, residing entirely in spiky contingencies inseparable from their actions. They do, however, share certain common moves, certain relations to and within those contingent scenarios, which I'll refer to as *channeling*, *tuning*, and *cloaking*.

Channeling spells out that critical pivot away: away from an idea of carrying out political action only in a managed public realm of discourse at a remove from the situations in which one lives and perhaps works. Instead, sabotage channels that antagonism back into and through the specific system to be challenged, saturating and suffusing it. It begins with and from the

refusal to believe that there must be a distinct terrain or public representational mode for politics that is separate from those lived situations, or that this mediated and visible action at even a minor remove is the only legitimate way to act politically. And it insists instead that evasion and insurgence can begin in those spaces from which we gain no distance, and that it already does, no matter if sanctioned or not.

Tuning follows from this turn back to where one already is. It names the amplification of the frictions found there, latent in the mismatch between plan and realisation, between an ideal blueprint of how something should work and the dense particularities of how it actually does. In this way, it weaponises the conditions of those systems, activating the inoperationality that resides within a set of operations. It finds those inconsistencies and cracks of terrain, procedures, expectations, and rules, and it carefully tweaks and modulates them so that they generate a disruption or lag that can't be cancelled out, insofar as it comes from within the circuit of production, communication, circulation, or extraction itself. Practically, this can take the form of what was called "working to rule": of knowing, as railway conductors did when they wished to slow troops and materials for fascist military campaigns, which rules and safety checks are on the books but not actually supposed to be followed, and which, if faithfully obeyed, will so slow up the process as to grind it to a halt. It can mean knowing that a factory's supposed automation in fact requires endless small fixes and then choosing to let one go unfixed, not visibly attacking production but allowing the staved-off noise of the assemblage to attack the operation of the whole. It can involve, in a telemarketing center, not hanging up the phone after a cold call has ended, continuing to prattle on into a dead line while a supervisor strolls past and, in this way, gradually dragging down the firm's efficiency.

Yet such actions become not only possible but unpunished—and therefore repeatable—because of cloaking: camouflaging

these actions within the terms of that very system itself, delaying and dispersing its effects under the sign of the *accident*, the *fuck-up*, the *bad connection*, the *expected loss*, the *oops*. One of the reasons that the more famous logic of framebreaking (and the cultural trope of the Luddite) has so little to do with sabotage is because framebreaking makes itself entirely visible and, indeed, it's historically powerful for that reason, as a raw display of proletarian force. But the logic of cloaking is drastically different from this, as seen in the long, scattered history of how people have made precise use of the conditions, processes, and spaces of their labour, incarceration, or social situation to *not* get caught as they waste time, undermine the boss, stymie the police, or kick back against colonial control. Plates seem to get dropped more regularly at a restaurant that won't pay living wages, but it can't be proven that any single instance was willful. A new cop car rolling off the line seems perfectly fine but begins to rattle itself to pieces a week later, at which point it can't be said who along the line cranked a bolt until a hairline crack spidered out unseen. Prisoners make a racket, clomping around in their clogs, because they are clumsy clods or because they are using its noise to cover the whispers they pass from the corner of closed lips.³¹

Yet underlying these three operations of sabotage is something even more fundamental. It is not a specific concept or idea, not a procedure or move. Rather, it's a way of reading the world, and one's position in it, that is capable, however briefly, of seeing the built and lived as more than familiar, expected, automatic, or natural, as more than just one interchangeable instance of the category it's supposed to belong to. (*Just a*

³¹ And as that last example suggests, we can see in this the willful use of uncertainty not only as safety and cover, but also as a weapon of insubordination itself. What can matter as much as any possible material or circulatory disruption caused by sabotage is the disruption and anxiety produced by the lingering *threat* of it, by the inability to determine what is and is not intended.

machine, just a beach, just a border, just the wind, just a smile, just the rules.) Instead, this sort of material reading dwells in the particulars one is forced to dwell with, day in, day out, and it finds in them the loopholes, exploits, and unresolved tensions that make it possible to continually unsettle them against the familiar and prescribed modes for which they were intended. It involves reading a process of working as if it is a work, hovering between signification and static in the sense that Blanchot articulates:

The work is not the deadened unity of repose. It is the intimacy and the violence of contrary movements which are never reconciled and never appeased—never, at least, as long as the work is a work. The work is the intimate confrontation with itself of an opposition between contraries, neither of which, though they are irreconcilable, has coherence except in the contest that opposes them one to the other.³²

However, counter to any modernist fantasy of true shock or novelty, sabotage starts from an experience of familiarity, even if it results in a creeping sense of unease and a startling breakdown or inversion. It is a process of reading that emerges from, and radicalises, a form of knowledge born of proximity and repetition, one attuned enough to the texture of that experience to recognise and sense the differences, to know how to dampen or tune their noise. In a certain sense, this is what's meant by *skill*, or, in the terms already raised, by *dexterity*: a facility that isn't taught so much as gained over time, through doing and testing again and again. Indeed, in the framework of sabotage, the activation of this sort of informal skill—i.e. an excess of experiential knowledge beyond what has been formally taught and what is supposedly required for a repetitive “unintelligent”

³² Blanchot, *Space*, p. 226.

task—is what makes it possible for individuals to produce those disruptive effects and a charged atmosphere of diffuse antagonism, often with consequences far beyond what they could achieve by making demands or putting pressure on any elected official. It's there in the profound skill it takes to appear unskilled in the most damaging yet “accidental” way, to know what little fuck-up generates full-bore stoppage and breakdown. It's there in the knowledge of how “with two cents worth of a certain stuff, used by one who knows, a locomotive can be made absolutely useless,” the scandalous proposition raised (and largely disavowed as too radical) in the 1897 CGT conference where sabotage was first advocated as a willful tactic. It is made front and center in the way that the Wobblies, a decade and a half after, argued that it is precisely *because*, and not in spite of, the treatment of workers as interchangeable and uneducated labourers that they are capable of producing a chaos that the bosses cannot control and that ruins demanded efficiency and output. In the words of a 1913 pamphlet advocating sabotage in the Paterson strike:

Every worker who is a cog in the great modern machine of mill, factory, mine, workshop or railroad knows from his daily experience just what all this means. Any worker knows that the entire factory can be thrown into confusion at any minute if even one of the necessary cogs is thrown out of gear.³³

This comparison of the literal cog in the factory with the worker as metaphorical cog is not a mere rhetorical flourish. It gestures instead to one of the most enduringly radical elements of sabotage, the way that it insists upon a “cog's-eye view,” refusing the position of the worker as a privileged or ennobled one, who

³³ Industrial Workers of the World, *“Jersey Justice” at Work: First Decision on the Advocacy of Sabotage in the United States Courts*, New York: s.n. 1913, p. 4.

should be proud of their skill and who has a stake in the productivity and profitability of the plant, firm, home, or farm.³⁴ Instead, the perspective of the cog sees that position for what it is: a trap that veils the plain fact that on the balance sheet of capital and its managers, the human cogs are indeed just one input among many. And, insofar as they are unique, it is above all because unlike lumber or petroleum, they can be pressured into greater productivity and less resistance for the same pay, either with the con of being part of a shared enterprise (“team members,”³⁵ in the now-ubiquitous bullshit management lingo of the 2000s) or, more bluntly, with the threat of absolute precarity. In refusing that and instead thinking from the viewpoint of the cog, part, and support, rather than the boss, guard, manager, or “team member,” it underscores the importance of an antagonistic analysis and activation born of its very embeddedness and interconnection. Rather than from the position of the intellectual or expert reading inwards, seeking to verify in a concrete situation the theory already decided elsewhere, the cog’s perspective reads outwards from within, tracing ahead in

³⁴ I would suggest here that this absolutely applies to the soldier as well, in terms of the expectation that they be prepared to not only incarnate the values of the nation-state but also to literally die for them. If the history of war plays a key role in the history of sabotage, and vice versa, that will be only in part because of its use as a tactic for those who are at a strategic and material disadvantage. It also suggests a constant possibility latent in the foiling of a war effort by its own soldiers, especially through the prospect of a radical internationalist (and anti-nationalist) solidarity across those expected to see each other as existential enemies.

³⁵ The baleful catalogue of this kind of linguistic sleight of hand would run for pages, and is counterbalanced perhaps only by the fact that, at least from my personal employment experience and that of friends, we know it rarely convinces anyone other than management themselves, not least of all because no one is called a “sandwich artist,” not even at Michelin-starred brasseries. An instance that feels particular telling is JetBlue’s insistence on calling everyone they employ a “crewmember,” no matter whether they fly or not. As their EVP of Commercial and Planning puts it, “When we use the word crewmember, it’s because everybody is a crewmember...We’ve created a culture where there’s a direct relationship between our crewmembers and our leadership. It is very much an egalitarian society.” Quoted in Adam Friedman, “Don’t call us Employees!—How Corporate Culture impacts your Internal Team and the Retaining of Employees,” *Inc.* 2016, <https://www.inc.com/adam-fridman/dont-call-us-employees-how-corporate-culture-impacts-your-internal-team-and-t.html> (accessed 28/1/19).

time and space the concatenating effects that can happen when the right element is “thrown out of gear.”

When the Wobblies insisted on this, they knew full well it didn't need to be taught, even if it did need to be defended, celebrated, and made to expand the sphere of what could be politically conceivable as a valid part of collective obstinacy.³⁶ This is because it is an *intimate knowledge*,³⁷ one that can get no distance from its materials and that thinks with the cogs, not from an abstract methodological preference but because it spends all day with them and because they leave scars on the hands. It³⁸ takes shape neither privately nor collectively, but rather transindividually, in two key senses marked by the bridging “between” or “across” of that prefix. First, between an individual person and those “cogs” that surround them: through the quotidian experience of anyone who comes to know all too well the systems, architectures, protocols, rules, affective structures, and mechanisms that they are compelled, by law or social compulsion, to exist in, to enact, and to reproduce. So it is transindividual in that it emerges from a lived personal experience of being relentlessly constituted by, and inseparable from, what seemingly is external, inanimate, impersonal, and alien, a daily fact of being subsumed into processes that dwarf you yet do not function without your participation, whether willing or com-

³⁶ In other words, even if it didn't need theory to happen, it needed to be theorised to articulate a structure of political thought in which it could be recognised as not just allowable but necessary.

³⁷ For a discussion of the concept of intimacy as a “heuristic,” particularly in connection to trying to map the affective structures central to colonial networks, see Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2015, pp. 17–18.

³⁸ I refer intentionally to this knowledge as “it” in a way that suggests that it is itself agential, rather than a knowledge that is the property of a person. What I define as sabotage is not just an act but also an account of a kind of mentality that exists unstably between a thinking subject and the techniques that they learn to navigate the world around them. The intimate knowledge of sabotage is in this way truly transindividual, as detailed, because it marks the surprise at what you have come to know and at the inseparability of your mental processes from supposedly inanimate elements around you.

pelled. Second, it is transindividual because it takes shape between or amongst those who share such spaces, who live, work, and survive intimately with each other, even if forbidden from speaking. As such, it constitutes both a knowledge of shared conditions and the ground of exchanging that knowledge, building a communicable intelligence of traces and hints outside of any formal institution³⁹ and able to evade becoming recognisable to those who seek to annul it.

In both cases, this intimate knowledge is far from formal study. It has nothing to do with a fantasy of critical distance or with the training of those hired to design a system or enforce its correct usage. It is instead constituted and continually refashioned by that cursed fact of repetition: navigating small variance and deviance, coming to know the little tics and cracks of a system like you know your body, and, like you know your body, being surprised by the shifts in capacity and ability to adapt, or, conversely, by an alarming brittleness and lack of flexibility. In this way, such a knowing involves a continual blurring of the supposed line that demarcates *me* from *kitchen*, *lathe*, *medicine*, *crops*, *swamp*, and phrases so worn they are spoken as if without thought (*may I take your order?*), suggesting instead a kind of negative subjectivity that does not make use of techniques so much as takes shape around and through them.

However, even if this knowing is born from what is repeated, it's crucial to distinguish its stakes from mere familiarity, because it marks a fundamentally different experience and outcome. Rather than the expected accumulation of habit and "going through the motions," the intimate knowledge that makes sabotage possible suggests a disarming turn and a tipping over into strange potentiality, an unsettling where mate-

³⁹ However, what will be so specific about sabotage is the way that it will transmit its force visibly not through the open collective voice of those who conspire, but through the "bad work" and willful error of individuals who route this shared antagonism back into and through the cogs.

rials, practices, spaces, and processes come to be known so well that they reveal themselves to be more than what they are supposed to be.⁴⁰ They appear not as instances of those aforementioned categories but as a set of articulated and at times contradictory textures and techniques, properties and frictions, accidents waiting to happen and never identical to their alleged purpose. Philosophically, in the terms on which unworking proceeds, we might see this as the way in which earth remains in excess of world, sustaining variant capacities and properties that cannot be reduced to their structured articulation. In terms of aesthetics and cultural technique, we might understand this as a radical iteration of what the rangy Russian writer and literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky termed *ostranenie* (*оcтpанeниe*), “enstrangement”⁴¹ or “making strange”: the capacity of artistic technique to counter habitualisation. Such an art itself begins from uncanny proximity. It is “closer to its source than a shadow is to the object which conceals part of the ground from the sun.” In order to function, then, and to let this closeness open towards an understanding of the contradiction of what it sees and feels,

⁴⁰ In this way, it also opens a way to complicate famous accounts of the fundamental alienation of mechanised work, such as that of Walter Benjamin who frames the experience of industrial repetition as an entirely alienated from deviance or learning, a process “sealed off from experience” in which “practice counts for nothing.” Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, London: Verso 1983, p. 133.

⁴¹ I follow Benjamin Sher’s translation (and Alexandra Berlina’s adoption of it), which maintains that awkward spelling—the extra *n*—which itself marks the lexical specificity of the fact that the word in Russian as Shklovsky spells it is itself off. It is missing the second *n* it should have, the result of a simple mistake that couldn’t be fixed later, now “roaming the world like a dog with an eat cut off” (Shklovsky, *O teorii prozy*, p. 73, quoted in Alexandra Berlina (ed.), *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, London: Bloomsbury 2016, p. 56). Fittingly, then, the translation makes the word strange in each language by passing back and forth a letter always out of place. In a volume she edited on enstrangement in relation to the moving image, Annie van der Oever places the *n* back in the original Russian, to try and unsettle a potential excess familiarity with the concept. (Annie van der Oever (ed.), *Ostranenie: On “Strangeness” and the Moving Image. The History, Reception, and Relevance of a Concept*, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press 2010) I’d suggest also considering a link, through this problem of orthography, between Shklovsky’s “accident” in the spelling of *ostranenie* and what Jacques Derrida is articulating through the writing and idea of *différance*.

the work of art enabling such a perception must itself not be a faithful mirror of what exists but rather an artificial assemblage of technique that starts from that unsettling of familiarity and then “constructs ways of cognition, removes the white noise, turns it into speech fit to carry a message.”⁴² In other words, the toilet may be a microphone, provided you come to know it better than you ever wanted to.

Within the debates about avant-garde aesthetics in which Shklovsky participated, one of the names given to this potent and unsettling activation of a medium was *faktura*, or “texture,” which comes to name the quality of a work of art that always makes its particularities, material contingencies, and specific frictions felt, as he wrote, “in every place—a textural object.”⁴³ What’s crucial about this is how it crosses wires, almost synaesthetically, so that a gap opens between what can be known as a neutral image and what must instead be felt to be known, manifesting all the properties that would go missing if it is allowed to remain something to be quickly glimpsed and catalogued. The Latvian artist and writer Voldemārs Matvejs (known in Russian as Vladimir Markov) refers to *faktura* as the “noises” of the materials involved, which we might think of as their static, that extra information that dooms any perfect transmission yet which makes this sort of “strained” attention both possible and critical, qualifying ideal forms and thickening the texture of any experience in ways that cannot be paraphrased or planned for.⁴⁴ It can only be known firsthand, intimately, in excess of what can be seen from afar. (“Distrusting the eye, we

⁴² Viktor Shklovsky, *The Links of Art of Art Do Not Repeat Each Other. Once Again, on the Dissimilarity of the Similar*, excerpted in Berlina (ed.), *Viktor Shklovsky*, p. 324.

⁴³ Quoted in Emma Widdis, *Socialist Senses: Film, Feeling, and the Soviet Subject, 1917–1940*, Bloomington: University of Indiana Press 2017, p. 29.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Jeremy Howard, Irēna Bužinska and Z.S. Strother, *Vladimir Markov and Russian Primitivism: A Charter for the Avant-Garde*, New York: Routledge 2016, p. 180.

place it under the control of touch,” writes Kazmir Malevich.⁴⁵ So even if such cognition itself can perhaps “remove the white noise” and then let us say something vital with real clarity—in the way that Shklovsky sees, for instance, enstrangement able to uniquely describe the cruel absurdity of regimes of punishment and property—it does so by making us feel the “noise” of a system of communication or perception, and in this way, to know the operations of such a system from within, in ways that its designers and owners perhaps never can.

I’ve drifted from the history of the prison into that of modernist poetics because I think it gets us closer to grasping what will come to be so powerful about sabotage’s intimate knowledge, and about the unworking it opens towards. Above all, that power lies in the way that, in spite of the deadening fact of repetition and familiarity, this knowledge keeps unfreezing what surrounds it, refusing to let things be what they are alleged to be or to let intervention seem impossible or off-limits. Instead, it detects possibilities by taking apart wholes to see them as in motion and contradiction, under contestation and belonging to uncertain futures, suffused with that “intimacy and the violence of contrary movements which are never reconciled and never appeased.” Indeed, we might read Markov’s “noise” of *faktura* through the literal noise transmitted through the prison pipes, and vice versa: the bristling set of particularities that take shape when a diagram has to become physical and lived with, which generates feedback and possibility that can never be fully cancelled. Moreover, when we displace this from a question of aesthetics towards a form of antagonistic perception and knowledge crucial for what sabotage will designate in social struggles, the stakes of this question about seeing the “making”—including of what we did not ourselves make but confront,

⁴⁵ From the statement accompanying his design for his “Monument to the Third International” (aka Tatlin Tower). Quoted in Widdis, *Socialist Senses*, p. 28.

rather than treating the made as a given—become markedly higher. We face the prospect of undoing the potential fixity and dominance of techniques and forms that attempt to constrain, control, and manage.⁴⁶

What can be celebrated in the sphere of art or theory is less easily so in the terrain of struggle, however.⁴⁷ The possibility of a continual unsettling, the insistence upon a “cog’s-eye view,” the implausible analogical slips between categories: all prove to be anathema to expected modes of civic organisation and political representation. Such an intimate knowledge, more broadly, has long been demeaned by ideological forms that predated but became central to capitalism. Because similar to obstinacy, this knowledge is an easy target for accusations of being uneducated, uncritical, intuitive, manual, spontaneous, merely practical, ad hoc, and without theoretical grounding. It gets partitioned off from reason and science and judged as regressive, uncivilised, unbecoming the march of progress, and,

⁴⁶ One way to understand this process, to which I return at more length in the book-length work on sabotage, is as a *technification* of the given: not in the sense that what one struggles against is more or less technological, but that it involves a form of grasping those structures and spaces as composed of competing, or mutually reinforcing, procedures that seek to channel and articulate a set of material and social flows in such a way to limit their possible variance or disruption. It opens out, in other words, towards what the philosopher Gilbert Simondon aptly called a “technical mentality,” one that would involve not only thinking the technical on its own terms but also seeing the historical record of the transformation of forms and energetic flows that get crystallised in a single bulb, generator, buttress, or, for that matter, toilet.

⁴⁷ And perhaps in everyday life itself. As Berlina suggests in her reading of Shklovsky, the experience of *ostranenie* not in art but in personal experience may largely be one of pain and self-alienation, an “unfreezing” of sad, desperate passions normally warded off to persist through the experience, for instance, of being in exile. She writes: “But is being defrosted and liberated from everyday routine not Shklovsky’s greatest goal? Well, no. It is, to his mind, the greatest goal of art. A book might be the ax for the frozen sea within us—but if life itself unfreezes it, there might be a flood. What is happening to Shklovsky in Berlin is exactly what art should do, but he prefers a return to automatism when *ostranenie* is created through alienation, when strangeness encroaches upon reality.” (Berlina, “Translator’s Introduction,” in: idem (ed.), *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, London: Bloomsbury 2016, pp. 1–50, here p. 16)

above all, as profoundly dangerous.⁴⁸ In other words, as everything that cops, judges, and reformers deem its results to be, which they hear in sabotage's insolent unsilence and the seeming arbitrary slowness and chaos that always potentially masks a threat. And so, in a manner all too fitting for sabotage itself, this projection of irrationality and inoperativity becomes the smoke screen for sabotage's work of unwork, the inoperationality it finds waiting within every system and holds open as refuge and revenge for those who need it.

⁴⁸ Barring specific modes (like the fetish for the artisanal) which will celebrate the results of such intimate knowledge, precisely insofar as they seem to belong to a different historical order, untouched by industry and modernization.

INVITATION TO CONTRIBUTE: A CONVERSATION ABOUT UNWORKING

Mehdi Belhaj Kacem and Peer Illner

December 8th

Dear Mehdi Belhaj Kacem,

My name is Peer Illner and I'm writing to you as the Editor of *continent*. *continent* is an anglophone journal that publishes quarterly on philosophy, critical theory, and media art. We are currently planning a summer issue on the topic of *désœuvrement* (unworking/inoperativity) and I would very much like to invite you to publish an article with us. I have been following your work on mimesis, art, and the question of unworking for a long time. I believe that your treatment of these themes in the wake of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe is unique and exemplary and I would love to count you among the contributors. You can find some information on *continent* here: <http://continentcontinent.cc/>.

Kind Regards,
Peer Illner

December 10th

Bonjour,

It's a pleasure to contribute to your journal. Could you please let me know the maximum character count for the article?

Best,
MBK

December 13th

Dear Mehdi Belhaj Kacem,

Many thanks for your swift reply. I'm really happy that you're up for writing something for us. The character count is flexible. Normally, our articles are around 8 pages long. However, you are very welcome to write more if you think this is too limited. Let's say a maximum of 15 pages would be acceptable. We are aiming for a deadline of June 1st.

Best wishes,
Peer

February 26th

Cher Mehdi Belhaj Kacem,

I was wondering if you write in English or French. In principle, you can write in either language. If you prefer to write in French, I will happily translate your article into English.

Best wishes,
Peer

March 1st

Dear Peer,

I write in French.
The deadline is in June?

Cheers,
Mehdi

March 1st

Dear Mehdi,

Exactly. The deadline is June 1st. Feel free to write in French. In that case, I'll translate your article into English. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions you may have.

Best wishes,
Peer

June 7th

Dear Mehdi Belhaj Kacem,

The deadline for submissions to the *continent* issue on *désœuvrement* has now passed. I am writing to see where you're at with your contribution. Would you still like to send us an article? If you need more time, I can negotiate an extension with the other editors. I am particularly happy to count you among the contributors.

Best wishes,
Peer

June 16th

Dear Mehdi,

Did you have time to think about your contribution to *continent*? The deadline is negotiable if you need a bit more time. Since I believe that with the current events in France your thinking around unworking is gaining a new urgency, I would really be very happy to count you among the contributors.

Best,
Peer

June 18th

Dear Peer,

Yes, sorry. I'm a bit ashamed that I never got back to you. The whole thing is abysmal. I am really struggling to intervene sensibly around this notion of *désœuvrement* for reasons that I hope to explain in the text itself when I get it done. What is your new deadline?

MBK

June 20th

Dear Mehdi,

Thanks for your message. I'm really happy that you're still on board. What would be a realistic deadline for you? Can we say in two weeks, July 4th, if that seems viable to you?

Best,
Peer

June 22nd

Perfect. That's very generous of you. I'll make sure that you'll have no regrets and that my text adds something new.

Cheers,
Mehdi Belhaj Kacem

July 21st

Dear Mehdi,

I'm writing to ask you for a little status update concerning your article for *continent*. Are you making headway on the piece? If I push you a little, please understand that this is only because I'm really looking forward to reading your essay.

Best,
Peer

July 28th

Dear Mehdi,

I'm writing again to ask you where you're at with your article. Are you advancing with it? I'd be grateful for a little status update. We have assembled all the articles and would really like to pass to the editorial stage soon.

Best,
Peer

August 3rd

Dear Peer,

I am sorry to have left you without any news. As an independent writer and not an academic, I don't work like our intellectual civil servants. I have, for instance, barely written anything during the last four years and have only recently emerged from this drought. In short, I have lived four years of "*désœuvrement*." I really thought of answering you every day but I guess the theme scared me for being a bit too close to home. "Literature" rather than "philosophy" even if the motif of *désœuvrement* stems precisely from independent writers (Bataille, Blanchot) who blurred this boundary. (I want to add that that is not at all what I'm doing. You can read what Steve Light has kindly written on my work on my website.) I'm actually not sure if I have anything new to add to the theme. At the moment, my profound malaise has rather intimate reasons. I have nothing to add to what Nancy and Agamben have already said. Or perhaps I do, but my words will come out only once I will have completely left behind this productive crisis that has condemned me to inoperativity during the last four years.

Please forgive me my strange desistance.

September 8th

Dear Mehdi,

Thanks for your honest message. I regret, of course, not being able to include you in the journal, even though I think I understand your reasons quite well.

Best wishes,
Peer

September 16th

Dear Peer,

Since the very beginning, when I accepted your invitation to contribute to this issue, I've been literally devoured by feelings of guilt at the idea of writing anything at all on the notion of *désœuvrement*. But here we are: let's get this torture over and done with. After all, torture, like language, laughter, and labour, is humanity's own. That is the whole problem. It is the only problem, even.

As you must have gathered from my last letter, unworking touches something very intimate in me. Something that comes from what one normally calls literature rather than philosophy. Brutally put, but without wanting to offend anyone (Nancy, Agamben are those who today write the truest things on unworking), I could have kept my promise regarding a number of other concepts. However, in what concerns unworking, I could not possibly treat it as a "very interesting concept" and, like a professor, analyse it from the safe space of academic distance. Instead, I am obliged, without even exactly knowing why, to, as Lacoue-Labarthe said, "give in to autobiography." As I said

in my last email, it is without a doubt not entirely insignificant that the notion of *désœuvrement* was firstly thought in the realm of literature and not by professional philosophers. Indeed, it was conceived by independent writers who are nevertheless counted among the most significant thinkers of the twentieth century: certainly Bataille and Blanchot (but we can also see how the spectre of this thinking, even though never explicitly named, haunted the writing of Walter Benjamin, in particular in his wonderful *Baudelaire*).

I feel a profound malaise, therefore, in that the thing—*désœuvrement*—touches autobiography. A malaise that was intensified by the insistence with which you pushed me to write on the topic and which I, perhaps wrongly, suspect originates in the remark that Alain Badiou makes in a footnote close to the end of *Logiques des Mondes*, in which he claims that inoperativity constitutes one of the central themes of my work. However, this is simply wrong. I actually spoke only rarely of inoperativity, and I never said that my generation was “dominated by inoperativity and pornography” [sic], which is a completely meaningless statement. It is enough to read Badiou’s recent thoughts on contemporary youth—which he has deemed necessary to share—to get a sense of what he thinks of my generation. Having said that, someone who knows my work very well has asked me why the recent summary of my philosophy (I am sorry, I have not found a better name for it), *La Transgression et l’Inexistant*, which you may have read, and which unites around forty of the key concepts of my system (in the precise sense of the word), does not include an entry on ‘*désœuvrement*.’

It is true that in the first theoretical text that I wrote a long time ago, which was very naively informed by all the authors that I just quoted (apart from Badiou, for reasons that I will explain), I argued that the ‘unworked’ might constitute a new revolutionary class for our times. Today, I would not speak so

much of class but rather of the strong concept of populism, as used by Laclau, which is compatible with the premonitory views of Benjamin. On the topic of unworking and revolution, one would also have to mention the Situationists, in particular Debord and the view of unworking as politics but also as art and, in Debord's case, art is also undoubtedly (auto)biographical.

I am, however, at the moment emerging from my own inoperativity. After four years of inactivity, I am writing again! I could have therefore answered your request in the typically academic manner of writing on the imposed concept, as indeed most academic philosophers do (but not all of them, I am thinking of Meillassoux and a few others). To my mind, this is a bad thing for philosophy. If one has nothing to say, one should just keep quiet. So for me, this theme exceeds the frame of the purely conceptual and touches on something more intimate and biographical, maybe even on what Agamben calls bare life.

In my case, my malaise stems from a feeling of guilt towards the workerist visions of our academic Stalinism. From the very beginning of our conversation, which started 15 years ago, Badiou got extremely aggressive whenever we spoke about the theme of unworking. If it were up to him, he would have filled entire railway cars with all these 'unworked' people to send them to labour camps. Our academic Stalinism teaches us that we are either producer, bourgeois capitalist, or parasite (Badiou's homicidal contempt for all inoperativity and the *lumpenproletariat*). "Either worker or thief," Badiou told me years ago with his habitual sense of fine nuances. But this is ridiculous because an academic is in no way a direct producer, not more so than an independent writer anyway. Nancy and Agamben have long understood this. But neither Badiou nor Žižek.

However, the conviction that animates a thinker, academic or otherwise, is clearly that he or she works: that he constructs concepts and thereby participates in collective life just as much as a farmer or a mechanic. This is also entirely my conviction

and the whole point of my exoteric philosophical system (sorry again, for this emphasis) is that in twenty years time everyone will use my central concept of *pléonectique* in the same way that people are using Plato's "idea" from two and a half millennia ago or Marx's "capital." My pride prevents me from clearly defining this term that concretely envelops the entire system of my thinking.

But even if I fail in this, I will still die with a clear conscience. In the best case, my concepts have a public utility. Even during my recent bout of inoperativity, I did not feel any less useful to the collective. "No one, individually, is indispensable," that is Stalin's logion. "The individual doesn't count," as one said in Pol Pot's time. Pol Pot exterminated 93% of his doctors and teachers for this very same reason. And Badiou still supports this today, if you push him a bit.

However, an increasing number of collectives are formed today, more or less secretly, that refuse both work and parasitism. They learn to produce directly and to live off the lowest possible minimum income. Concretely, I am thinking of the radical vegan communes that are much more numerous than one thinks and that inhabit the countryside where I live half of the year. They are a bit like modern day Franciscans. I do not support everything they say in their 'spontaneous philosophy,' but something in what they do commands admiration, or respect in the Kantian sense of the term. (If anyone a little stupid obeys without questioning what Kant says about his ethical precepts, you would respect him infinitely more than a certain intellectual or pseudo-giant of philosophy who in his private life represents the farcical inverse image of everything he says about Truth and the Good.) They join gesture and speech and are thus different from all these brilliant or ingenious thinkers who claim to teach universal lessons but are pathetically incapable of doing what they preach. The latter thus never say what they are doing with their own concepts. This last point is a

dilemma for me. I do not always live entirely in accordance with what my philosophical work suggests as an ethics, but I am currently trying to pick up the courage to do so. I am therefore a bit like them (the professional thinkers and not those militant vegans who left everything behind; their work, their family, and society to live according to the ethical precepts that they profess publicly, which is precisely not the case with our professors) and it is from this dramatic paradox that I try to take leave. If my thinking could meet those who do what they say, perhaps in addition to saying what I do, I would end up like them by doing what I say. In any case, I admire them much more than us ‘philosophers’ and ‘intellectuals’ who are great at talking but bad at getting anything done.

I am able to deliver all the analytical concepts that reflect precisely the ethics and the practices of all these inoperative—but not parasitical—collectives that are currently constituting themselves. That is why I am currently forcing myself to break with the academic writing style (I am not pretending that 95% of philosophical life since Kant has not taken place at universities, Bataille and Blanchot also never pretended this) and I try, like Marx or Nietzsche, to make the most sophisticated concepts accessible to people other than academics (which is not intended to exclude them either, but we will talk about this another time). The fact that philosophy has become almost exclusively academic means that it has for a long time now only spoken to itself. It is in this closure that we can see its political sterility (not to say its senility), easily recognisable through its booming declarations that pretend to be acts of terrorism. The only exception today is Laclau. I will speak of all of this soon in more detail but this ‘academic closure’ of philosophy is nothing other than the question of ‘inoperativity.’ Forgive me for, yet again, putting this word in quotation marks out of modesty. I will explain the reason for this semantic veil, to allude to Derrida, at the end. But finally, without further ado, you would

never say of a cat that lazes around in the sun all day that it is inoperative. We will see that everything takes place here. Man is an animal that works, which is why we can *only* say of him that he is inoperative (we do not speak of unemployment when talking about bees or ants).

This concept has taught us not only decisively but also premonitorily, almost despite itself (Benjamin, Bataille, Blanchot, Debord), what has been wonderfully summarised by Nancy: that the absence of the work in art (in literature and elsewhere) is reflected politically in the refusal of the productive imperative. This is already stated by the very concept of unworking, but even its thinkers (Nancy included) were not aware of it. Beyond all that has already been written on it, unworking today means the denial of necessary production. Not only does community not realise itself as work (Nancy) but, in a more oblique way, the premonitory sense of unworking was (and this has only become obvious in the last few decades) that productivity (or what our mediatised political language calls growth) is as such criminal and suicidal. First, at the level of our species, and then at the level of everything that lives.

It is precisely this reality, which constitutes our only modernity, that the hysterical adherents of the meta-Stalinist 'real' won't recognise. They thus happily short-circuit the radical left's only possibility (ecology) to rally its energies. Luckily, they only do so at the university, which limits the damage they do to the academic context.

Man is an animal that works. We have known this dimly for a long time ("For we are God's fellow workers," St. Paul dixit) and clearly since Hegel. There are no other animals of the same class (mammals) that work. There are insects (ants, bees, etc.) that work monotonously; always the same task since tens of millennia. In our anthropological closure, there are millions of different jobs, which all tend towards what? Hegelian-Marxism gave us the beginning of an answer: towards antagonism as

such and nothing else (not towards an end goal, like our philosophers, including Hegel and Marx thought). We are God's fellow workers means that we are all just workers and the historical lapse in St. Paul's phrase is today visible all around us. It is the technological Leviathan that ironically satisfies all the requirements that would have been necessary to define God (cf. transhumanism). This Leviathan is our total work of art. And this is why some terrified people among us have started to deconstruct it. This is the meaning of the rehabilitation of Wagner by some, against his philosophical condemnation by Nietzsche—as Lacoue-Labarthe said, when Wagner describes the plant life around Bayreuth, he is describing Nazism with fifty years advance on its actual emergence)—, by Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe. They are telling us that if Wagner had given birth, not to Hitler, but to Stalin or Mao, there would have been nothing to add to the analysis. (If, as Heidegger thought, the Nazis had listened to Hölderlin rather than Hitler, German National Socialism would have been presentable.) This is why, against their most creative colleagues, the same people have started to condemn the political motif of unworking because they prefer the artistic theme of the work (preferably the great work). What Hegel himself could not see (neither could Marx, hence the illusion of production as necessity, literally as “second nature” that already Plato and Aristotle, but not Epicurus believed in), is that not only did work proceed from the most fundamental ethical violation (slavery), but also that, at its end, the facticity of work would become criminal in the genocidal and exterminationist sense of the word: this is the one and only problem of the beginning of this century. Seen from this angle, we have to place at the same level: the exterminationism of Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, etc. (and therefore the philosophers that openly back this exterminationism, just like Leo Strauss inspired the strategists of George Bush), the delocalised American and European exterminationism (occidental and capitalist), and the

exterminationism of fascism. Like an Industrial Rock group from my youth said: “No one is innocent.”

This is the oxymoronic and therefore tragic sense that, following Schurmann and Lacoue-Labarthe, I have given to the adjective ‘conceptual’ in my work. This is captured by the atrocious and oft-cited phrase written above the entrance of Nazi concentration camps—“work brings freedom”—which has been hitherto misunderstood. This phrase does not only concern the actual Nazis; that would be too easy. The phrase is a monstrous lapse not only by the Nazis, but by humankind as such, that designates humanity as monstrous.

A chimpanzee, a cat, a larvae—not to mention a tree or a rock—don’t work. Hegel’s originary scene of anthropogenesis, which is confirmed by all contemporary anthropology since Lévi-Strauss, is what I have called ‘evil’ in my philosophical system. What is evil? Simply put, evil is the worldly creation of suffering that did not exist in the animal kingdom. Find me a single case of torture, exercised by animals. In other words, this supernumerary suffering is created by work and only by work. By slavery, in the Hegelian sense: without originary slavery (and this is confirmed by all contemporary anthropology and biology), there is no “generic humanity” to get excited about at the university.

What form can we give to inoperative art? I gave a little hint in my work and with a bit too much autobiographical naivety, in *Transgression and the Inexistent*: play. Why? Because, despite a few exceptions (solitaire, video games, playstation), the vast majority of games are played together with other people in ways that are just as varied as the games themselves: team games, one on one, one against everybody else, everyone against one etc. It is one of the biggest repressions in the history of philosophy that the Greeks considered play, most notably the Olympic Games, as the highest form of art. For them, it was much more noble than tragedy, music, or architecture. And

why does play indicate the direction of inoperative art? Precisely because play engages a community of players and because in a game every player co-creates the work, which is the game itself. Because there are several players, the game never becomes a work (the game takes its course), like it does in all other art forms. This, it seems to me, is the political lesson we have to draw from the facticity of play: the inoperative art *par excellence* (and with varying success, contemporary art as that, which unworks art is today in search of new games). But I admit that for the moment this intuition is nothing but philosophical: another utopia.

But, you will tell me, dear Peer: “See, you have something to say regarding unworking!” No doubt. But I am not one of those detached academics who, with his authority, looks down on the dumb proletarians or teaches those willing students, or even ends up addressing the youth as if they knew nothing themselves. Unworking is my most intimate drama. This is what I meant when I said it was autobiographical.

It is this fact of being torn apart by the consciousness of the fact that what I eat, the water I drink, the electricity that I use to write this text, the paper with which I wipe, or dry, or blow my nose, etc. is all produced by poorly remunerated workers but also by natural resources that are never even counted, as everyone knows. Workers like my alcoholic mechanic friend Tonio, with his hands covered in motor oil, that I ran into earlier; or my deceased construction worker friend Patrick, who killed himself, aged fifty. When I think of them, I feel guilty, but only when I am inoperative. When I am working, like right now, I am temporarily redeemed from all my sins.

But there is something else that is painful in the literary or autobiographical dimension. All things considered, inoperativity is a kind of second-order mysticism. If you have ever experienced what it means to be dead to society, then unworking means assuming this social death. It was no accident that

Lacoue-Labarthe, always him, defined literature in relation to Blanchot, as the writing by someone who is dead (D.H. Lawrence's magnificent testimonial novella *The Man Who Died* is a pleonasm of literature). This is the minimal but important difference that separates literature from religion. The latter's central theme, with all its familiar consequences, is Resurrection (or in non-occidental countries Reincarnation). Literature, on the other hand, lets a dead person speak as a dead person. From Homer to Beckett via Calderon, from Sophocles to Artaud via Dante, from Orpheus to Kafka via Shakespeare there is ample proof of this. There is a terrifying forgotten film on Australian prisons from the 1980s called GHOSTS... OF THE CIVIL DEAD. That is what I have been for fifteen years, dear Peer: a civil ghost. Literature tells the story of someone who died (my death was in summer 2003) and who returns amid the living as a dead person. This is Odysseus, and Oedipus and Antigone; this is Ovid and Hamlet, it is Montaigne and Rousseau, it is at the same time Proust (already dead) and Blanchot (always already dead). And paradoxically (Lacoue-Labarthe has demonstrated this admirably), it is here and only here that we find the joy of being simply, biologically alive. This joy is also a second order joy. No animal can feel it, and with this I am by no means discrediting the incredible richness of the animal kingdom, nor endorsing the superiority of human beings. Far from it, when we look at the paradoxical community of play. Animals cannot appreciate a work by Titian or a quartet by Beethoven. However, most of them like to play. This is our community with them.

Since Benjamin, if not Hölderlin, we know that translation constitutes the central category of any consistent philosophy of history, beyond any empirical activity of translating. Even if the great scissions of our history (Greek, Roman, German) have also always been great translations. Every time, a great translation (of the Greeks by Cicero, of the *Bible* by Luther) determines single-handedly a historical tipping point of the utmost impor-

tance. But we should also be attentive to the small lapses in translation and therefore to the translations that decide our imminent history. Thus, I recently learned that Agamben translated the term “*désœuvrement*,” so central to his philosophy, with “*inoperativita*.” Something like inoperativity [*inopérativité*]. We immediately see the distance between these two terms: *désœuvrement*, by all appearances, seems to designate something of the order of the intersubjective human community, whereas *inopérativité* seems to refer more to something like the objectal (what Agamben calls the *apparatus*). The Agambenian *désœuvrement* would then be: the deactivation of what good old Heidegger called the gigantic technological machination. It seems to me that, with Agamben, we are not so much talking about a voluntarist deactivation of the technological machination but more about revealing that, even within its monstrous efficiency, our hegemonic technology is already inoperative. Like the computer at the end of Kubrick’s *SPACE ODYSSEY*. It is already senile. That is the subjective-objective *désœuvrement* that I try to indicate with the concept of play. This point deserves some ample elaboration, which I will undertake in my future work.

I will limit myself to saying what I have been thinking for a long time and what seems to be confirmed by this recent revelation in the work of Agamben. Namely, that Agamben and Nancy and Blanchot and Derrida and Schurmann and Lacoue-Labarthe are part of what would not be exaggerated to call a “Left Heideggerianism,” undoubtedly one of the most powerful currents of thought in the late twentieth century. In one word: deconstruction. It is easy to see that any great (post-Cartesian) philosophy takes roughly one century to fully unfold its effects. This is evident with Hegelian-Marxism or Nietzscheanism, to say nothing of Galileo-Cartesianism. For a long time, I have been saying to myself that if the truth and the effectiveness of metaphysics is the unflinching deployment of technology, then it follows that the deconstruction of metaphysics must take

effect (to stay a little Hegelian) as the relentless dismantling of technology. Technological collapse of metaphysics? Not only. Germany for instance has shown us that one can voluntaristically dismantle nuclear power without provoking an economic catastrophe. It is towards all of this that the concept of *désœuvrement* is pointing.

Let me end on a pathetic-subjective, autobiographical-sacrificial note that prevented me from answering you for so long. As I mentioned earlier, there is a kind of ecstasy in unworking, in that—as everyone knows who has thought about it—it is normal to do nothing. And that is exactly what I have been doing for the last four years. Taking pleasure in nothing. “Enjoying life,” as one says vulgarly, meaning to enjoy the miraculous chance of being alive and not living in a slaughterhouse, a military battery, a prison, a concentration camp, on the street, etc. But quickly the Stalinist superego enters. Since we know very well that what we eat, what we use in terms of energy etc. is brought to us through an invisible network of fellow humans that do work, have worked, and will work. A minimal (and negative) ethics consists in showing solidarity with all these workers. And so you start working again because you know that this work (and its central concepts like the *pléonectique*) will nourish the best of what this so-called generic humanity has to offer in the grave conflicts that are coming our way.

And still, I cannot stop myself from thinking—even in those moments when my work makes me most proud—that, in fact, whenever one works, and it does not matter what that work is (there is naturally a huge difference between a gardener and a trader, a cow breeder and a CEO, in other words, a slave and a tyrant), one participates in the worst. This is due to the fact that the facticity of evil, all the atrocities that humanity has unleashed on the Earth since its apparition (of humanity, not of the earth), stems from the simple facticity of work: a tragic

double bind. As Kierkegaard would say, work and you will regret it. Don't work and you will regret it. You will have regrets in either case.

You cannot not be guilty, whether you work or 'are' unworked. Maybe, unworking, to be an un-worker (in the exact sense that Beckett spoke of de-peoplers) constitutes the political task for our coming generations in the coming century. An oxymoronic verb that renders the most radical passivity active, to operate inoperativity.

To give you an idea of why the topic of *désœuvrement* pains me so much, let me conclude by citing the introduction to an extraordinary conference, hosted by Lacoue-Labarthe, on the theme of the autobiographical in Derrida, which overwhelms me whenever I read it.

My dear Jacques,

I had sworn not to give in to it, to do everything in my power to avoid it, and to not allow myself to be drawn in. A sentence, slightly overemphatic, but obstinately recurring, put it plainly to me: I don't want to succumb; I don't want this endless return of the same demons; I don't want this kind of eternal repetition. Before long however, I realised that it was impossible. Strictly impossible. Then, another sentence, just as emphatic, I'm afraid began to voice itself in me: I'll yield to autobiography; I'll make that sacrifice. And when I understood that eventually, in order to make a start, I would have to utter this sentence publicly, it immediately seemed clear to me that the right course to follow was simply to let the formidable phrase that had thus come to the fore echo in all its harmonic depth: I'll make that sacrifice. And leave it at that. I think—I know—that you will understand. And you, Jacques, first and foremost.

Voilà, dear Peer. Your insistence has flattered me and mortified me. It has excited me and made me feel guilty. I hope that this text clarified why. And of course you can publish our emails in *continent*.

Mehdi Belhaj Kacem

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Even though its title suggests otherwise, this volume would not exist without the tireless work and generous support of a number of people and institutions. It is to them that I would like to express my gratitude. I first learned about the heresy of unworking during Alexander García Düttmann's seminars at Goldsmiths College, University of London. It were his ingenious philosophical readings that first sparked my interest in the theme. This interest would have remained unchanneled, however, without my long conversations with Alison Hugill, the most avid student of unworking that I know. Years later, it was Jamie Allen who invited me to edit a special issue on the theme for *continent* journal. I would like to thank him and all the other editors at *continent* for their trust and for giving me a forum and a free hand to explore unworking in all its guises. This collection would have not seen the light of day without the gentle persistence of Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, who encouraged me to extend the journal issue into a book. In August Verlag, the manuscript found its perfect home and I would like to thank Morten Paul for backing the project from the start. Publication was made possible by the financial support and enduring generosity of the Research Center *Normative Orders* at Goethe University Frankfurt, for which I remain grateful. Finally, my deepest thanks to Lianna Mark, who read this in a moment of *désœuvrement*, returning from Bologna.

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