

#18

**THIS
SITUATION
NEVER LEAVES
OUR WAKING
THOUGHTS
FOR LONG**



Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, Lisa Mazza, and David Riff				David Riff with Keti Chukhrov, Viktor Misiano, Gleb Napreenko, Alexandra Novozheneva and Andrey Parshikov		CONVERSATION	
Editorial		P. 7		These Are Still Open Questions...		P. 9	
		Boris Buden		SPECULATION			
		Red Velvet		P. 23			
				Rasha Salti		CONVERSATION	
				The Trials of Exile and the Production of Art: Conversation with Mohammad al-Attar, A Syrian Playwright		P. 32	
Burak Arikan and Erden Kosova		CONVERSATION		Bassam El Baroni and Hassan Khan		CONVERSATION	
Counter-Hegemonic Cartography		P. 40		On Radical Self-Interest		P. 46	
Ana Teixeira Pinto		SPECULATION		Julia Rometti and Victor Costales		STATEMENT	
The Pigeon in the Machine: The Concept of Control in Behaviourism and Cybernetics		P. 65		I Am Crassula		P. 74	
				David Riff		CONVERSATION	
				Different Shades of Withdrawal: Conversation with Nikita Kadan and Joanna Warsza		P. 78	
Sarah Joseph		PROJECTION		Mariam Ghani, Gulf Labor Working Group		EXHIBITION ROOM	
Arts Boycotts: The Controversy over the Nineteenth Biennale of Sydney		P. 85		Notes from a Boycott		P. 92	
		Matteo Lucchetti		CONVERSATION		Alfian Sa’at, Tan Pin Pin and Amanda Lee Koe	
		Our Language Is Either Dated or Inaccurate: Conversation with Ntone Edjabe		P. 116		To Singapore, With Love: “If You Care Too Much About Singapore, First It Breaks Your Spirit, Then It Breaks Your Heart”	
						CONVERSATION	
						P. 121	
Moses Serubiri		CONVERSATION		Veronica Wiman		PROJECTION	
“The Police Told Me I Shouldn’t Put on a Show Like That”: Conversation with Curator Koyo Kouoh on the Contested Issues of Homosexuality, Media and Religious Power in Africa		P. 129		Revisiting <i>Negrta</i> : Conversation with Liliana Angulo		P. 135	
		Hu Fang		SPECULATION		Contributors	
		The Becoming		P. 139		Colophon	
						P. 144	
						P. 146	

SITUATION
ER LEAVES
WAKING
UGHTS FOR
G

THIS SITUATION
NEVER LEAVES
OUR WAKING
THOUGHTS FOR
LONG

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez,
Lisa Mazza, and David Riff

How can we work under such conditions? Sadly, we find ourselves asking this question again and again. A massive global shift is underway in the order, or shall we rather say, the disorder of things. Notions of hybridity and unevenness, once so central to our self-understanding(s), are gobbled up by the notions of hybrid war, with its ghost armies and its highly addictive image productions. All the old foes—censorship, criminal persecution, and all-out instrumentalization—are back with a vengeance, but there is nothing old about the choices they prompt. In the age of hybrid war and velvet revolutions, things are much more complex. Caught up in the confused dynamics of political turmoil, the conditions hold us hostage unless we somehow manage to change them. Yet if we accept and internalize the imperatives of power not to address “complicated issues,” we will most likely end up ignoring the elephants in the room. One of these elephants is the MANIFESTA 10 Biennial in St. Petersburg, which has taken place amidst the authoritarian political turn in Russia. While the editorial team of this journal is certainly concerned with the exhibition and the debates it has provoked, it must be said very emphatically that MANIFESTA in St. Petersburg is certainly not the only recent event to present its producers with difficult circumstances. How do we describe the difference between our various complications, and do they really add up to something like a global turn? Furthermore, how can we continue our various engagements, despite the overwhelming pressure to boycott, withdraw, and resign? These were the questions that drove the editorial process behind this issue of *Manifesta Journal*.

Editorial work on this issue ran parallel to the fateful “Russian Spring.” What did this season of reaction mean to curators and critics living and working in Russia? Guest editor **David Riff** poses these questions and others to

philosopher, poet, and artist **Keti Chukhrov**, critics **Gleb Napreenko** and **Alexandra Novozhenova**, as well as curators **Andrei Parshikov** and **Viktor Misiano**, president of Manifesta Foundation and founder and former chief editor of *Manifesta Journal*. Which ways forward seem the most salient, and what realistic view must one take to continue? There is no future without a past. Which historical perspective shall be used to tackle the present situation? **Boris Buden** tries to answer this question in his speculation *Red Velvet*, where he draws a line between the events of Eastern and Central Europe’s “velvet revolutions” and the current self-understandings of liberal democracies and the oppositional forces they provoke, with implications far beyond the local context of Central and Eastern Europe.

Perhaps a historical consciousness of the kind that Buden describes would allow us to see the all too-often occluded links between the increasingly repressive situation in Russia and those of the Middle East. In the case of Syria, deep connections go far beyond the relations between Putin and his client, Bashar al-Assad, and even beyond an unspoken Russian post-Soviet colonialism in the region. There is a synchronicity between both the aspirations and their denial: the Assad regime’s flirtation with liberalism and a parallel process under Medvedev in the mid-to-late 2000s in Russia, culminating and ending with the global wave of protest in 2011. **Rasha Salti** thus talks to Syrian playwright **Mohammad al-Attar** about the trials of exile, and how the production of art in a global context can anticipate the uprising of an entire generation. A late and very inspiring instance of such uprising was the urban protest against the razing and gentrification of Gezi Park in Istanbul, in which architects, urban planners and artists played a crucial role. **Erden Kosova** discusses with the activist, cartographer, and artist **Burak Arikan** on how urban cartography and the mapping of solidarity networks can contribute to struggles, often at a divide from representation-hungry art institutions, all the while reclaiming the “use” of art and the poetics immanent to struggle.

It is this immanent poetics and its subversion in art that stands at the center of a dialogue between curator and critic **Bassam El Baroni** and artist **Hassan Khan** on the effects of Tahrir Square and its productive effects on artistic thinking and vice versa, presenting an intriguing though by-now fading snapshot of the so-called Arab

These are Still Open Questions...

David Riff
with Ketí Chukhrov, Viktor
Misiano, Gleb Napreenko,
Alexandra Novozhenova and
Andrey Parshikov

Spring's utopian-aesthetic dimension. As both authors have pointed out in their introduction, the situation has begun to look very different two years down the line. From this observation has the present issue title emerged: that any situation at this current moment in time, in any place, "never leaves our waking thoughts for long." Two years after the so-called Arab Springs and the Russian "winter of dissent," pundits and serious critics alike are drawn into comparisons of a Cold War 2.0, an image reinforced by the Russian Federation's recent nuclear posturing. Yet isn't this comparison too facile? **Ilya Budraitskis** addresses this question in *The Language of Cold War?*, asking whether or not such banal historical parallels obscure the real nature of the reactionary turn and block off the search for viable survival strategies. This theme of survival is further taken up by **Veronica Nosedá**, who narrates her journey to Russia to play soccer in the Open Games in 2014, a multisport event held by the Russian LGBT Sports Federation, which highlighted the concrete reality of struggles in forms unimaginable at the height of the real Cold War. Cold War-era ideology and its application in the instrumentalized psychology of behaviorism stand at the center of **Ana Teixeira Pinto's** speculation, *The Pigeon in the Machine*. This excursus into the history of behavioral systems-theory and animal experimentation raises timely questions in an untimely form, addressing the groundwork that was laid for the biopolitics of a "brave new world" between the USA and the USSR, more than sixty years ago. Precisely these biopolitics are the source of new unexpected combinations. The fundamental hybridity of a wholly man-made cosmos of conditioned and experimentally-generated fauna and flora gives rise to new ideological forms of Magical Anarchism, as narrated by **Julia Rometti** and **Victor Costales**, where facts and metaphors are driven by Amerindian perspectivism.

What does it mean to work under such conditions with respect to curatorial practices and artistic potentialities? Controversies around recent contemporary art events have stirred artists' boycotts and mobilised their publicness, most notably this year at the Biennale of Sydney, here brought to discussion by **Sarah Joseph**. **Joanna Warsza** and **Nikita Kadan** exchange their views in light of the public programme of the MANIFESTA 10 in St. Petersburg, on the reasons of participation or withdrawal from the construction of an ideological facade. Are boycott and withdrawal always the end of the conversation, or can they be the beginning of something new? **Mariam Ghani** speculates on exactly that in her report on how the Gulf Labor Working Group's boycott of the Guggenheim's Abu Dhabi franchise ultimately generated an exhibition program of critical art called 52

Weeks, giving the very notion of boycott a more positive turn. Rasha Salti in conversation with **Nancy Adajania** speaks "truth to power" and about her refusal to resort to the self-censorship. She lays bare the development behind the grossly misinterpreted installation of Mustapha Benfodil at the 10th Sharjah Biennale in 2011, as well as the existence of the public sphere in some of the Arabic-speaking countries, and its absence elsewhere.

Censorship and self-censorship are also returning in South Africa, as **Ntone Edjabe**, editor of Chimurenga Magazine, tells **Matteo Lucchetti**. Today, old members of the African National Congress who supported the cultural boycott of the apartheid regime are among the loudest to call for censorship, while neoliberal freedom of the press counteracts and prevents a much-needed decolonization of language. Still, it is possible to develop strategies of cultural resistance even under highly repressive conditions, as becomes obvious in **Amanda Lee Koe's** discussion with **Alfian Sa'at** and **Tan Pin Pin** about the dynamics of censorship and self-censorship vis-à-vis theater and film in Singapore, where increasingly sophisticated arts funding goes hand-in-hand with repressive occlusion of local politics from the arts. Are solidarities possible across vastly different contexts, when exhibitions all over the world are attacked by homophobic thugs? Such questions are in the background as **Moses Serubiri** talks to curator **Koyo Kouoh** about how a recent exhibition at Raw Material Company, Dakar, was attacked for trying to start a debate about homosexuality in Africa. By revisiting her exhibition, *Negrita* curator **Veronica Wiman** in conversation with the artist **Liliana Angulo** reflects on how to counter self-censorship by giving space to the fight against racism, classism, sexism, and gender violence towards women from the Afro-Columbian community in Cali, Colombia. Ending with an excerpt from **Hu Fang's** poem "The Becoming", we might be misinterpreted as being romantic futurists, endeavoring only towards a lucid analysis of the ever-repeating historical narratives. That, dear reader, is for you yourself to ponder:

*Our descendants might could from the track of circular time
have a new start
landing on feet on the muddy puddle pavement*

David Riff [D.R.]: *Over the last months, we've seen a drastic global shift. Some call it a "fascist-clerical turn," while others speak of a conservative revolution from above. The fact is, in Russia, Vladimir Putin's political zig-zag between authoritarian nationalism and maintaining good relations with the West has veered decisively in one direction, buoyed by a resurgent nationalist imaginary. Yet when I talk about how bad things are, I feel like I must be exaggerating. Really. The sun shines as the leaves on the trees slowly turn dusty and yellow, and my family walks in the same park, and life only seems a little less pleasant. Everybody talks about patriotism and Putin's high ratings, but there aren't that many people with those black-orange-black-orange-black Colorado-beetle ribbons, are there? How much of the current shift is about media-war and hysteria, and how great is the impact in everyday life? How resistant is everyday life to commands from above; how obedient? How distant is the war? How noticeable are the changes?*

Gleb Napreenko [G.N.]: Even if the polls show that Putin's ratings have gone through the roof, we should be very careful in interpreting that information. Yes, the country is in the grip of conservatism, inertia, and a fear of change. The same person who experiences paroxysms of patriotic fervor in the spirit of "Crimea is Ours," for the want of at least some kind of identity to believe in, also feels a deep dissatisfaction with the situation of life in the country at large. He or she represses such feelings, alarmed at the prospects of losing that identity and stability, and always asking, "Who, if not Putin?" The most unexpected ideological constellations can be encountered by talking to people in public transportation in Russia's cities: there is nostalgia for the USSR and nostalgia for the Tsar, liberalism and hatred toward the oligarchs, and the like. Ideology is always contradictory, but it also always hides its own contradictions while, more

importantly, it hides the contradictions of reality itself. Such unevenness characterizes not only the ideology of each individual subject, but that of all Russians: it isn't quite clear who these famous "masses" are; different regions and social groups have different opinions, so that any monolithic "Putinist majority" is a myth of the Kremlin's ideologues. One shouldn't deny the potential for change in people's minds, though that potentiality might never be realized. How shall we actualize these potentialities, and can they be actualized at all? These are still open questions. If we're talking about our circles, including those on Facebook, almost everybody was somehow swept up in the wave of politicizations over the last years and in the protests of 2011–2012. It is especially depressing to discover one's own powerlessness and the pressure of repression after such a euphoric, intoxicated feeling of togetherness, after indulging in the joy of public political representation. In Putin's third term, power really has shown its authoritarian essence. Yet this authoritarian essence has its roots in 1993 and the Yeltsin-era, and didn't just take shape yesterday.

Of course, you can drink coffee and go for a walk, but you can't inscribe yourself into a more or less stable institutional structure if you aren't going to work to reproduce the existing consensus. This is something the last MANIFESTA taught us.

Alexandra Novozhenнова [A.N.]: Your question already suggests that the sphere of ideology is at a certain remove from what we perceive as "real" life: coffee, leaves on the trees, and so on. Well, of course, if you don't happen to live in Donetsk, Ukraine. Yes, there is the illusion of a rupture between the urban everyday and the media. As an experiment, some people actually stop reading the news and notice that life suddenly doesn't seem so bad. They stop taking sides in distant conflicts, and they stop investing their intellectual energy in aggressive discussions that make it seem like the civil war is already knocking

on the door, though it'll probably still be a while before then. I think that there are problems here, however (especially if we're talking about life in Russia). You can stop reading the news and keep drinking coffee while going for a stroll, but as soon as you mention work, let's say in the cultural industry, you immediately begin to feel the changes in the most concrete way. In the field of art, this means that only the most brutally neoliberal institutional organism can survive by insisting on the autonomy of art, which in reality is not autonomous at all but depends upon the neoliberal urban context and the apolitical consumption of food and exhibitions. As soon as people try to take a different position in that organism, if they try to raise the degree of criticism, or think about how the institution might work politically, generating not consensus but change, the reality of the conservative turn can immediately be seen. They will see that there is no place left for them in public space. Of course, you can drink coffee and go for a walk, but you can't inscribe yourself into a more or less stable institutional structure if you aren't going to work to reproduce the existing consensus. This is something the last MANIFESTA taught us. Whenever the illusion arises that there is no connection between the exaggerated escalation in the media, and peaceful reality, it's not a bad idea to simply remember which place we can afford to inhabit in this society, in its life and its structure. That is the level where reality shows itself.

Viktor Misiano [V.M.]: I understand your question as an expression of perplexity at the many layers of today's reality. In fact, there is no clear explanation or exhaustive definition for what's going on, making it impossible to understand today's world without admitting its incomprehensibility. Its contradictions are hidden. There is no discursive integrity, only permanent agnosticism, and these are the hallmarks of our time. You mention the Ribbon of Saint George as being the new symbol of Russian nationalism, but have you ever noticed that it is also used to adorn expensive Western cars? Vladimir Medinsky, the Minister of Culture, says that Russia isn't Europe, but at the same time Ca' Foscari University in Venice has awarded him an honorary degree. The news on Russian state television bubbles over with anti-Western propaganda, but it's immediately followed by an American thriller. The young man in the trendy clothes who came to fix my e-book yesterday first told me what a great guy Putin is for defending us from America, and then gushed with enthusiasm at the prospects of Apple soon releasing MacTV. It's amazing how the recent burst of nationalism goes hand-in-hand with the recognition of the cultural and technological hegemony of the West. Nationalism, and not only in Russia, was always the dark side of the global order, and the rationality of neoliberal capitalism, based on procedures of evaluation and prediction, were always no more than a superficial layer hiding trauma and dark fantasies. We knew this all along, but now these two dimensions have become visible at once, forming strange nets of varying contrapuntal intersections. Even more, this net of hidden counterpoints contains even more contradictions. That's exactly what makes our time so interesting but also so dangerous...

Andrei Parshikov [A.P.]: Three weeks have passed since I got these questions, and a lot has changed since then. On the eve of the 6th to the 7th of August, Facebook exploded with pontifications, whining, and apocalyptic prophecies regarding parmesan cheese, dry-cured Spanish ham, and oysters. Things have quieted down since, but it was precisely at that moment, and not the day that Russia announced it had decided to annex Crimea, that the intelligentsia's consternation reached a critical mass. Of course, everyday life hasn't changed that much. Over the last two months, there are fewer and fewer people with black-orange-black-orange-black Colorado ribbons, but there are now official representatives of the patriotic National Liberation Movement who carefully observe every opposition demonstration and disrupt its orchestration, unafraid to dirty their faces in the mud. It's also important to mention that Russian television (which I watch not just to stay informed but also because I enjoy it as an extreme sport) stopped blowing up the themes of Ukraine and the anti-terror operation, and has also stopped using the word "*Novorossiya*" [literally, "New Russia"]. Now all they talk about is beautiful Azerbaijan and its tomatoes and the milk farms of the Moscow region, where, it goes without saying, udders almost burst after August 7th. My point is that even a month ago, the changes were more than apparent, but now, there's something like a pause, though the tension hasn't gone away in the least. Everyone is pausing a little and waiting to see which way the spring will uncoil when it's finally released after having been wound up for so long.

Everyone is pausing a little and waiting to see which way the spring will uncoil when it's finally released after having been wound up for so long.

D.R.: *Let's talk more about the potential impact on cultural production, of the recent legislation restricting freedom of speech in the public sphere. People outside of Russia generally don't know that it doesn't just concern the dissemination of propaganda of LGBT lifestyles to minors, but extends from harsh sentences for unsanctioned gatherings to punishment for "Liking" extremist materials with prison sentences. The list of extremist materials seems to be growing daily, as the Russian parliament tries to place restrictions on all sorts of things: on anti-religious polemic, on revisionism vis-à-vis the USSR's role in the Second World War, on anti-patriotic sentiment, on cursing in movies, on books, or on works of art, and even—according to a particularly loony initiative—on words of foreign, that is, non-Russian origin. How much of this is simply legislative craziness? Furthermore, how much should artists try to fight back?*

A.N.: There are so many prohibitory initiatives and their majority is so absurd that it is quite pointless to react to each and every one of them. It seems that no law, no matter how absurd, would ever provoke a significant outburst of dissatisfaction leading to change. The new legislative initiatives are perceived as media-noise through which one can obliquely understand the government's current direction. At the same time, the struggle against them isn't entirely pointless, as long as it doesn't become an end in itself as a struggle for rights in the abstract sense. For example, Elena Gremina, the director and stage-writer of Theater.doc has started a strong campaign against the law that bans cursing onstage, and clearly, she isn't fighting for the abstract right to curse in public, which would be pretty stupid, but for the critical role that has fallen to documentary drama with all its literary peculiarities in Moscow over the last years. Gremina doesn't stage picket lines or collect signatures; she uses the resources available to her, which are her theater and her reputation in the media, inventing different moves within the situation at hand. She is taking risks, and at the same time, setting precedents. That kind of struggle seems important to me.

A.P.: Putin's prohibitions have been building up the population's mental tolerance to governmental legislative inventions for at least two and a half years, now. After the signing of the law against the propaganda of non-traditional values, a few colleagues and I used municipal money to organize the First Moscow Gender School in the Muzeon Park. This was the height of the hysteria regarding that law, and I had to answer complaints from ordinary citizens every day. I had to tell them that our school was not propagating homosexuality to minors, and that entrance was eighteen and over. In fact, three other laws make it really hard for me to live in this country: the law on demonstrations, the law against offending religious people's feelings, and the law against separatism. It's just that they can be interpreted in the broadest possible way, which means that work of any project automatically sets off self-censorship of the strongest kind. These are really very scary laws. As for the laws controlling the internet, this law really is very murky and concerns the mass media rather than simple citizens who find themselves in jail for "liking" something on Facebook. We're on our way to having a walled-off internet as in China, but not as quickly. There aren't enough servers for now.

There aren't enough servers for now.

V.M.: Still, the problem is that so many laws are being passed at such incredible speeds that no one can even follow their appearance. There is also no control structure capable of grasping the symbolic production of such a large country or documenting all the abuses of the viral spread of prohibitory legislation. Many laws are passed according to the ideological consensus of the moment, but the situation is changing so quickly that old laws are quickly forgotten. If just a few short months ago it was important to fight non-traditional sexual orientations, it is now important to out a ban on any public criticism of the Russian annexation of Crimea. LGBT activists can now do pretty much anything, as long as they don't speak out against the annexation.

Moreover, this legislative cascade looks so grotesque that it discredits itself: it seems so carnivalesque that it is not serious to take it seriously. Finally, Russian society today is quite complex: there are still social settings, many of them in fact growing, where these laws are simply ignored. In other words, the state doesn't take into account that we are no longer living in a modernist disciplinary society, a fact that many political activists and their mouthpieces ignore with their all-too-direct criticisms. They find themselves in jail not because they've broken the law, but because the state put them there, in fact breaking its own laws.

If just a few short months ago it was important to fight non-traditional sexual orientations, it is now important to out a ban on any public criticism of the Russian annexation of Crimea. LGBT activists can now do pretty much anything, as long as they don't speak out against the annexation.

D.R.: *What about the role of contemporary art? Here, there has clearly been a major shift. If in recent years, the Ministry of Culture supported a certain kind of art as a symbol of modernization and the legitimization of local bourgeois elites, the course has changed since autumn of last year, when the Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky visited the Moscow Biennial at the Manege Exhibition Hall and condemned the show. It reminded lots of people of Nikita Khrushchev's rampage against modernism in 1962 in the same place, only that Khrushchev was ultimately more sympathetic to the artist's concerns. Since, the Ministry has taken a clear course against contemporary art in its memoranda, recommendations, and public appearances. Yet at the same time, the Presidential Administration walks back the more radically conservative, nationalistic programs, and projects like MANIFESTA 10 at the Hermitage or the Youth Biennial in Moscow still open with government funding. Where will this zig-zag land? Are these projects the last big public events before art goes underground, or retreats into VIP salons? Will big public projects with state support still be possible, despite Medinsky's threats? How afraid should we be that our entire field of practice has been banned altogether? Or should we worry more about being instrumentalized?*

A.N.: I think Medinsky's rhetoric is not ideologically prohibitory but rather connected to an economic-instrumental view of culture. It's just that the state (on a federal level) will not finance anything that doesn't have an immediate propagandistic effect—that is, if it doesn't serve the reproduction of itself in its current state (examples of these are festivals of Cossack dancing, exhibitions at the Hermitage, the Bolshoi, or the "Romanov Dynasty" exhibition, and the like). All other initiatives will

continue to exist on private money if they don't cross the boundary of the permissible; completely dependent on the consumerist logic of urban space (called "the eventful city" by urbanists). This doesn't mean that the state won't support anything that might be called "contemporary culture"; MANIFESTA, for one, proves that the state assumes that there is a place for that "contemporary culture" (and even a refined, subtle, smart version of it), and that it is ready to pay for it in part, but that place is as isolated as possible and rather symbolic or arbitrary. Such a culture will inevitably find itself suffering from anemia.

A.P.: Interesting question. Moscow seems to be in a highly privileged position, first of all, and the fact that the Hermitage is celebrating its three-hundred-year anniversary with a MANIFESTA should already tell us that islands to represent the elite and possibly the world community are needed and still exist. Indeed, there is Medinsky, but he's a clown for the Moscow intelligentsia; the laughing stock of the middle class and the creative segment, for the entire oppositional part of the population. Not only that: he is like a clown lighting rod that personifies politics in his personality-show, so that the population might joke, laugh, and wonder out loud at his antics, training a certain social attitude towards him but not towards what he represents. Therefore, in the end, nobody is about to put a ban on contemporary art, but alternative trash will creep in. Let's hope that contemporary art benefits. Even if you don't really like the Russian avant-garde and hate Peter Greenaway, you're still bound

to like his recent show in the Manege better than the exhibition *Steps* by Glazunov's academy, where people just have no culture of making exhibitions whatsoever. Also, Moscow has the progressive urban cultural adminstrator Kapkov, who still isn't finished building his Pleasantville, and while work is still under way, art will be there to help.

Therefore, in the end, nobody is about to put a ban on contemporary art, but alternative trash will creep in. Let's hope that contemporary art benefits.

V.M.: Putin came to power in his third term through a political project that was inspired by the idea of rejecting the democracy of representation in favor of direct democracy, as strange as that sounds. He was going to cede leadership of the ruling party to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and found a Popular Front, triumphantly stepping to its head. He would declare war on the elites, demanding their nationalization, in that they would deny themselves ownership of property and bank accounts abroad and so on. The cultural bureaucracy's critique of contemporary art has a similar nature. It accuses art of being elitist, cosmopolitan, and too-far removed from the needs of real people. However, though Putin's project has successfully realized itself in a uniting nationalist mobilization over the last months, it is still unfinished in a political sense. It is unclear how to reform political institution to realize direct democracy, except by turning representative democracy into pure ritual (which, as we know, is the case). A sense of self-preservation has prevented the state from trying to fully nationalize the elites. Something similar is happening in culture: the cultural bureaucracy cannot dismantle a Westernized artistic and cultural infrastructure, because that would mean having no infrastructure

whatsoever. The political, economic, and cultural elites resist the current course on all levels and in different forms. I myself observed how the governor's office of St. Petersburg supported *MANIFESTA 10*, despite having a reputation as the most contradictory city in Russia. Actually, this municipal government is well aware of that reputation, and they really want to shake free of it...

Keti Chukhrov [K.C.]: It is quite obvious that private initiatives will thrive under such conditions. However they can peacefully co-exist with numerous government-funded public venues. In other words, contemporary art as practice will not retreat either on the part of the producers (artists, curators, heads of institutions, and the like), or on the part of those who govern cultural politics and commission it on the bureaucratic level. The specific trait of today's Russia is an imaginable mutation: along with the austerity measures and the obscurant censorship the state invests in public or educational programs: the example could be the Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art (MMCA), the National Center for Contemporary Arts (NCCA), the Moscow International Biennial for Young Art, or Strelka (which is actually a private institution, but was launched on behalf of the governmental cultural initiatives). Each of these imply that censorship can go hand in hand with the quasi-enlightened programming. Therefore, not only will contemporary art not recede in Russia, it will occupy a hegemonic position in legitimizing the "progressive" cultural politics of a national state, which will not necessarily be the projects on national issues, but on the contrary, might even touch upon neutrally-leftist topics, including social-democratic rhetoric, urban studies, and public art. The reason for this is not only the instrumentalization of art on the part of state bureaucracy and/or private owners, but contemporary's art's aesthetic and political vagueness in general. Art gets instrumentalized so easily because over the course of its history it has lost both its radical modernist negativity, and its touch with the reality that would allow it not just to intervene, but to construct life. That's not to mention the sensuous mimetic contact with reality that it had abandoned even long before these two losses.

D.R.: *Obviously, there is a tradition of resistance in post-Soviet Russia to cultural restrictions from above on all levels. Non-conformist artists (that is, artists working "beyond the law" of a certain aesthetic and topical canon) have had very limited access to public exhibition space, little ability to set up public events, and almost no chances to travel. Nevertheless, the art community has developed and at times has even thrived, as artists have developed formats such as out-of-town site-specific actions or apartment exhibitions to make, document, and show work to one another. In some ways, this Apartment Art seems to be resurfacing, as are what you, Viktor, have once called "confidential practices." How viable are they today? Can artists find refuge there, or is it harmful and regressive, understandable as that may be?*

A.N.: I think it would be a big mistake to retreat entirely into art like that. It's also impossible, simply because today's world is far too open to allow such utter escapism. We are all visible and interconnected. Try going to an apartment exhibition, and a million snapshots will immediately appear on your friends's Facebook pages, if they were also there. Today, the private-public relation is fundamentally different, and narcissist self-marginalization in a circle of friends won't guarantee you a proud position of independence from the "rest of the world."

A.P.: Yes, if there is such a turn, it's usually very harmful, especially if the reasons are political. The reason for the revival in Apartment Art lies elsewhere, in the boom of young artists. Within three years, several art schools have opened to produce young artists at an enviable pace, though nobody needs so many young artists in Moscow, where there are only five or six respectable galleries, and three or four museums. They've just graduated and really want to show their work to the public and to one another. That's the real reason. There hasn't been a turn to super-private spaces as of yet.

V.M.: Looking back on the experience that I called "confidential communities" in the 1990s, I have noticed one thing that we didn't realize back then. The communities of those days arose on the ruins of Soviet society, and identified themselves as a model and paradigm for a more stable infrastructure in the future. That is, their main value—namely that the production and exhibition of art remained in a para-social, anthropological dimension—at the time seemed as if it were the compensatory, and even detrimental result of external conditions. This is precisely why the art world accepted the governmental-oligarchical infrastructure so unequivocally in the 2000s, trading in its communities for corporations. The infrastructure itself seemed to be the foundation for any artistic order as well as its critique. Paradoxically, this is why the institutions could not be criticized, because they would just create the conditions to perform an institutional critique. Contemporary conditions are no less contradictory. The state has created a new status quo by touching upon an old, national trauma. The art world answers by addressing trauma on an individual rather than on a collective level. Hence, the complicated relation of artists to the idea of a community: trauma is a subjective experience, while communities—or better yet, society—is most often the source of that trauma. On the other hand, by unlocking the very foundations of subjectivity, traumatic experience opens the subject to a search for empathy, understanding, a friend, a counterpart—that is, an Other. These new connections have no institutional horizon, at least, not the one that existed in the 1990s. Now, confidentiality realizes itself in nearly literal terms, losing its old metaphorical meaning. This is a new post-activist form of solidarity that we have yet to understand fully. Finally, there is another important moment. As the state construes its solidarity with the national masses and finds itself in opposition to the institutions, the institutions themselves evolve in an interesting direction. They undergo radicalizations and consciously or spontaneously begin to take over critical functions as well as opening themselves up for criticism. Of

course, the Russian version of this new institutionalism is spontaneous, unreflexive, and inconsistent. Yet there is a characteristic detail: when I first put out a call for participants for the first Curatorial Summer School in Moscow, most of the applicants named the Tate Modern in London, England, as their ideal of an art institution. Three years later, their ideal was the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Netherlands.

K.C.: Obviously the authoritarian state gradually manifests more and more totalitarian traits. This is complemented by a Cold War rhetoric. Such a condition could be considered a motivation for art, culture and humanities to go underground. At least, such is the historical background of cultural practice during totalitarian policies. However, if we look back at Soviet history, not much from underground art and culture of the Soviet period has remained viable for the present. This is because claiming to be "underground" means claiming one's own exceptional position and condition, and then voluntarily or involuntarily acknowledging the ethics of a closed community based on skepticism and suspicion. To my mind, however, despite all irretrievable cracks in social space, there is one history, one world, one art, one culture, and the like—implying their versatility to the full. As for the present, the moment, the retreat of the intelligentsia would not imply any drastic change, or even be a remedy of resistance. The reason is that unlike in the 1960s and the 1970s, when the issue might have been non-representational politics and its subversive impact, today politics or culture cannot be efficient without visibility. The argument against this assumption might be that the practices that might be completely suppressed *de facto* already seem to be underground. I would dispute such an assumption by claiming that the "underground" is a consciously and voluntarily chosen standpoint, and a state of mind, rather than a position in relation to authority. The present modes and media of cultural production, as well as ethical and social habits, do not suggest that there is any demand for such a standpoint and hence that it could be viable. By the same token, any shift to Apartment Art as a new space of production would not construct alternative values. It would just represent art in the conditions of a poorer economy.

To my mind, however, despite all irretrievable cracks in social space, there is one history, one world, one art, one culture, and the like—implying their versatility to the full.

D.R.: *One thing that's clearly changed since the time of Apartment Art is the advent of neo-capitalism and its coterie of robber barons and minor oligarchs. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, we saw a rising demand for contemporary art from precisely this profile of clientele, and the emergence of new kinds of spaces, educational platforms, and discussion formats that cater to them or to their view of culture. At times it seemed like art had become a total spectacle; a gentrified zone where all the producers are banished to the kitchen; a star chef or two aside. Now as state-run institutions become precarious or suspect, some influential critical artists are revising that opinion. Recently, for example, the Ukrainian artist Nikita Kadan announced that he'd much rather collaborate with a private initiative such as Winzavod or V-A-C Foundation than the NCCA, which, in recent years (and even now) has often been a bastion*

of critical discourse and engaged culture. Indeed, V-A-C Foundation is currently funding one of the Meeting Points exhibitions by What, How & for Whom/WHW about decolonization and political turmoil in art from Africa and the Arab world, while Garage has also been generally friendly to critical and engaged art since the arrival of its new director. How much hope should we place in the support of a “progressive bourgeoisie”? What would your strategy be in that regard? Do you agree or disagree with Nikita Kadan?

A.N.: There is no way of coming to a clear principle such as “I only work with private institutions but never for the state.” Each institution has its specific way of functioning and providing different possibilities. This is something you should decide according to the situation, moreover because private money and state interests are so often symbiotic.

A.P.: There are two stories that could be witty comments to your question. The first is a memorable speech that Charles Esche gave at the Exodus panel during the steirischer herbst festival in Austria a few years ago. He said that the intelligentsia’s only option is to create an international network of artists, architects and computer specialists based largely on capital from the small-to-middle-range bourgeoisie, as the young segment is still interested in identifying itself by going to contemporary art exhibitions and “reading books by Agamben with pretty covers.” By educating this group, one stands a chance of creating a new world elite. This is a point I found myself agreeing to, in principle. As for Nikita’s point of view, it makes more sense to take a position such as that of Teresa Margoles, who doesn’t accept budgets for commissions or exhibitions until she can actually talk to a person whose view of the world she accepts. That’s why it’s quite hard to work with this artist in Europe, where so many exhibitions have corporate or state sponsorship.

The worldwide tendency is rather about claiming the leftist rhetoric on behalf of the enlightened bourgeoisie, rather than patronizing progressive initiatives in culture. This is not yet the case for Russia.

K.C.: I think that imagining oligarchs supporting the real initiatives of left politics in the nineteenthth or twentieth century would be naïve. The worldwide tendency is rather about claiming the leftist rhetoric on behalf of the enlightened bourgeoisie, rather than patronizing progressive initiatives in culture. This is not yet the case for Russia. The Russian private foundations still function according to a system of patronage. However, the fact that projects supported by the V-A-C or the Stella Foundation often deal with critical theory or leftist thought does not lead to intensification of leftist thought and practice. On the contrary, we have to face the lubrication of such practices on the ground, even though it might be involuntary on the part of the leftist agents themselves. Another interesting option is a converse possibility: something still unusual for art and its institutions (see the texts by John Roberts on the Second Economy). There are the cases when an artist herself generates the platforms and conditions for an alternative economy, which although is inevitably inscribed into the macro economy, it is still able to ground its production on the logic of non-monetized exchange. The

best example here would be the Timebank by e-flux, or the SvobMarxIzd and Tranlit projects here in Russia. Alternative economies either become a cultural or even artistic achievement in themselves, or they serve as new grounds for artistic production.

G.N.: This question, like the previous ones, asks what we should do under today’s situation of reaction. They are all ethical questions, but they concern aesthetic practices. Here, you are indirectly asking us about the meaning of contemporary art, or the lack of meaning thereof. Which institutions can we deal with, and whom should we avoid? Where can we exhibit? Whom should I support in the situation of having to choose between several evils? All of these are ethical choices that everybody needs to make on their own. For one, I cannot answer Kadan’s question: the choice between Garage or V-A-C, or the state institution of the NCCA, just sounds like a choice between bosses. As Jacques Rancière has shown us again and again, the contemporary aesthetic regime only allows art to be itself in relation to non-art, for example, ethics, politics, or history. An aesthetic position can only be articulated in the context or space of non-art; it only makes sense there. From an ethical position, we all stand accused of inconsistency, opportunism, or escapism. Yet art can only happen in a place where one can discuss these conditions; where one can reflect upon the place of one’s utterances and the territories in which these utterances are produced. If such reflection is taboo or impossible, art loses its meaning, and it’s time to run. The most reflexive, complex, radical art under present conditions is always full of both the senselessness of “slackerdom” and the utmost seriousness of truth; the source of its attraction as well as its emptiness. Even in the main project of the current MANIFESTA, which to me seemed to be purely mechanical in its reaction to the political expectation and the demands facing it, there was a place for reflexive works of art like Francis Alÿs’s *Lada Kopeika*, which was dedicated to the very act of viewing the former USSR from a European perspective.

D.R.: *Over the last years, activist practices have become more popular in Russia after a period of formalism and aestheticism, and many people were talking about the renewed importance of Moscow Actionism from the 1990s and its “terrorist-naturalist” tactics. Groups such as Voina and Pussy Riot reclaimed the medium of intervention in a very spectacular way, and for a while it even seemed like the competition in radicalism that we had once known was back. Somehow a new zero-point was Pyotr Pavlensky’s performance where he nailed his testicles to the Red Square. At the same time, we’ve seen the spread of more differentiated social activist practices that are less concerned with intervention, in addition to their institutionalization, such as the “Creative Time”-like formats used by the curator Tanya Volvkova’s Mediaudar. Has the changing political situation given actionism and art activism new “leases on life”? Is the institutionalization of such practices a problem, and if so, to what extent? Does it render them transparent to power? Or does it give them a voice that they might otherwise lack? Furthermore, how effective can actionism and activism be as a political alternative to more static exhibitions in Russia today? Can such ephemeral activist-artist projects work, as long as they don’t take the course of direct confrontation?*

A.N.: The institutionalization of these practices often simply looks stupid. Their classification as a separate kind of art requiring special festivals and generating subcultural communities seems to me no better than the classification of different species such as science art or formalism. That only obscures the meaning of such pursuits. Unlike the actionism of the 1990s, which was all about fidelity to the historical avant-garde in art, it is more productive to look at today's activism as a type of civic behavior in a particular political context.

A.P.: It seems to me that the heyday of "artivism" has passed ever since Nadya Tolokonnikova and Masha Alyokhina got out of jail. First, I thought it was over when Voina got the Innovation art prize, but no, Innovation is only relevant to the community. The story about Pussy Riot and their cathedral songs really circulated all over the world and made the political prisoner punk performers into no lesser figures than Khodorkovsky. Anything anyone might do after Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina shook hands with global pop stars and US presidential candidates is understood as a public relations gesture, and only later as a statement—and even then, only through a negative-critical optic. On the other hand, Artem Loskutov's stupid action on the secession of Siberia has been a success. The media are so tense right now that there can be explosions at the mere flick of a match.

G.N.: Art fulfills a variety of functions other than aesthetic ones, such as when a certain kind of community forms around art. That is the value of events like Media-udar or Feminist Pencil, but that's also their biggest problem, as the community formed around them risks becoming subcultural and closed. For many, it seemed like most of Media-udar's visitors were somehow personally involved in the event. Art's social and aesthetic functions can be summed up in the word "mediation": the artwork effects mediation in the gap between art and non-art, or in the gaps between people. The main threat to art in Russia (and not only in Russia) is the loss of a space for mediation; the total closure of art in self-reproduction disconnected from any "outer reality," which includes both the normalizing institutionalization that you refer to, as well as any exodus into the underground in response to censorship. I wouldn't risk a prognosis, but if there's anything worth fighting for, it's that gap; that space beyond a circle of friends and beyond the autonomy of art, if fighting is still possible. In that sense, I felt Kristina Norman's work at *MANIFESTA 10* to be very successful as a work, and its success lay in the embarrassing story of Mikhail Piotrovsky, whose commentary turned the work's meaning upside down. This opens a battleground for the struggle of interpretation, which is actually that same space of mediation. It is in that space that a society's heterogeneities and disagreements reveal themselves. Maybe, at least, a limited public sees that art can still demonstrate the potential of dissent hidden in the false monolith of Putin's consensus.

D.R.: *My final question is a little sad and self-legitimizing, but the present developments make me think a lot about emigration and diasporas, as so many of my students and colleagues prepare either to leave or to depart*

into a kind of inner exile at distant houses in the woods. I find myself wondering whether it might not be more interesting to work in Kharkov, Ukraine, or even Kyiv (where lots of people speak Russian) right now than in Moscow. Do you think the current developments will prompt a wave of migration or greater flux in terms of the geographical mobility of artists? Or, on the contrary, will it isolate Russian artists and cut them off from the rest of the world? How do you feel about working in the Ukraine—would you consider it? Are you considering emigration?

A.P.: My answer will be very brief. It's probably more interesting to work in Kyiv than in Moscow today, but it is also a lot scarier. Many people, myself included, are pretty much panicking, and imagine a new Caribbean Crisis from which there is no exit. That goes without saying. My friends and I all keep open visas for Schengen states and the US, if ever we have to ask for asylum.

V.M.: I first faced the problem of emigration in the mid-2000s. The cultural authorities, still rather glamorous-corrupt than national-patriotic, told me that I'd do best to look for work abroad, because no one would work with me here. They did everything possible to make me believe in the seriousness of their intentions. The atmosphere of triumphant conformism was such that there was scant space for judgment or action on the Russian scene. For six years, my second home has been in Italy, where I spend at least half of the year. The situation today is much more dramatic than it was ten years ago, but that's what makes it interesting. In the past, I simply didn't understand what to do in my own city, if I didn't know how to cheat or steal? In the current agonistic situation however I see that my presence can be relevant, and that there is interest in my work. It could be that the experience of emigration taught me to look at reality dialectically. Bertolt Brecht once said that the emigrant is a natural dialectician.

Bertolt Brecht once said that the emigrant is a natural dialectician.

A.N.: We need to find ways of acting in the situation as it is, but travel for the sake of travel, or openness and communication are not means in themselves. As for artists, I don't think anyone can be completely cut off from anything. Of course, there will be an interruption in "cultural exchange," but it's interesting to see what role art or criticism can play in the remaining spaces. Artists migrate because that's how the art world works; its infrastructure forces them to relocate to wherever there are schools, residences, and exhibitions. I don't think artist's travel will be affected by recent political events.

K.C.: I think it is quite predictable that agents from the leftist intelligentsia would create some sort of transnational multitude exerting at least oblique impact on the emergency zones. Much more interesting for me would be researching, as well as socially and existentially experiencing, the fields of reactionary populism that overlap with most impoverished areas in provinces or smaller towns, and which form the majority of Putin's electorate. This shift of the oppressed masses to governmental politics,



Drawings: Vlado Jeremić

Boris Buden

Red Velvet

as well as their nationalist rhetoric, causes the split in the left: if people detach themselves from such masses they appear to be elitist and liberal; if they, on the contrary, support them, they fall into the trap of superseding the criticism of the oppression with nationalist ideology. Education and enlightening programs would seem here the third way—and this way is very important. However it often turns out to be a palliative of an imaginary social democracy; and hence such an educational and political intervention should be paired with a sophisticated, sensuously involved, modest and self-critical study of such fields.

Do you remember Vaclav Havel? Not only the most innocent among all the anti-communist dissidents, but he was the leader of the most innocent of all the so-called democratic revolutions of 1989-1990, the one called "Velvet". Velvet, of course, is the name for a closely woven tufted fabric of silk, cotton, wool or any other natural or synthetic fibers. It is known for its softness and smoothness, which is why it is so popular as metaphor. In the case of the revolution in former Czechoslovakia, "velvet" seems to stand for its peaceful and nonviolent character.¹

It is believed that the art of velvet weaving originates in the Far East. The fabric was well-liked by nobles. History tells us that when Harun al-Rashid, the Fifth Caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, then the ruler of Baghdad, died at the beginning of the ninth century, five hundred pieces of velvet were found among the treasure he left behind. Known as the fabric of the royals, it was allegedly introduced to Baghdad by Kashmiri merchants.

The rule of Harun al-Rashid is also known as the peak of the so-called Islamic Golden Age, when Baghdad flourished as a center of knowledge, culture and trade. The fact that the Caliph Harun al-Rashid appears as a figure in some of the *Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*, also known as *The Arabian*

Nights, gives the symbolic meaning of velvet a certain orientalist touch. A decade or so before his death, Harun al-Rashid moved his court and government from Baghdad to Ar-Raqqah, a city on the north bank of Euphrates River in Syria. Today, curiously, the city is located again in a caliphate. It was established in June 2014 and is ruled by Caliph Ibrahim, most commonly known by the nom de guerre Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of a terrorist organization, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), considered by international public to be worse than al-Qaeda. His rule, in contrast to the one of his predecessor Caliph Harun al-Rashid more than thousand years ago, will surely not be remembered as a golden age, a time of peace and stability in which knowledge and culture flourished along with overall economic prosperity. In Ar-Raqqah, now the headquarters of the jihadist movement, all educational institutions are closed, the city is cleansed of religious and other minorities, the cultural and social achievements of modern civilization annulled. It is a time of animal cruelty, mindless destruction, sheer stubborn regression—a condition for which the enlightened European mind, trading freedom for security, once coined the notion of a "state of nature".

The question remains, what does all this have to do with Vaclav Havel?

1 The Slovaks, however, prefer to call the revolution "gentle".

Rock the Casbah

At the end of January 2003 Vaclav Havel was among the leaders of eight European states² who issued a joint declaration of support for U.S.-led military intervention in Iraq.³ In the statement they hail the so-called transatlantic bond as “a guarantee of our freedom.” At stake is, of course, the bond between the United States and Europe, which as the authors want us to believe, consists of shared values: democracy, individual freedom, human rights and the Rule of Law; values that once, as they wrote, “crossed the Atlantic with those who sailed from Europe to help create the USA.” Their adversaries, the terrorists whom they vow to fight in Iraq, are defined as simply the enemies of these values. The September 11th, 2001 World Trade Center attacks showed how far they are prepared to go. Yet there is no reason to worry: the signatories of the Declaration assure us that the governments and people of the United States and Europe stand firm in defense of their common values. All that remains is to “rid the world of the danger posed by Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction.”

Ideologically the statement is grounded in the common platitude of Europe being liberated from the two totalitarianisms, Nazism and Communism. As such it is far from being politically unbiased. Rather, it aligns its subscribers with European conservatives’s implicit evocation of the historical narrative of the *Historikerstreit* (historians’s quarrel) in the late 1980s in West Germany, and Ernst Nolte’s interpretation of Nazism as an excessive reaction to the threat of Communist totalitarianism, which was ultimately to blame for all the Nazi atrocities. It is therefore not by coincidence that Silvio Berlusconi was among the signatories of the Declaration. In September of the same year, 2003, he would provoke a public outcry by claiming that Benito Mussolini had never killed anyone but had just sent people on holiday to confine them. Berlusconi,

2 The other seven were: José María Aznar, Spain; José Manuel Durão Barroso, Portugal; Silvio Berlusconi, Italy; Tony Blair, United Kingdom; Péter Medgyessy, Hungary; Leszek Miller, Poland; Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Denmark.

3 See “Leaders’ statement on Iraq: Full text”, *BBC News, World Edition*, Thursday, 30 January, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2708877.stm> (Kind thanks to Přemysl Houda for reminding me of this text).

however, has never been a person whom one would expect to deal with the world in a soft, gentle, if not to say a “velvety” manner. Is that in contrast to Havel?

A few years earlier, in October 1997, Havel was in Washington to give an address after receiving the Fulbright Prize. The title of his speech was somewhat curious: “The Charms of NATO”. He namely used the occasion to welcome the decision to include three Eastern European nations (Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic) in the Western military alliance. He enthusiastically called for America to assume its responsibility for the whole world. For Havel, only the United States can save our global civilization by acting on the premises imbued with its values that should be adopted by all cultures, all nations, as a condition of their survival.⁴

A year and a half later NATO, which now included its new Eastern European members,⁵ militarily intervened in a sovereign European country—to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, as it was said in the language of “humanitarian interventionism” or, in its generally ignored political translation, to support the secession of an oppressed ethnic minority. It was in Serbia in 1999 and the minority at stake was Albanians in the then-still-Serbian province of Kosovo. Like the previous military intervention in Bosnia, this one, too, succeeded in pacifying armed conflict on the ground, yet failed to solve any political problem. It only reinforced new divisions along the ethno-confessional fault lines, tolerating even the cases of open segregation and leaving the entire region in a sort of permanent state of exception—a condition that has become the pattern for the results of western military interventions around the world; a condition in whose creation Vaclav Havel was so enthusiastically involved.⁶

In this case again, language is cleverer than the ideological kitsch called “Velvet Revolution”. It coined an idiom that better suits the reality: an “iron fist in a velvet glove.”

4 Vaclav Havel, “The Charms of NATO,” *The New York Review of Books* LXV (15 January 1998).

5 Who according to Donald Rumsfeld represent a “New Europe”, which in contrast to the “old” hesitant one, was unconditionally willing to send armed forces to Iraq.

6 See Boris Buden, “Saving Private Havel: The Official Bastard (ARKZIN) Statement on the War in Yugoslavia”, <http://www.greekhelsinki.gr/pdf/Buden.PDF>, last accessed 20 September 2014.

The story about “velvet”, a fabric so rich with symbolic meaning, does not end here. Only a year before NATO warplanes dropped their first bombs on Belgrade, Serbia, Vaclav Havel was guest of President Clinton in the White House. In fact, he came to the official dinner along with a special guest of his own, the legendary front man of *The Velvet Underground*, Lou Reed, who even played that evening in the famous East Room. In the early 1990s Havel welcomed Reed in his residency in the Prague Castle. Some believe that the Velvet Revolution actually owes its name to the famous American rock band.

Coming back to the already-mentioned orientalist touch obviously inherent in the notion of “velvet”, we might remember that the name of the band was actually taken from a book with the same title written by Michael Leigh, a contemporary paperback reporting on sexual subculture of the early 1960s in the USA. From New York, where he was at the time, Havel brought home the Velvet Underground’s *Banana* LP. It was the year 1968, the year of the Prague Spring and the subsequent Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. It was also the year of the worldwide student revolts against conservative and authoritarian establishments, as well as the year of mass protests against the war in Vietnam; the year that still stands symbolically for the flourishing of all sorts of subcultures especially sexual ones. (Are we not following another symbolic trajectory of that fascinating fabric called “velvet”, the one that connects the Velvet Revolution with the Sexual one, and both with the anti-war protests?)

It might be reasonably assumed that the so-called western values include the achievements of sexual emancipation, which have significantly contributed to the liberation of women and various sexual minorities in addition to playing a role in the moral and political legacy of anarchism, pacifism and left-wing anti-militarism. This means that these values must also—as Havel, smitten with the irresistible charms of NATO suggests—be adopted by all cultures, all nations, not simply to increase their overall well-being or to improve the form of government but to secure nothing less than their ultimate survival. For Havel this was clearly the reason to support military intervention in Iraq. What then has happened to all these values out there between the Tigris and the Euphrates? Have they been swallowed in the no-more-velvet Arab nights or stolen by Caliph Ibrahim and his forty thousand terrorists?



The Thermidor’s Bloody Velvet

Igor Girkin, a.k.a. “Strelkov”, is the self-proclaimed leader of the so-called pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine. Like Caliph Ibrahim, a mysterious person: messianic, militaristic, ultranationalist and reactionary.⁷ It seems, moreover, that he also shares similar values, best presented by his ideological advisor Igor Druz, a strong supporter of Orthodox Christian morality and the virtues of family. Needless to say, he equally strongly opposes homosexuality and would most probably agree with Caliph Ibrahim’s views on women. In short, he is disgusted by the above-mentioned achievements of the sexual revolution and woman’s liberation, things he perceives as Western decadence. Anti-militarism, too, is presumably for him nothing more than a “faggot’s ideology”. Yet what connects these two obscure figures of today’s crumbling international order even more is their deep, utopian-like wish to restore a previous condition, an allegedly better past. While Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi dreams of repeating and even surpassing by far the might and glory of the Caliphate from the early Middle Ages, for instance by raising the black banner of the Islamic State over St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, his Russian brother-in-arms Strelkov fights to revive Russia’s historic destiny and to re-establish a Czarist-Stalinist empire.

7 See Noah Sneider, “Shadowy Rebel Wields Iron Fist in Ukraine Fight”, *New York Times*, July 10, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/11/world/europe/russian-seizes-authority-over-ukraine-rebels.html?_r=0, last accessed 20 September 2014.

Most striking about both, however, is what they share with Vaclav Havel: the perspective of a world divided into normative identity blocks or “civilizations”, each defined by its own values and each occupying its own space in which these values are supposed to be at their proper, original location. While the former two still see some limits to the expansion of their delusional retro-projects, Havel wants the Western values to be adopted by the whole world, if necessary by the military forces of the USA and Europe. For him there is no alternative. Those who reject Western values are doomed to perish.

The picture clearly resembles Carl Schmitt’s vision of the world after the collapse of the old Westphalian order of sovereign nation states, or more precisely, the most pessimistic version of what he called the “Nomos of the Earth”: one of the parties has identified its particular position, grounded in no less particular values, with the position of the humanity as a whole. At stake is a Universalist stance, which makes it only more dangerous because it perceives all those who oppose it as absolute enemies. Their destruction becomes a pre-condition for humanity’s survival. In this perspective the enemies of the West are the enemies of humanity, and as such don’t deserve to be treated as humans. The notion of a “terrorist” today not only perfectly denotes Schmitt’s concept of the absolute enemy but also personifies a political waste product of the post-totalitarian ideology in which the West has absolved itself of the terror of the so-called two totalitarianisms. Moreover, it has washed itself of the violence in which the very values it claims today are grounded in, and were born, of the “terror” of the French Revolution.

“‘Terrorism’ and ‘terrorists’ are words that originated with Thermidor,” writes Sophie Wanich when defending the “terror” of the Great Revolution.⁸ At that time, the notion was applied to those who fought for a new world grounded in a political and symbolical egalitarianism, concretely to Robespierre, Saint-Just, the Jacobins and all who fought for “liberty or death”. It was also applied by those who defeated them, by the forces of the continuity with the old world of inherited inequalities, stable hierarchies and political

8 Sophie Wanich, *In Defense of the Terror. Liberty or Death in the French Revolution* (London, New York: Verso, 2012), 99.

passivity of citizens.⁹ It was the Thermidorians who invented the neologism “terrorist”. They, as Wanich argues, “not only anthropologized a violence that was also seen as popular, but they actively obscured what had given this terror a situational legitimacy: a juridico-political process of collective responsibility.”¹⁰ As a consequence, “terror” has become the name for an abstract evil that has lost any causal relation to the historical praxis. It has become an *otherness without history*.

More importantly, the notion of “terror”, according to Wanich, presupposes a process of active forgetting. It is a forgetting that is affected after the time of revolutionary foundation when the forces of counter-revolution restore the post-revolutionary “normality” in which they seek to reclaim their privileges and assure their rule. It erases from memory the traumatic truth of an irreducible contingency of historical praxis as well as its prospective openness. What the re-established normality wants people to forget is what they have learned in the revolution—that collective will can change the existing reality.

At stake is, as Sophie Wanich underlines, an *active* forgetting. It doesn’t simply erode the experience of the creative power of negation, acquired in the revolution, but reemploys it in the interest of the new order by turning it into the opposite direction. Instead of a better future one now creates a better past. This is how what was an uncertain outcome of revolutionary struggle, a contingent fact of victory or defeat, suddenly becomes a substantial value of the community’s identity that is deeply rooted in its unique genealogy and not only able to connect generations divided by centuries but unite them beyond any historical time.

A perfect example of such active forgetting offers the notion of “velvet” in the Czechoslovakian “Velvet Revolution”. Far from referring to the peaceful outcome of a thoroughly-contingent revolutionary transformation, the attribute “velvet” suddenly turns, as if by a miracle, into an essential quality of the new post-totalitarian order. Moreover, it seems to have articulated itself in the revolution only because it had always already been there as an identitarian value.

9 That is, by the forces who sought “the establishment of property-based suffrage and the abolition of the right of resistance to an oppression which refused [the people] any active citizenship.” Ibid.

10 Ibid., 100.

“Velvet” is now a value of an originally non-totalitarian and non-violent Czechoslovakian community, which was only temporarily suppressed by a foreign force of Communist totalitarianism and militarism, in addition to being a value that ties the community to a larger identity block, to a “civilization” called the West. Instead of metaphorically describing a contingent quality of a historical event, or if one insists, a uniquely and grandiosely bloodless character of a revolutionary act, the notion of “velvet” has become a mode of cultural belonging; a shared value that connects individuals and peoples not only beyond their actual differences but beyond history itself. This symbolic transformation, the translation of an attribute of practical deeds into a value, has, of course, far-reaching ideological effects.

First, it enabled Havel and the community he represented at that time to immediately swap one military block for another, without (even for a moment) claiming the liberation from the military blocks altogether and ultimately from the very logic of militarization of the political. Becoming an identitarian value, “velvet” helped the sovereignty of popular will that was forged in the act of revolution to avoid a traumatic encounter with the very openness of the historical praxis and to take the responsibility for the new it had just called into being. It has prevented, too, even more traumatic encounters with the powers of the status quo, which saw in the revolutions of 1989 and 1990 nothing but a desperate attempt of the historically-belated nations of Eastern Europe to catch up with the West.¹¹

It was only after the “velvet” of the Prague revolution became the “velvet” of the West, a genuine value of its identity, that the veil of oblivion was woven out of that fabric; a veil that covered the whole of “The Democratic Revolutions of 1989–1990”. Similar to the Thermidorian concept of “terror”, it was generated in the process of active forgetting, both retrospectively and prospectively. Not only did the notion of “velvet” rid itself of its pacifist and anti-militarist meaning from the 1960s, the memory of the colonial terror in America and the eradication of indigenous people as well as the trans-Atlantic slave trade had also

11 See especially Jürgen Habermas’s concepts of «die nachholende Revolution» (The Catching Up Revolution) and «die rückspulende Revolution» (The Rewinding Revolution). In Jürgen Habermas, “Nachholende Revolution und linker Revisionsbedarf. Was heißt Sozialismus heute?”, in J. Habermas, *Die nachholende Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1990), 179–203.

miraculously evaporated from Havel’s phantasy of western values, having once sailed from Europe to America.¹² The iron fist of NATO had put on its velvet glove. What else could better hide its bloody and often-criminal history? Now, only the charms of this most powerful military association in today’s world could be seen, and not a trace whatsoever of its ugly dirt. So “velvet” became a magic means of whitewashing, able to restore the primal innocence of its wearer under all possible circumstances and within all dimensions of time. Even that responsibility for which Havel called the United States to take for the whole world could have turned into its opposite, a total irresponsibility for one’s own decisions and deeds. “Velvet” is today a general attribute for the double standards of the political and military engagement of the West around the world, and stands for its infinite impunity in the face of international criminal law.¹³

Now when we haven’t yet finished counting the victims of the Western world’s intervention in Iraq, of which Havel was a full-hearted supporter—so far at least 500,000 deaths, four million refugees, mass torture, ethnic cleansing and irreparable damage to the state of Iraq, as well as the unstoppable sliding into chaos and war of the whole region, with no political solution whatsoever in sight—the time has come to finally lift the velvet veil of oblivion. Not to disclose the moral shortcomings of the hero of the Velvet Revolution, but to lay bare the fatally-missed opportunity of radical change; to look fearlessly into the abyss of historical contingency and to recognize the tragic defeat in what has been celebrated as victory ever since the so-called fall of Communism. Even if the time to try anew hasn’t yet come, it is still not too late to reclaim the “velvet” from the forces of the new Thermidor.

12 There is, of course, a radically different perspective on the issue of «travelling values» between Europe and America; an anti-colonial one: «Two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster, in which the taints, the sickness and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions.” Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 313.

13 Of which the greatest beneficiaries today are political leaders and military commanders of Israel. See Richard Falk, “Massacre in Gaza. Can International Law Provide Justice for Palestinians?” *Al Jazeera*, Doha, Qatar, 22 July 2014, <http://m.aljazeera.com/story/20147228354824989>, last accessed 20 September 2014.



Under the Terror of Values

When the website for *The Guardian* dubbed their new news region “The New East Network,” covering “fifteen countries that rose from the ashes of the USSR,” the Lithuanian ambassador to the UK protested. Asta Skaisgirytė-Liauškienė found it unbearable that the map of the former USSR included Lithuania. Although it is factually true that Lithuania was a part of the Soviet Union in the past, the ambassador was incensed to see the Guardian present former Soviet space as a somewhat homogeneous region today. This was misleading and unfair to the Lithuanian state, she argued: “Lithuania is a vibrant civic society, which is strongly committed to Western values.” That these values also include the magic fabric of velvet is beyond doubt. When in the mid 1990s in downtown Vilnius, the statue of Frank Zappa was erected to replace the torn-down one of Lenin, it was the Czech President Havel who was invited to unveil the new monument that marked the Lithuanian transition from the former communist East

to the civic future of the West.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the velvet veil of oblivion was also deployed to facilitate this transition. It enabled Lithuanians to swap the homogeneity of the former Soviet space for a new one of so-called Western values, and to reinvent the community’s identity in terms of belonging to another identity block.

What is the most astonishing about this rather embarrassing public intervention is not the blatant counter-factuality of the diplomat’s retroactive spatialization of Lithuanian identity, but her arbitrary creation of another history in order to assure an absolutely consistent genealogy of a new belonging. It didn’t suffice to draw a radical boundary between the civilizations in real space. The same boundary had to be drawn, however falsely, throughout historical space.

In fact, there is no essential difference between what the Lithuanian diplomat has done to the factual

¹⁴ See Kate Connolly, “They tore down Lenin’s statue—and raised one to Frank Zappa,” *The Guardian*, London, England, <http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2000/jan/29/lithuania>, last accessed 20 September 2014.

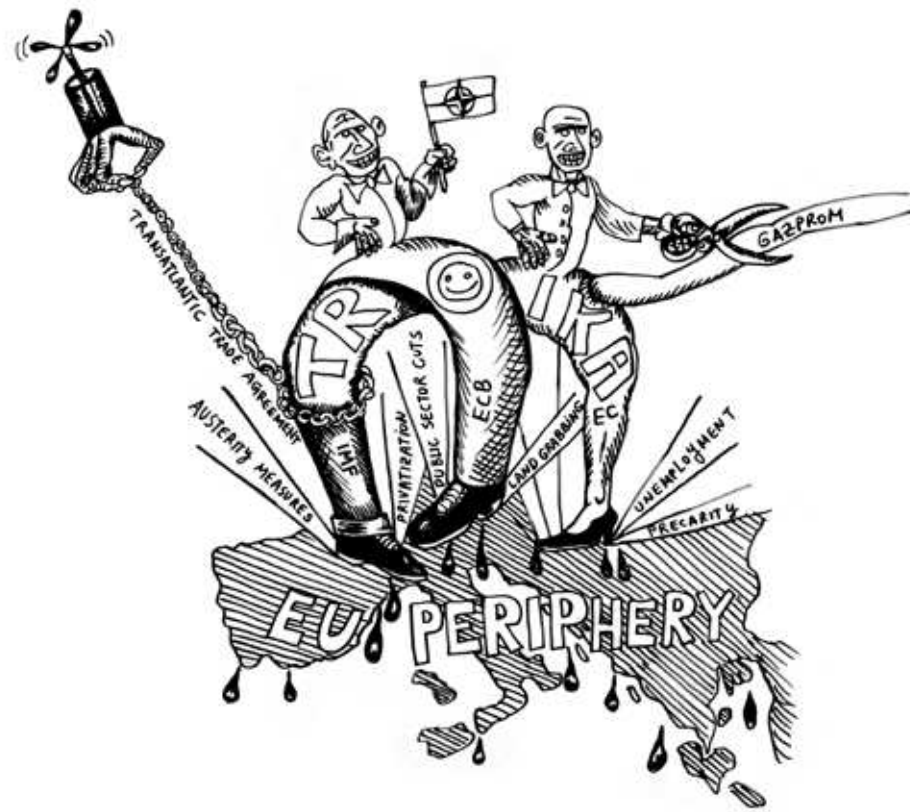
history of her nation and what Caliph Ibrahim is doing to the legacy of the old Caliphate. Both have cut out of the past every trace of historical heterogeneity (the latter literally using knives) that could have interrupted the trans-historical continuity and spatial unity of their respective values. A community grounded in values presupposes an absolutely homogeneous time-space, which it can create only through active forgetting.

We have been witnessing something similar these days in the Ukraine, where people die and kill along a completely new boundary between two fabricated pasts, both claiming territory: one of a Czarist-Stalinist imperium in the East and another of the so-called Western values in the West. Although constructed from a historical perspective, both spaces are in fact ahistorical, which is why their values can be essentialized, canonized and petrified beyond any form of historical transformation, and why anything that contradicts these values must necessarily fall victim to oblivion. However, the more it is whitewashed from their values the more it returns as the dirt of political propaganda. This is the case of the legacy of the two totalitarianisms, which has in a monstrous way been revived today in the Ukraine as a cultural other of the respective identities, as something non-European, non-Western, non-Russian or, by the same token, non-Islamic; an element with no place within their historical genealogies. Both fascism and communism appear in historical retrospect as sort of temporary intruders from abroad (or in the Russian case, from the other world), who invaded Europe and victimized its innocent nations, only to be subsequently repelled by the strength and superiority of their values.

The real danger of the ideology of the two totalitarianisms, however, lies in its implicit premise that their horrors definitely belong to the past, and that the experience of these horrors is retrievable only in a form of cultural memory. This is the case in the Ukraine today, where the public frenetically searches for, or morbidly produces, fascists among the combatants in the East, recognizing them (on both belligerent sides) primarily by their cultural appearance, that is, only insofar they surface in historical costumes, with swastika-tattoos or Nazi salutes as though they had just escaped an ethnological museum.

Those who remember the past only culturally are doomed to repeat it politically. In Ukraine today it is the fascism of the actual reality that has been forgotten, not the one of the past—a fascism that is constitutive of the political conflict itself and of the ideological legitimations and self-representations of both sides, entrenched in their normative identity blocks, each killing and dying for their genuine values. It is a fascism that is inherent to a rather self-pitying resentment (which makes it no less dangerous) of the once-world power and its belated, parochial retro-imperialism. Nonetheless it is fascism, too, that feeds the spiral of militarization of the West and generates the diabolical logic of its self-justification: we are supposed to believe that the violence has broken out despite, not because of Western intervention, that it is escalating because NATO hasn’t yet sufficiently protected its East European allies rather than because of its expansion into the area, and that it won’t stop soon because there are too few, and not too many guns on the ground. It is in the repressive homogenization of what is historically heterogeneous and contingent, all in the name of the most “velvet” of values. Furthermore, it is in the violent territorialization of these values, which monstrously evokes and decadently repeats the horrors of colonial imposition of Western values, where we should recognize the symptoms of a fascism of tomorrow, not the traces of the one of yesteryear.¹⁵ It is, finally, this terror of values that should be called fascism today.

¹⁵ See Jon Solomon, «After Iraq: Trends Underlying the Initiation of Generalized, Global War,» *Journal of Futures Studies*, 8(1) August 2003, 115–122. At: http://www.academia.edu/1225139/After_Iraq_Trends_Underlying_the_Initiation_of_Global_War, last accessed 20 September 2014.



Let’s Swap Havel for Lenin and Space for Time

What could prevent the emergence of a new fascism, as well as stop the bloodshed, not only in the Ukraine but in the Middle East? Might a proper politics of memory offer a solution—one that would save the truth of historical heterogeneity from repressive oblivion, and remind Ukrainians from the east and the west of the country of their common values and shared history, however controversial and tragic; one that would make the supporters of Caliph Ibrahim aware of the tolerant, multi-confessional and multicultural reality of the old Caliphate? Do we not need a more accurate knowledge of what truly happened a hundred or a thousand years ago? Concretely, should we not remind western Ukrainians or Lithuanians who topple down Lenin statues, as well as those in the East who protect them that they both are wrong? The former, because it was precisely Lenin and the Bolsheviks who actively fostered, in a violent opposition to Czarist imperialism and Russian nationalism, the national liberation of Ukrainians, and their territorial, cultural and linguistic self-determination; and the latter, because they symbolically protect precisely what they destroy in

reality. Could an accurate historical knowledge of who Lenin truly was and what the Bolsheviks really did end this tragedy of errors—especially regarding the legacy of their opposition to the very logic of capitalist militarization and imperialist wars?

Cultural memory, which has long ago taken the position of historiography in our dealing with the past, is itself part of the problem, not a solution. It has emerged out of the destruction of what was once historical experience—a destruction arranged and executed by the powers of the new Thermidor. However accurate and emancipation-minded, it will never liberate the past from its identitarian confinement in which the genuine heterogeneity and contingency of historical praxis are necessarily lost to oblivion. This is precisely what happened to the legacy of Lenin. Preserved only in the form of cultural memory and reduced to a piece of cultural heritage, Lenin finally became Russian, even worse, a Russian nationalist: a commemorative embodiment of the Czarist imperialism, which in the reality of historical praxis he mercilessly fought.

There is no way to retrieve the truth of the past without frontally challenging the forces of its identitarian confinement in the reality of their political institutions and ideological apparatuses. The past is not a battlefield for a better future. Rather it is the actual historical praxis in which one has to take responsibility, not simply for what we do now but also for what all those whose footsteps we walk in have done. The ground of this responsibility is historical experience, not cultural memory; its dimension is prospective creation, not a retrospective preservation; its medium is a resurrected revolutionary praxis, not a *realpolitik*.

A new, radical politics of peace, which is urgently needed today, doesn’t necessarily imply taking responsibility for a more democratic state that would properly commemorate the past and so eliminate

the *casus belli* fabricated out of imagined histories. It is already too late for that. The current wars do not destroy an existing order; they are waged out of its decay. This is why a responsibility to peace today can no longer rely on its principles and institutions, both national and international. Rather, it emerges from an open confrontation with the forms of their degeneration and abuse—concretely, with the wreck of what was once a sovereign nation state, and its corrupt, either compradorial or imperialistic, elites and its repressive and often criminal role in the neoliberal destruction of the very order for which it had for so long been both an agent and a beneficiary. Those who want peace today must radically oppose the current division of the world into normative identity blocks, and never allow themselves to be squeezed into one of the new global containers of values that threaten to plunge us in an endless war.

What cultural memory cannot remember but what a true historical experience already knows is that this destructive development does not rely on historical necessity. One can remember the creative power of negation only by activating it in one’s own historical praxis. This is what responsibility today is about. It must be taken in the midst of historical contingency as an act of radical negation beyond any sort of moralistic innocence. Moreover, it must be able to resist the Thermidorian blackmail imposed on a whole epoch with its (seemingly opposed) shock concepts of “terror” and “velvet”. Yet to restore the historical experience and reactivate the emancipatory potential stored within, one also must dare to say that “yes, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were right to take arms against capitalist exploitation; yes, they were right to liberate the nations (including Lithuanians and Ukrainians) oppressed by Czarist imperialism; yes, they were right to foster the emancipation of women, right to decriminalize abortions and homosexuality; yes, they were also right to look at traditional bourgeois art and culture with disgust; and finally they were right, too, to pull Russia out of an imperialist war,” and in the same breath: “No, the execution of the Romanovs in Ekaterinburg in 1918 was not a terror.” Rather it was a revolutionary terror, just as the decapitation of Louis XVI of France and Marie Antoinette was a century earlier. “Revolutionary terror is not terrorism,” writes Sophie Wanich.¹⁶

Indeed, there is not and there will never be an equivalence between the sending to guillotine of the Louis XVI by the National Convention in 1793, and the recent beheading of the American journalist by Caliph Ibrahim’s butchers. No, a decapitation is not always decapitation; a crime is not always crime; terror is not always terror, although sometimes it is “velvet”, like the red velvet of 1917.

Only after saying this openly will we be able to behold those historical heterogeneities and continuities that the current terror of values has blinded us to. We will see the East that once was, and that can still be again, more Western than the West itself; we will see Lenin marching in the steps of the fifth Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid when the East also was ahead of the West; and, following both, those anti-colonial fighters who became more western than the West precisely by waging war on it. We will see, too, the monuments to Lou Reed and Frank Zappa erected not in the place of, but beside that of Lenin. We will see a deep historical affinity between the October Revolution and the sexual one in the 1960s,¹⁷ as well as the radical anti-militarism of both. In short, we will see a legacy to claim where the Thermidorians have dumped the trash of history that they expect us to be ashamed of. Only then we will also be able to actively and responsibly oppose the ongoing war, which is not ours—in a reactivated memory of what Lenin did in March 1918 in Brest-Litovsk. As it is well known, he traded, as he explicitly said, “space for time”. We must do the same today—forget the space and choose the time—for only then it will come over to our side.

17 See Bini Adamczak, “Gender and The New Man: Emancipation and the Russian Revolution?” *Platypus Review* 62, December–January 2013, <http://platypus1917.org/2013/12/01/gender-and-the-new-man>, last accessed 20 September 2014.

16 Ibid., 102.

The Trials of Exile and The Production of Art: Conversation with Mohammad al-Attar, A Syrian Playwright



Rasha Salti

Rasha Salti [R.S.]: Let's begin our conversation with *Withdrawal (Insihab)*, the performance/play that was presented in Beirut, Lebanon, in the framework of *Meeting Points 6* program (April 27th to May 7th, 2011), curated by Okwui Enwezor.¹ At that time, the uprising in Syria was barely weeks old. The performance consisted of stage readings with Fatima Laila and Wissam Talhouk. *Withdrawal* opens with a young unwed couple in a rented studio. Their love story gradually implodes as they negotiate the contradictions between their aspirations as individuals and their aspirations as a couple, in direct contrast with the real prospects in the Syria governed by Bashar al-Assad on the eve of the 2007 referendum. By exploring the intimate tribulations in a relationship, the play drew a portrait of the generation that became the marrow of the uprising—an event that political experts were firmly convinced would not happen in Syria. Did you intend to write a prehistory of the Syrian uprising while you were taking part in it?

1 <http://meetingpoints.org/mp6>, and <http://meetingpoints.org/mp6/downloads/Meeting%20points%20intro.pdf>, last accessed July 27, 2014.

CONVERSATION

All images: *Could You Please Look into the Camera?* Performance, written by Mohammad Al-Attar, directed by Omar Abu Saada, Festival B.O.M, Seoul, 2012

Mohammad al-Attar [M.a-A.]: In truth, I wrote the text in 2007. It was published in English, in an anthology.² Shortly thereafter, Okwui Enwezor came across it during his research for *Meeting Points 6*. That was a year prior to the Arab Spring, but there must have been an anticipation of something, especially if you consider the title Enwezor gave to his edition of the event: *Locus Agonistes: Practices and Logics of the Civic*.³ In my conversations with him, I recall that he liked how the text incarnated the predicament of twenty- and thirty-something middle-class generations in Syria, their perception of a horizon without prospects of self-realization, their sense of entrapment. The play ends on a dark note. It has since become clear that the desire for life is stronger

and that people don't surrender to a living death. The inclusion of the play in the program [acquired] tremendous significance after the insurgency erupted. The form in which it was presented, namely the stage readings, were part of Enwezor's curatorial conceit: he wanted to showcase an open rehearsal, or a work-in-progress

Even now, the play has never been performed in Damascus, Syria. It is not an overtly political play, but obviously, it has been forged within an explicitly political reality that is transposed on stage. When I watched the performance in Beirut during *Meeting Points 6* I felt that we had achieved a small victory. At the time, the insurgency was barely more than a month old; the government had already retaliated with a high degree of violence, but we were extremely optimistic. I was optimistic then, and I remain so now, though to a lesser degree—I am certainly not pessimistic. The play was written from that fragile and precarious realm of hope that some carried

and defended; the firm rejection of surrendering to the prevailing order that the regime enforced. When I watched the performance in Beirut, I understood that we were right to have stubbornly, steadfastly, held on to this realm. My conviction of the necessity for change was further solidified.

I wrote the text after al-Assad had staged the notorious referendum and the grand spectacle of popular allegiance, at a time when his regime



2 Mohammad Al Attar, *Plays from the Arab World* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2010).

3 <http://meetingpoints.org/mp6/downloads/Statement.pdf>, last accessed July 27, 2014.

was in a very stormy diplomatic impasse following the assassination of Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri, and just after the formal—and humiliating—withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon. I am neither intensely involved in politics, nor do I have affiliations to the established opposition groups or any other political movement, and yet I witnessed the referendum as the terrifying promise of the regime’s enduring reign of terror and hopelessness. The play comes from that realization.

R.S.: When you wrote the play in 2007, were you aware that it would be impossible to stage in Syria? Thinking back, Damascus was the Arab Capital for Culture in 2008, an initiative that the regime undertook very seriously, with Asma al-Assad at the helm.⁴ Tremendous resources were marshaled and the emerging creative talents in major cities were lured with the promise of finding production support and employment in the organization of events. New spaces were established, and older spaces were rehabilitated. There was a semblance of a widening of the horizon, replete with hope for a renewed cultural and artistic life. You were among those who worked in the administration of that program.

M.a-A.: To answer the first part of your question, I don’t think anyone can anticipate the public life of a work of art while in the process of making it. I did not know I would not be able to stage the play while writing it; I cannot say that I was entirely devoid of any hope in that regard. However, I was not really thinking about that question. After it was completed I came to the realization, gradually, that I would not be able to stage it, but I have never lost the desire to do just that.

As for the Damascus Arab Capital for Culture initiative—indeed, I was among those who joined the administrative team. We were lured because we all felt we could make a real difference in arts and culture at the time. Yet we realized soon enough that the margins we had identified in the beginning were actually far narrower. It was not only a sobering realization of the regime’s perfidy, but more importantly, to some of us, this occasioned the awareness of the extent of the internalized censor within: self-censorship. That is fundamentally the regime’s mechanism of operation; the stem cell of tyranny. Oppression is so deeply ingrained in the individual’s perception of what is socially and politically acceptable that the power of the official censor is aggrandized; mythologized. Stories of reprisals exaggerated. To a considerable extent, and in retrospect, I think we failed to seize the opportunity to form small troupes and to pursue our aspirations to create productions in the narrow margins that existed.

For the record, overall, the initiative had a remarkable impact on two levels. On the one hand, it provided for unprecedented production resources, as much for those emerging talents who did not have opportunities to produce first works, as for the established talents who did not have opportunities to pursue ambitious projects. On the other hand, a number of very well-known international productions were

⁴ The Arab Capital for Culture is an initiative undertaken by UNESCO under the *Cultural Capitals Program*, to promote and celebrate Arab culture and encourage cooperation in the Arab region. The preparation for the festivity began in February 2007 with the establishing of the Administrative Committee for “Damascus Arab Capital of Culture” by a presidential decree.

presented to the Syrian public for the first time. The initiative created a momentum in all sectors of the arts, which local audiences had been yearning for. It is unfortunate that it had to wait for such an exceptional instance to discover this array of international and local productions. Unfortunately, as soon as the year ended, the momentum died, and the promises of “residual” impact had all but lapsed. For instance, we were told that rehabilitated spaces would become available for local talents, though none in fact were.

R.S.: This UNESCO-led program, Capitals of Culture has, with a few exceptions, witnessed spectacular failures in the Arab world. I recall distinctly that its edition in Damascus was one of the rare successes at the level of international programming, and how it mobilized a local generation of emerging creators; some were close friends, and others were people I’d met over the course of that year. I remember very well my ambivalence towards the enthusiasm that you and other friends showed. Yet at the same time I was fully aware of the project’s success. The most difficult moment was when Peter Brook was in Damascus presenting a performance, with all the jubilant newspaper headlines; and at the same time, the army was crushing the prison uprising in Saidnaya, a town only a few kilometers away from Damascus. In fact, news of the uprising only surfaced a couple of days after it had already started, and the regime had used the military and its artillery to crush it. I was floored by how a media black-out could be pulled off so efficiently. The journalists were there... Do you recall that moment?

M.a-A.: In all honesty, we, the locals, also learned about this uprising after it had already started. In full disclosure, we did not even try to learn more about it. That’s the self-censor within—the belief that trying to find out more would only bring trouble. You are right, this is a paradox; a huge one, and we should remember it. We should remember where we were, and how we were, how obtuse and shallow our margins were. We could not really build anything on them. The festive tenor of the entire program at the time was not only celebratory, it was also frivolous. The cultural program was a media stunt, a much-needed political opportunity for the regime to normalize its status in the local, regional and international media. Recall that at the time, the regime was under siege and didn’t have much room to maneuver. It is not a coincidence that festivities were launched with fireworks at the Umayyad Square with Bashar al-Assad in attendance, in addition to his most loyal allies at the time, the Turkish president Abdullah Gul and the Emir of Qatar, Hamad



bin Khalifa.⁵ This event was of tremendous political significance. We were fully aware of the political stakes. There is no need to rehash the age-old debate of whether we were right to take part and/or wrong not to boycott, suffice it to say that we saw the possibility of strengthening the fragile and precarious margins in which we dwelled. I must repeat: we were not bold enough to seize the opportunities at hand, and we were shocked by the perfidy of the regime.



R.S.: When the insurgency broke out in March of 2011, for longer than a year, it embodied so many of our ideals. In 2012, you moved to Beirut and in the iteration of *Meeting Points 6* in Berlin, Germany (January 2012), you presented another play entitled *Could*

You Please Look into the Camera?, which was also in the form of stage readings, and with actors. *Could You Please Look into the Camera?* was pieced in a dramaturgy, with testimonies from prison detainees suspected of being “insurgents”, and who had endured torture. The work raises questions about the role of art in representing everyday life in the context of the insurgency, all the while drawing upon images, stories and documents used by the militants, in a work of art. At that stage, the world (as well as the media) was interested in the insurgency, and the insurgents (as well as the regime) had unhindered access to the internet to convey the everyday lived experiences of the insurgency in unmediated ways via Facebook, YouTube, and the like. Why did you feel the need (or desire) to present another play?

M.a-A.: Okwui Enwezor had decided that the iterations of *Meeting Points* in the various cities that were going to host it would not happen immediately after each other. Close to nine months had lapsed between the presentation in Beirut and the one in Berlin. In the meantime, I had become totally involved and was overwhelmed by the insurgency. Furthermore, I considered *Meeting Points* an important platform where I could express myself with a relatively high degree of freedom. If that first text contained some answers as to why the insurgency happened

⁵ On January 18, 2008. The opening ceremony included a visual show, levitated dancing, musical segments, floating acrobatics, and hot air balloons (Arab_Capital_of_Culture: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008>, last accessed July 27, 2014).

in the first place, nine months later, I felt it was time to propose some representations and reflections on what was going on within the insurgency. I don’t agree with you that the world was really watching, or that people were interested enough, and that the lived experiences of everyday citizens were communicated in their naked truth or their full complexity. Yet whether that was the case or not is not the point, because victims of violence and terror will invariably feel that what they endure is not acknowledged enough by the rest of the world. This is not something proper to Syrians, Iraqis or Palestinians (or Rwandans or Afghans, or anyone else, for that matter)—each have expressed similar feelings in a myriad of ways. The necessity of using the visibility afforded by *Meeting Points* was thus too pressing to ignore. In parallel, I wanted to explore the limitations and virtues of theater (my own practice) when it engages with an ongoing insurgency in the here and now. Going further, perhaps, is an exploration of the significance of the play or text as a document. What kind of a document does a literary text constitute, and what is a document? This was in addition to the desire to express things that I was convinced people did not know or did not have the right type of access to.

Okwui and the *Meeting Points* team agreed to include another performance. The text is based on thirteen testimonies by political detainees. After conducting the interviews, I wove the statements together and embedded the “documentary” material within a dramaturgy. My interrogations on the nature of the document and the relevance of a dramaturgical structure guided me through the process. There were two instances of the stage readings within *Meeting Points*, but afterwards, the play was staged with actors. A performance directed by Omar Abu Saada was held in Arabic at the *Bo:m* Festival in Seoul, Korea, which basically commissioned the production of the play, and following that a one-time-only performance was held in Beirut (due to our limited resources).⁶ The play was performed in English in Edinburgh and Glasgow, as a production by the National Theater of Scotland, and

it was also performed in German in a theater in Berlin, produced by suite42 in cooperation with Heimathafen Neukölln.⁷ The play is often performed there now because it is part of their repertory. The text has also been published in English in *TDR: The Drama Review* in September of this year. Unfortunately, the Arabic version of the text has yet to be published; it is partly my fault that we have not been actively invested in seeking a publisher.



⁶ <http://festivalbom.org>, last accessed 9 September 2014.

⁷ The English translation was done by Prof. Lisa Wedeen; the German translation was done by Andreas Büniger and Ghada Salim.

R.S.: Today you are still living in Beirut. Your movement out of the country is limited for many reasons and you are working on a new play. An adaptation of a classic. The situation in Syria is quite different—or perhaps you don't see it that way?

M.a-A.: Without a doubt, the situation in Syria is very different—there is no point in fooling oneself and trying to lessen the extent of the disaster. We are back to a situation where the horizon is unclear. Personally, my only consolation is the firm conviction that ours was a journey we had to embark on, and that today we are living what is perhaps its most arduous chapter, but that it is necessary and unavoidable if we are to move forward to another stage. Transitions to a better reality don't always have to take the longest and the most painful trajectory, but this is what has happened in Syria. I suspect that this is not unlike the temperament of our region; the predicament for finding the most treacherous roads and the penchant for tragedy. (Perhaps this is why I am now working on adapting a tragedy.) How do you break loose from the harnesses of decades of tyranny, of dictatorships, of the alliance between capitalism and the military, all imbricated within sectarianism and communitarianism? What we are witnessing today is the product of the sedimentation of all this, and of the coercion of a specific interpretation of religion and belief. I am relieved that so many essential questions have now emerged to the foreground: questions of identity, of affiliation, of cultural capital, of the state (its nature and its form), of constitution and its language... It is a thunderous, complex and poignant chapter that does not carry promises for better tomorrows in the very short term. I take solace in the fact that the Syria that was; the Syria I was born and raised in; was like a mausoleum closed by tyranny. The insurgency forced it open, and this is the reality we are witnessing today. There was no way around that. I am not pessimistic, because at least the Syria I knew is gone for good and will never be again. The Syria of the future may not be exactly as I wish it to be, but at least we are now back in the temporality of time. We were outside time; now we are within time. This is what gives me a modicum of hope.

As for the present adaptation of *Antigone*: why a classical text, you ask? Aside from the reasons I have just cited, there are practical considerations. My partner in this project, Omar Abu Saada, and I have both been drawn to working with female refugees. We had been thinking about that after having been involved in a number of projects within communities of Syrian refugees in Lebanon who use theater and drama as a means to mediate or facilitate communication and expression. We have come to understand that there is a steeply gendered differentiation in the reality of refugees. The conditions that reign over the lives of women are singularly complex and heart wrenching, whether they arise in their roles as mothers, wives, widows, sisters, or daughters. At the same time, they are able to express their lived realities with remarkable eloquence, and they often pay attention to simple issues that usually go unnoticed. They have sacrificed a great deal, and they continue to do so. Most importantly, they seem to have a greater ability to endure, to forgive and overcome profound hurt, or wounds that for others would be impossible to scar. I felt the need to start from an existing text: I did

not want, nor did I have the ability, to start from scratch, and thus I chose to adapt. *Antigone* spoke to me on all these levels—it speaks from a woman's point of view on a civil conflict; a war, and asks questions of duty, of responsibility, and of ethics. In fact, it asks more questions than it provides answers to. I have my own position, but that does not imply that I have answers, or that I can write a text that delivers answers. I am against all tyrannies. There will not be a new Syria until the tyranny of the regime ends; and until all the other tyrannies that have popped up since (like the Islamic State for Iraq and Syria—ISIS) end as well. I do have a great number of questions. Right now I am re-reading all the different adaptations and transformations of that classical tragedy. It is an amazingly rich text, but it is also very potent and capable of embodying a Syrian *Antigone*.

R.S.: Thank you for sharing that with us, Mohammad.

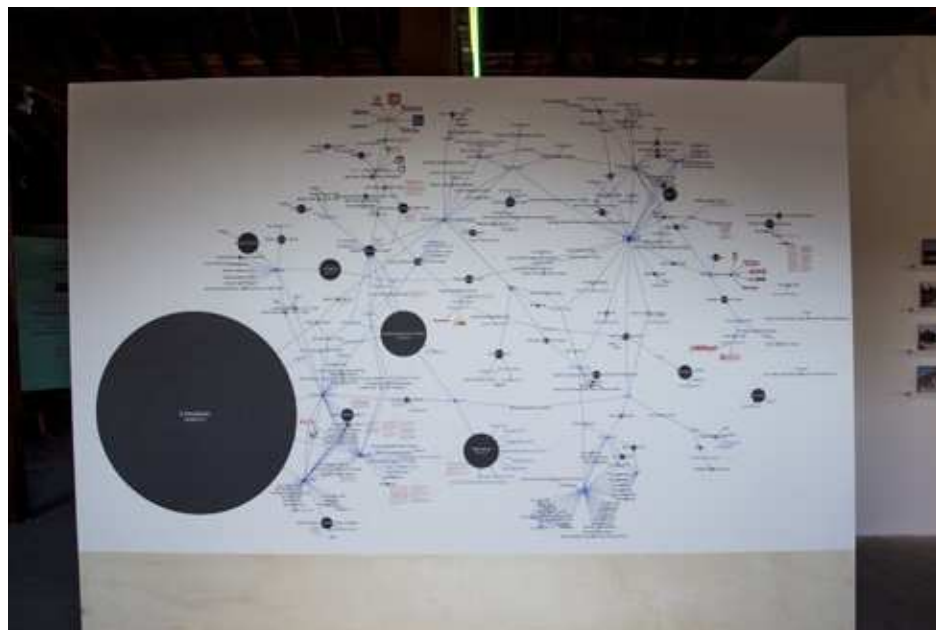
M.a-A.: Thank you too, Rasha.



Counter-Hegemonic Cartography

CONVERSATION

Burak Arikan
and Erden Kosova



Erden Kosova [E.K.]: Burak, it's been more than a year since the uprising that evolved around the Gezi Park in Istanbul. You were quite active both in coordinating and reinforcing the informational network of the protesting bloc and in contributing to the festive energy at the park—I remember the workshops you organized there. Can you tell us what we have inherited from these days? What has remained in terms of ideas for change and self-organization, especially after all the distractions of real politics and the maneuvers of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party) machine, better known as AKP, that followed the events?

Burak Arikan [B.A.]: First of all, I must say that I was just another participant of the collective intelligence that flourished in the Gezi resistance. We've all experienced the condensation of variable opposing voices, which I think the famous slogan "EITHER TOGETHER OR NONE OF US. NO SALVATION ALONE" manages to capture. If I were to reflect on it with a few words, I think the word "solidarity", and more particularly

Installation view
of Burak Arikan,
*Networks of
Dispossession*,
2013, at the
13th Istanbul
Biennial. Photo
courtesy of Burak
Arikan.

"solidarity of the oppositions", would be the most persistent idea since June 2013. In fact, as we all know, people call their groups "solidarity groups": from park forums to mahalle¹ organizers to universities; we not only have Taksim Solidarity, but groups from all over Turkey, such as Yeldeğirmeni Solidarity, Tatavla Solidarity, Ankara Solidarity, Eskişehir Solidarity, Mersin Solidarity, ODTÜ Solidarity, Soma Solidarity.

What we have had in Turkey might be similar to the Indignados movement in Spain, or to some branches of the Arab Spring, or to the Brazilian struggles around urban issues. Each movement has its own characteristics, sets its own political agenda, and for some moments dictates the temporality of political developments. On the other hand, as we all know, the solidarity of certain groups has prevented them from expanding on their own social class. Hence, what has remained, at least from Gezi, is the fact that we have to keep inventing ways of building and interconnecting our solidarity groups to be able to scale beyond our own social classes.

E.K.: You are a member of the website project *Networks of Dispossession* (*Mülksüzleştirme* in Turkish),² which has posted detailed maps that display intricate relationships and alliances between the governing party, existing and emerging corporations and their CEOs who have been taking part in the so-called process of "urban transformation". The ruthless policies of displacement of lower classes and minorities from the metropolitan centers, the hysteric privatization of all state building and sites, the deregulation of protection laws concerning forested territories, and the madness for construction... all of these issues have fuelled popular anger during the Gezi events and the corruption scandals that broke out last December. *Networks of Dispossession* managed to attract popular interest in the social media by gathering particular data and presenting a macro-scale picture. Methodologically, the project had an unmistakable connection to your previous mapping works. How would you evaluate the differences and the links between your previous (and ongoing) work and your collaboration with *Networks of Dispossession*? How did they operate and how were they received?

B.A.: *Networks of Dispossession* (*Mülksüzleştirme Alanı*) started at a workshop in the Gezi Park on June 6th 2013, with an open call for participation to map the partnerships between private corporations and the state in Turkey. The focal point was to track, visualize, and raise questions on particular power relationships, and map what is known as "Crony Capitalism", which increases the crisis of income inequality.³ The mapping of such a large number of relationships had to be done collectively, because there is no

¹ Mahalle (Arabic: *ماحلة* *mahallā*) (abbreviated mh. or mah.) is an Arabic word, adopted into Turkish which is variously translated as district, quarter, ward, or "neighborhood." See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahalle>, last accessed October 3 2014.

² <http://mulsuzlestirme.org>, last accessed 8 September 2014. More information on the project is available in an interview with the artist: <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/127>, last accessed 8 September 2014.

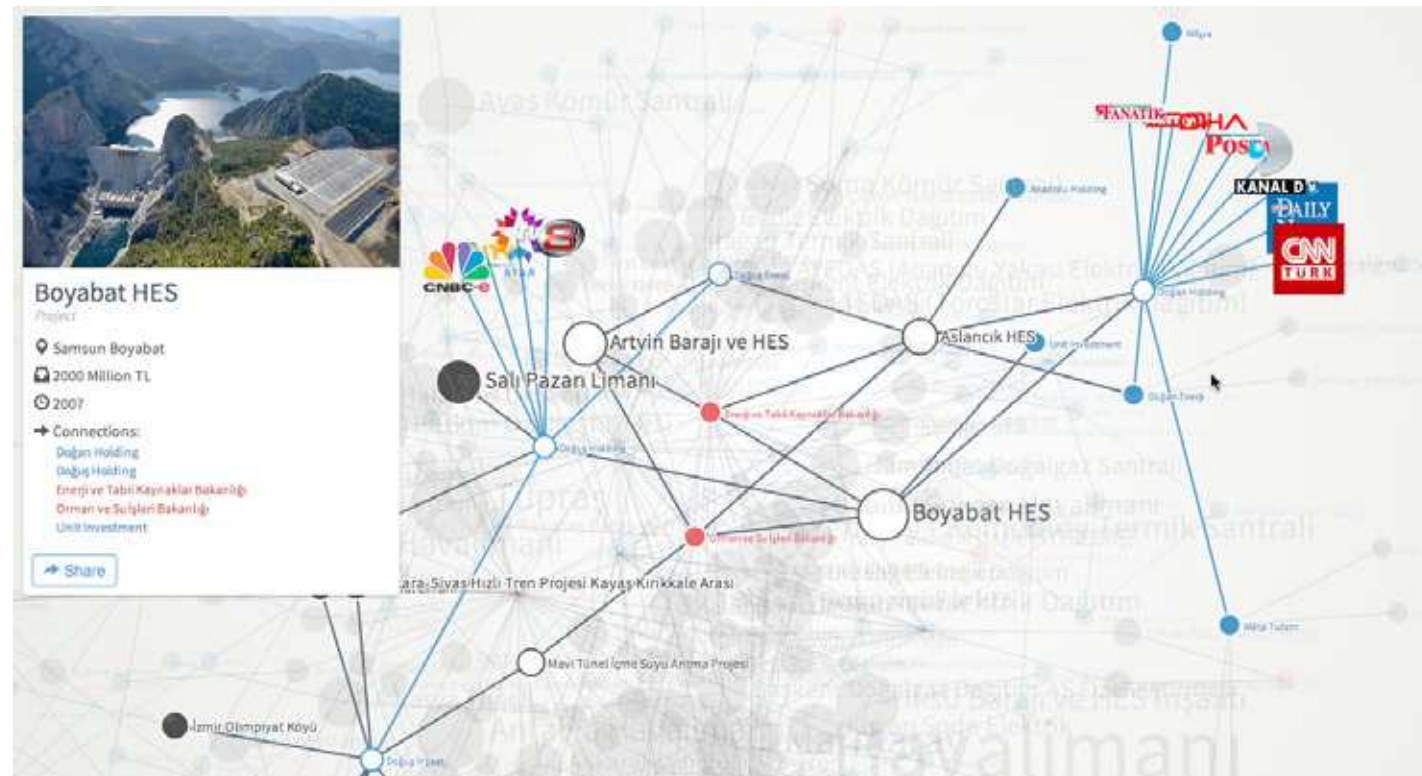
³ Thomas Piketty's book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014) on the crisis of income inequality uses the example of the growth of the construction sector versus overall economic growth in order to demonstrate his theory. It is supported with the world's largest historical data research on income inequality.

way we would have been able to find complete data about the Turkish government and its private partners. We decided to start building it one step at a time, and expand the research as more people put effort into it. Our working group began with a few dedicated people in the Gezi Park, and it has been expanding as more people feel its urgency and volunteer. When we first released the maps, I think they were shocking for many. Then as they started circulating, they were given quite a lot of attention in the social media and in the independent media channels; all the while they were being censored or overlooked by the mainstream media. Over time, we have seen that the maps have been used as a reference, especially in the times of shock and awe of the AKP government's corruption cases, which were brought to public attention on December 17th 2013.

Earlier in my work, I created maps and custom software on variety of topics, but this was the first time I'd been involved in a large collective work. Besides myself, our working group involved journalists, sociologists, architects, urban planners, lawyers and an expanded community of concerned individuals. It was challenging to decide on things collectively or to even motivate people to do their part on time. Scaling volunteer work is quite hard, but it is great to see everybody putting their expertise on the table and connecting their particular maps to reveal a complete picture. I must admit that my efforts on developing and running the Graph Commons (<http://graphcommons.com>) collaborative "network mapping" platform technically eased the realization of the *Networks of Dispossession* maps in such a short period.

The work went beyond the usual art audience and involved various networks of communities. People started iterating the idea of counter-mapping to other areas, and proposed maps such as "*Mülksüzleştirme* for Healthcare", "*Mülksüzleştirme* for Education", "*Mülksüzleştirme* for the Internet" and so on, which in a way confirmed the vision of the Graph Commons platform.

Detail of Burak Arıkan, *Networks of Dispossession*, 2013, with maps of the project that details media baron's links to public contracts at the 13th Istanbul Biennial. Photo courtesy of Burak Arıkan.



E.K.: For some time now, you have been actively following theoretical and political discussions on digital media and lecturing on the subject. What would you say, was there something strikingly specific to the use of social media during the Gezi uprising? Furthermore, how have previous experiences in Tehran, Athens, New York and other places influenced digital activism in Turkey?

B.A.: Regarding the practice of activism, there is a strong feedback loop between the Internet and the street, which drives the protests to their peaks. This physical-digital hybridity will survive despite the blunt Internet laws put in place by certain governments that allow deep censorship and mass surveillance, because there is an increased political consciousness in the ability of the internet and software to play a central role in political struggles.

There are statistical differences in the use of social media among resistance movements, but I don't see significant variations in the actual tactics. Although the transformative power of social media is apparent, we rarely see resistance movements innovate the medium itself, that is to say, invent new media formats, experiences, or media infrastructures. In other words, it is treated as a container of knowledge transportation. You share it, you blog it, and you help disseminate a given message to others in front of their screens. Tehran learns from Athens, Turkey learns from Spain and vice versa; all through what is transmitted in the containers. Although the content always changes, its container remains the same.

I prefer to imagine activists in Tehran inventing new media infrastructure, and then Athens uses it; activists in Istanbul inventing a media tool, and then Madrid and New York use it. Nothing new about this idea, of course; it is being done at some levels, but not much is happening in the media realm. In fact, I have this proposal of a "machine-readable communication protocol" from 2004 called ActiviXML,⁴ which intends to abstract the information flow between large-scale social activist communities and individuals in order to reinforce the impact of events.

E.K.: The language of the Gezi Park uprising was strikingly different from the serious, sober and disciplined tone of the decades-long leftist tradition in the country. It was festive, amusing, witty, and rude. The tradition of local humor-cartoon magazines, and the football culture (brought in mostly by the supporters groups of the clubs like Beşiktaş and Fenerbahçe), had a strong impact on this. On the other hand, the newness within the uprising has been linked to the youth generation which had been previously portrayed as completely de-politicized, distanced from the public space and sucked into the virtual depths of digital media. Did the young rebels of the Gezi uprising surprise you in any way? Do you see a generational character in this?

B.A.: Indeed, this generation was born digital. People who were born in 1990 have had the Internet since they were five years old. Today, if you see babies around scratching tablets, it's not surprising. We have just seen the tip of the iceberg from the current Internet generation.

4 <http://burak-arikan.com/activexml>, last accessed 8 September 2014.

People have expanded their learning capacity with the Internet, this has changed incomparably. Of course now everyone has become a broadcasting commentator. The instant sharing of information has increased the transparency of events. All of these changes threaten established power structures, including dictatorships such as Turkey. As it is said in Gezi, "This is just the beginning..."

Governments and their partners worldwide are in panic. They want to control the Internet, conduct mass surveillance endeavors and achieve deep censorship, and furthermore violate the ethics of net neutrality to generate new monopolies. This is a constant battle where new barricades are being set up every day. Think of how a large population adopted to virtual private networks (VPNs) and domain redirections in a week in order to bypass censorship by the Turkish government. The establishment wants to govern something that is by nature ungovernable. This is something I've been really interested in; it is the subject of my latest work.

E.K.: What do you think about the counter-campaign of the pro-government forces in the digital media? They have established professional teams to mobilize the youth organization of their own party and their sympathizers ("troll" was the term that they had themselves used for these people); they have managed to manipulate hashtags in Twitter and to produce black propaganda about any sort of opponent. In many aspects, they have managed to consolidate the support of their voters by polarization tactics. Yet, when they fell apart with their close associate, the Gülen Brotherhood, who dared to post illegally taped telephone calls by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his close associates, the top team of AKP changed the strategy and banned Twitter and Facebook for a couple of weeks. Do you think that this choice has backfired? Can we expect more suppressive policies in times of further crisis?

B.A.: First, a "troll" is there to pull attention away from its current focus into an arbitrary direction. "Trolling" does not matter as much as people would think. It is like email spam; it reaches to large populations but fails to transmit anything. Spam is easy to ignore with the right filters, and so are trolls. Someone should measure the time-to-live (TTL) value of trolls on social media. Needless to say, many-to-many communication is one of the tools of democracy that should be defended.

Despite the tightening Internet laws in Turkey, a strong culture of online activism and everyday digital resistance has emerged. People are increasingly using open platforms, ensuring encryption in their communication, with VPNs and the capacity to act as a distributed flock of whistle-blowers in order to find effective ways of disseminating leaks to masses.

Protest of
the Turkish
government's
restrictions on
the Internet,
May 2011.
Photo courtesy
of Serdar
Kuzuoğlu.
<http://www.mserdark.com/2-sansur-karsiti-yuruyusun-ardindan>.



What is critical on social media is the ability to make viral information more substantive. Providing ways in which people can explore and traverse relationality at a scale that includes the issues that matter to individuals and communities is one demonstration of it. This is an inherent part of *Networks of Dispossession* and of some of the maps on the Graph Commons platform.

E.K.: There has been a painful friction between the existing establishment of contemporary art and leftist criticism in Istanbul in the last decade. The rapid commercialization of the scene seriously damaged the credibility of any political stance with the frames of contemporary art. When the Gezi uprising exploded in the beginning of the summer of last year, people started to wonder what position the Istanbul Biennial would take the following September. Do you think that the Gezi experience left a mark on the art scene? Did new potentials open up? At least—I should ask this: did it have an effect on your views about your artistic practice?

B.A.: There are a few isolated points here:

First, if art institutions want to connect to activism, they should leave their tradition of representation, which fails badly by putting the protest at a theater stage. I remember one of our discussions with you, during which we talked about "contemporary art" as something that will be treated as pop-culture or pop-music, when we look back on it from the future. I feel this tension especially when art institutions try to contain activism.

Second, there is a "use of art" aside from our classical understanding of its roles in the society. Subjectivities at the borders of art and activism discover this potential. I will be discussing this issue at the upcoming Sao Paulo Biennial.⁵

Third, I started preferring the aesthetic of "counter-" to the aesthetic of "alternative". Not to be confused with binary opposition or the dialectical; "counter-" has to invent entire new ways to survive, because making alternative lines or variations can easily be adopted by the sovereign.

Fourth, how is large scale collective authorship in art possible? Would accelerationism help?⁶

Fifth, art can play a role in connecting seemingly distant communities, be they activists of urban struggles to hackers of internet freedom, transplanting issues into each community, aligning a variety of subjectivities by navigating the antagonistic qualities; the coexistence of opposing forces in each community.

⁵ See also <http://www.31biennial.org.br/dev/en/post/1102>, last accessed 8 September 2014

⁶ <http://www.publicseminar.org/2013/11/accelerationism>, last accessed 8 September 2014.



In August 2012, some sixteen months following the ousting of Hosni Mubarak after country-wide protests, Hassan Khan and I met up for a short summer break in Crete. At the time the now militarily-ousted Mohamed Morsi was a newly-elected president and it was extremely difficult to predict how things would shape up. As the situation in Egypt never left our waking thoughts for long, we decided to have a discussion about some of Hassan's then-recent works, as well as tracking and thinking through some popular ideas within the expanded field of art. We offered the interview as our response to an invitation by BAK, in Utrecht (NL), to contribute to their upcoming reader entitled *From Viewer to Consumer-Spectator to Citizen*, edited by Maria Hlavajova and Ranjit Hoskote. The reader in its original format remains unpublished at present. With the permission of BAK, we are publishing it in this issue of *Manifesta Journal*, as it is relevant to the content of the conversation and the moment in which it took place. Even though our ideas and even possibly how we would express them have shifted over the past two years, the interview is reproduced in its original wording without any editing.

Bassam El Baroni [B.EB.]: In the intro describing the concept of this publication (BAK Reader: *From Viewer to Consumer-Spectator to Citizen*), an attempt is made to introduce and speculate about "the citizen". The text states that we are transitioning into the era of the citizen as opposed to previous eras where the art public was first seen as a viewer and then as a consumer-spectator. "The citizen" to me sounds like an attempt to articulate the positivity of feelings garnered from various recent protest movements, revolutionary environments, and uprisings. The collection, use, interpretation, and speculation about this positive energy within art-theoretical circles is very evident. Some have even argued that the collective processes of communication and message building and the various modes of aesthetical-political engagement we have witnessed in different rebellious contexts actually started in academic environments, gradually made their way into art, and finally went through art into the theatre of actual political protest. As someone who was present in some of the Tahrir Square protests of January–February 2011 and also someone who happens to be an artist, musician and writer who is very much aware of international theoretical arguments, how do you view this and similar narratives that attempt to make connections between the academic, the artistic, and the actual sites of protest?

Hassan Khan [H.K.]: Let's ignore the citizen for a moment as I feel this can be a slightly different discussion. When I was in Tahrir at certain times of the pivotal eighteen days I experienced a rather uncomfortable feeling of being surrounded by a materialized presence. This "presence" was the sum total of what most of those present in that shared space were able to invest into it from their own. A fantasmatic space that has been made concrete through the activity of taking over the center of the capital, i.e. the center of authority. So what lies at the center of authority is not some "ideal" alternative world but rather an inversion of what that authority stands for. This is the space of grotesquerie rather than stylized "participation". People participated because of a compulsion, the necessity to make an existing (and conditioning) pathology formalized and focused upon one goal. The humiliation and removal of the symbol of power; the perceived source of the pathology. What I saw was a ritualized shaming of authority. A consistent and continuous exorcism. And it made me quite uncomfortable the way I guess an exorcism could even if I recognized its power and understood its efficacy. It is my conviction that it was actually the fact that these acts were deeply connected to the pathologies that they stem from, that an action in this space is deeply wedded to the context of exploitation, humiliation and shame, that allowed them to succeed in the first place.

I find it actually quite insulting that academics or artists would make claims that what happened in a place like this had anything to do with their formalized production of consensus. I believe that if, as some have claimed, certain trends within academic research and art practice have actually crossed over to the field of political action than this action in Tahrir would have been doomed to failure. It is possible that this argument is more relevant to the "occupy" movements and is part of its inability to become something more than a half-embarrassed attempt at striking a pose. Pathology is much more profound, wider, and deeply



Hassan Khan, *Blind Ambition, The Agreement*, 2011.



Hassan Khan, *What Haytham Thinks He Wants, The Agreement*, 2011.

Hassan Khan, *Fekry's Soul and Hassan's Tree, The Agreement*, 2011.



Hassan Khan, *The Village Is in Our Memory, The Agreement*, 2011.



Hassan Khan, *Transitions, The Agreement*, 2011.



All images:
Photo by Kirsten Daem.
Image courtesy of the artist and
Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

implicating than any of these proposals. What it produces in the context of “revolution” is fetishistic form (not art)—to unleash the potential of a revolutionary movement, i.e. the ability for every subject touched by this act to feel disturbed, unsure, afraid, desperate as well as ecstatic, aggressive, and/or confident, the taboo has to be broken and the totem humiliated. And that shared space reconfigures the cultural itself not as an intention but rather as a side effect. The references it draws upon precede a specific moment of cultural production and are more closely related to a sense of the historical body, thus even if we find in many cases a sort of populist *detournement* of popular forms (songs, moments from soap operas, advertisements, slogans etc)—the *detournement* is here, [it] is not an artistic strategy that leads us to the situationists but a practiced perversion of an established order.

In some sense the outside gaze represented by the cell phone camera as well as the broadcast cameras of international news channels was also understood in a strategic manner. The participants in this event have learned what a camera does through their own position as “passive spectators” and were thus able to communicate with it without even trying—this is not to establish an ideal situation, but to self-servingly use the same tools to their own advantage—to procure sympathy, and pathos. This understanding of the gaze was calculated yet instinctive and understood in a collective manner. So what we have here are two things happening at the same time: a shared collective outburst of pathological ills that are deeply wedded to their context and their assumption of ritualistic forms that are however also able to access the mediamatic space of communication on its own terms to serve its own purposes.

B.EB.: Can we swiftly look at the citizen through your work then perhaps? The citizens in your recent work *BLIND AMBITION* that was presented at *dOCUMENTA 13* don't seem to be the citizen-public of art that is mentioned in the intro but somehow these citizens are empowered and this empowerment does not seem to be coming from involvement in direct political engagements. Usually empowerment would refer to increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender, or economic strength of individuals and communities, but the source of empowerment one senses in the characters featured in *BLIND AMBITION* seems to be very different. Perhaps you can tell us more about this?

H.K.: I think that the work is constituted by the people who appear in it; they are central in a way that does not seek to position or categorize what they might be except through their own discourse. They inhabit a very special position—as they exist in a world that is absolutely silent except when they speak—in a sense this world lacks substance till that moment. They are the animators of that world—and it is their voice that makes it whole. However this dynamic is not about empowerment in any way because it does not propose either a space of origin or a telic end as the roots or destiny of these people who appear in front of us. The inhabitants of this world do not need anything beyond what they express (including unspoken implications). What I mean is that the work is not concerned with trying to work out an ideal position where participants “should” be placed.

However we also have the interludes or intermissions that act as scans—they are also silent segments but in this case no one speaks. As we move through the different modes of transportation we are put face-to-face with the wider context of a shared collective. We are introduced to the constitutive elements of a social order, the crowd. But this is no anonymous irrational mass. The constantly moving point of view shot that enters and exits different modes of public transportation is the anonymous figure here. We never see the cameraman's hands or body—taxi doors open on their own, and we never glimpse the camera in an accidental reflection (the cameraman was told to not be visible and all reflective shots were consciously edited out)—i.e. the point of view is dematerialized. It is this balance between an invisible exploratory roving eye and its ripple-like effect in the public field that allows for a scan of the world that does not transform the inhabitants of this world into explanations or props.



Hassan Khan, *The Hidden Location*, 2004. Exhibition view, SALT Beyoglu, Istanbul, Turkey, 2012. Photo by Serkan Taycan. Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.



Hassan Khan, *G.R.A.H.A.M.*, 2008. Installation shot at the Yokohama Triennale. Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel.

B.EB.: Not allowing yourself to look at or reproduce “the inhabitants of this world” as explanations or props and your earlier use of the term “telic” create a useful link to help understand your work in general. I mean teleology is in essence about the purpose of beings and things and their intentions, and in your work it seems that the purposes can tightly define humans as a subject. Their aims, ambitions and intentions are elusive and never revealed but yet its these very same purposes or rather hidden purposes that drive us to make attempts at making meaning of the work. We see this in *The Hidden Location*, *The Agreement*, *Blind Ambition* and other works as well. One could say that humanity remains a subject for you but humanism is deliberately counteracted through process, technique, and form. Perhaps this is why you find many theoretical and institutional configurations regarding what the artist, the artwork, or the audience is supposed to be, supposed to do, or how they are supposed to relate to politics or society annoying, because they are mostly heavily humanistic?

H.K.: Purpose strongly exists in my work. The status and self-definition of inanimate objects are constantly being questioned, while human beings possess and communicate a strong sense of their own purpose without necessarily disclosing or explaining what drives that purpose. I don't think the total work determines that purpose itself—it is revealed or hinted at by the subjects of the work. Which is why in portraits like *G.R.A.H.A.M.* (2008) or *GBRL* (2010) or even in the earlier *100 portraits* (2001) there is a tension between the subject and its representation, even in the fact that they are being represented. This tension in all three cases is produced though the very process of making these portraits. In the silent portrait *G.R.A.H.A.M.*—the subject (the now-deceased photographer and friend Graham Waite) is not allowed to speak even as I interview him about himself. The only act allowed is to roll and smoke a cigarette on cue. Graham's inability to vocalize his response to the questions (that the audience do not hear and are thus not even aware of) creates a tension between the act of preparing your self-image for a portrait (in this cause a continuous ten-minute shot) and in dealing with questions related to what that self is exactly. Furthermore he was asked to keep his eyes trained upon me (as I walked up and down and constantly kept moving) which disassociated one of the focal points from a sense of his intentions. By allowing us to witness an interior dialogue as well as maintaining an external force we watch Graham dealing with Graham.

The issue of voice is here imperative and complex. Where is the voice of the work? It is not as simple as assigning it to any of the subjects involved in the situation but it is rather the specific and precise confluence of controlled and uncontrolled elements that allow for a situation which can then be formalized in a manner that configures the art work. It is thus not the author's, the subject's or the work's voice that assigns purpose, but rather their interaction together.

In *The Agreement*, *The Hidden Location* and in *Blind Ambition* we are not only dealing with individuals but also with the presence of the collective. The works's configuration of the human is one that recognizes and takes into account as part of its arsenal an understanding of individual consciousness as inextricably linked to the collective

production of language, not as a limit but rather an unknown—a receding horizon that is both closed and open. Although each subject is treated as a fully valid independent voice the totality of the subjects in all three works acts as a conduit through which the collective in its synchronic and diachronic aspects is sensible. It is also the modulation (for example in *The Hidden Location*) between different methods of making that collective sensible that ensures that the ground is never fixed and that we are never left with a definition. The Shaabi song (“If you play me I will play you” by Aly Salheen) that accompanies the tracking shots of commercial products on sale in a mass retail store, or the breakdown of a character (who is played by an actress sublimating her own emotional economy) in a bathroom due to an unhappy affair, are put on par with the witnessing of ships passing through the Suez canal or young men reciting the true story of a sexual encounter with a prostitute. The social is recognizable yet reconfigured according to a precise sense of the purpose of each element. In a sense the hidden location is about the shared space of the imaginable as a starting point for the real. Yet it refuses to lyricize this source as a utopian promise (and thus I would argue steers away from romanticism), instead choosing to treat it as raw material. A trusted source.

In a sense the problem with humanism is not only teleology, it is also the fact that it refuses to allow the human to possess its own unknown quality. What is at stake here is the possibility of recognizing and sensing that quality, yet never taking the step of actually pointing it out and labeling it.



Hassan Khan, *Blind Ambition*, 2012.
Film still. Image courtesy of the artist
and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

B.EB.: Not pointing or labelling the possible unknown sides within each human is an interesting idea to contemplate in relation to the art economy. I think that is because it takes me back to the idea of what appears to be an ongoing struggle or at least a partial struggle between various elements / subjects of that economy. It could be argued that what is actually at the core of this struggle is the view, although usually not articulated this way, that some within the art economy insist on making attempts to inscribe artistic practices within a discourse of human rights. In a kind of Agambian reading, the art economy is seen as a camp that inscribes ideas about morality and ethics within a classic

human rights discourse. The role of some art professionals (in particular some curators) in this economy is to use art discourse as a mechanism for the same human rights discourse that offers us some freedoms while absolutely controlling the boundaries and character of these freedoms. It is also the same set-up of rights that wars are waged for and communities suppressed. How do you see this struggle, and what position do you take towards it, if any?

H.K.: I’d like to take your proposition and expand it a bit. The art economy is actually, whether it likes or not, dependent upon the unknown quality of art. It is a value system where a gold standard does not exist. The value of a work or an artist is established by different circles of consensus, yet in the end there is nothing material that can tie down that value and guarantee it. Yet it is not able to accept the value for what it is and thus continuously disguises it through the process of constant discovery of new trends, et cetera. It basically presents it as a “renewing” factor, a “discovery”; a sudden “urgency”. It is true however that the market (and I include the curatorial and critical circuits in my definition of the market) needs illusory markers of value to maintain that circuit and thus the reliance in some models on what you’re calling a “human rights discourse” it is also in my opinion a maybe unconscious desire to make art relevant—the basic implication being that art bare without props is not enough to function that effect. The tension of course is there—artists who do not see their work through that same prism are constantly trying to find ways to reconfigure the relationship, while institutions and those who run them are constantly trying to transform works into props and explanations. My position is one of “radical self interest”. I assume that my presence within this economy has a certain value, I feel responsible to my work and its dictates and I feel compelled to defend them to my best possible ability, and finally I realize that this in itself possesses a certain currency and value. Negotiation is then key—it also simplifies the situation when our respective positions are worked out *a priori* and an agreement is reached; we can then proceed to the next stage.

Hassan Khan,
The Hidden Location, 2004.
Film still.
Image courtesy
of the artist and
Galerie Chantal
Crousel, Paris.



B.EB.: The idea that an agreement lies at the heart of any human interaction is something that repeatedly appears in your work. In *The Agreement*, the publication you recently published, and its related exhibition *The Twist*, you present short stories you wrote about different characters, in which each character interacts with society on the basis of complex unwritten social contracts that negotiate their power, freedoms, relationships and desires. These contracts seem to be always open to renegotiation and volatility.

These two correlated projects were made during the very unstable period of political friction that followed the January–February 2011 protests; a period still ongoing, where power, freedoms, relationships, and desires are all being contested under circumstances of uncertainty and newly-rising diverse social and political forces. Each character in your stories seems to uneasily embody a segment of Egyptian society as a whole. Although none of the stories or the characters seemed to be implicated in the uprisings, they somehow seemed to have an indirect relationship to it that remained as an unarticulated but possible knot that could link the stories together. Not as a meta-narrative but in the idea that the stories pointed towards certain societal conditions and readings that presented a certain frequency of tension that was high up on the meter, a tension that ultimately became part of what led to the demonstrations.

H.K.: It goes back to how we can read the events themselves. In a sense this “revolution” or “uprising” or “event” (depending on who you are and what you think) did not happen but rather appeared as a manifestation. A sublimation of the social order itself and its existing tensions that lie hand in hand with the slowly collapsing state. The characters that appear in *The Agreement* where all based upon observations of people I had met in my life (with two exceptions) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I attempted to describe these characters through a partially omniscient narrator, whose relationship to the characters and the events being described is constantly shifting. This is a narrator who knows enough details about the character and their relationship to the world around them to be able to perceive their hidden and interior life, yet not enough to be able to explain that life away in terms of cause and effect. Thus the metaphors employed do not serve as sources of information but rather communicate something of the tenor or emotional intensity experienced by these characters. The characters “embody” as you say—yet it’s not a segment of society that they embody, but rather their idea of who they themselves are. And, it is exactly this idea that can be understood as a description of what the different social segments are. So we are in a world of agreements, one between the character and themselves, others between the characters themselves, and yet others between the different conceptions of whom these characters are and each other and finally a wider and more general agreement that makes the social order possible in the first place. The revolution was an attempt at changing that agreement—it, in a way, enacted that transformation in a speech act whose referent did not yet exist. Ambitions and statements are of a similar order. In a sense each act of communication in its implicit violence and lack of fixity acts as a latent correlative to the unsublimated agreements that order and categorize our definitions.

The Language of Cold War?

Ilya Budraitskis

The “New Cold War” has probably become one of the most widely-used expressions in an aggressive international public polemic to unfold in the dramatic Ukrainian-Russian conflict over the last months. The contours of a new world politics were only just emerging in the first wave of sanctions and mutual rhetorical outbursts, but already broad segments of the public in Russia, Europe and the United States—including those who were very far from decision-making processes—were already noticing a return to the familiar and frightening principles of the second half of the twentieth century.

Nearly seven decades ago, these principles were set up by the ruling elites and then established themselves on all levels of society, from the consciousness of intellectuals to the everyday practices of the majority. In society’s perception, the reality of constant psychological mobilization and the tense expectation of global military conflict became a way of life to be reproduced by two generations, for whom fidelity to convictions was always inextricably linked to fear and the feeling of powerlessness in the face of fate. The unprecedented destructive power of the new superweapons has had a disarming effect on both sides of the invisible front, whose strength can now only be measured in its capacity to make people accept choices that have already been made for them

in advance. Paradoxically, the constant feeling of risk has proven to be one of the most stable conditions of recent modern history, which is why its memory has always prompted so much subconscious nostalgia.

In our days, the specter of the Cold War has returned, and it has roused not only old-school diplomats, but generals, and/or propaganda hacks who finally feel that they are once again on more solid ground. The situation of an imposed choice between two “camps” is obviously no less fascinating to those who customarily think of themselves as attentive critics of any ideological construct. Identification with one of the conflicting sides appears as an intriguing solution to the general intellectual identity crisis of the last two decades. At the first unconfirmed signals of an old-new Cold War, intellectuals are ready to take a position at a moment’s notice and bring clarity to lines of conflict that, in fact, have not yet taken on their final contours. The first Cold War broke out because of military and political decisions (such as Hiroshima) which only later took on their ideological form. In its current nostalgic rerun, however, rhetorical production is clearly outpacing the course of events.

This change in sequence points toward the profound transformation of the position of intellectuals at

the time of the real Cold War that has long since ended. On the cusp of the 1940s and 1950s, there was a fundamental change both in the USSR and the West, despite all external differences. Namely, intellectuals were no longer just a group that was capable of crafting ideology on commission. Instead, they became a group that was always ready to commission, refine, and reproduce ideology all on their own. The Soviet Thirties and their politics of endless international zigzags were accompanied by repressions that ultimately produce flexible, cynical, and permanently terrified intellectuals, each at the ready to defend positions that he or she was denouncing only yesterday. First, fascism was little more than an insignificant obstacle on the road to global revolutionary crisis; then it became a threat to democracy and progress, and then it disappeared entirely from propaganda after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, only to return as the main enemy after Germany’s surprise attack on the USSR. This head-turning twist of foreign policy set in motion a ceaseless mechanism of selection, the only survivors of which were ideological “minutemen,” always ready for the most unexpected change. Permanent disorientation and instability gave rise to a new breed of propagandists who had learned never to trust anyone—especially not themselves.

The onset of the Cold War and the imperial-chauvinist turn of Soviet domestic policy in the late 1940s, on the contrary, created points of orientation that would remain constant through the entire post-war period of Soviet history.¹ The coexistence of two world systems that were constantly on the brink of global military conflict had become a reality, and it determined the consciousness of the Soviet intelligentsia for decades. The rise and fall of escalation and “*détente*” were little more than different symptoms of a reality that would never undergo any fundamental changes. The borders created by a confrontational foreign policy determined and shaped all public discussion: be it the clash of biological scientific schools in the early 1950s, or the debates on the future of the scientific-technological revolution or on that of “socialism with a human face” in the

1960s,² or in the heated dissident discussions on the balance of nationalist and humanist-universalist values in the 1970s,³ the background was always the same, its horizon set by the front lines of the Cold War. To take any “third position” of political or cultural self-determination to elude the brutal binary structure of the conflict between East and West seemed so obviously impossible that it required no special confirmation from above. In that way, any opposition to “really existing socialism” was identical to a conscious choice in favor of what was considered “the other side”; the West.

Over the last two decades of the existence of the USSR, official “Marxism-Leninism” was already hopelessly discredited, creating the need of an ideology capable of organizing society and legitimating power in its place. The first *de facto* replacement was the “revolutionary-imperial paradigm,”⁴ in which the idea of opposition to the West gradually became organically connected with a fear of disrupting the fragile global balance of power. It is indicative that the existence of this “military” stability chronologically coincides with the total domination of the country’s leadership by a generation whose political ascent began in the late 1940s. The utter defeat of Gorbachev’s “Perestroika” was in many ways connected to the radical reassessment of the highly complex construct of all the domestic and international relations that had emerged over the preceding decades of the Cold War. Clearly, the ensuing dissolution of the USSR, the victory of “democratic forces” and the beginning of the traumatic transition to the free market meant that one of the two warring sides had won.

One could say that that the Cold War’s main appeal to society lies in the radical reduction of a huge variety of conflicts into one central conflict capable of explaining all contradictions. This reduction is in fact what lies at the base of global Cold War ideology, beyond all the arbitrary fronts.

² Probably the key programmatic text in this discussion is Andrey Sakharov’s *Progress, Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom* <http://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfconf2009/english/node/20>, last accessed 5 October 2014.

³ This central debate for the dissident milieu of the 1970th was reflected in two anthologies: Alexander Solzhenitsyn, ed. *From Under the Rubble* (Paris: IMCA-PRESS, 1974, rus.) and collective answer came from a number of liberal and socialist dissidents in *Self-Conciseness* (N.Y.: Krronica, 1976, rus.)

⁴ Definition taken from Zubok, *op. cit.*

Then again, the Cold War did not only consolidate the elite, guarantee the loyalty of the majority, and create conditions for US hegemony in Western Europe. It has also allowed the political left to become an organic part of the system. The very possibility for criticizing this system from within itself then became a source of strength and a competitive advantage. In that sense, the Cold War created a new language of universal values, the power of which each mirrored the enemy’s weaker points. By using values such as personal freedom, democracy, and human rights as weapons, the West finally seemed of the verge of turning all those Enlightenment abstractions into flesh and blood, giving them a proper grounding.

The two “hot” global conflicts preceding the Cold War had created the problem of millions of “stateless persons,” for whose basic rights there were no guarantees from the sovereignty of any state or membership in any national community. “The Rights of Man, supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable—even in countries whose constitutions were based upon them—whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state. [...] Nobody had been aware that mankind, for so long a time considered under the image of a family of nations had reached the stage where whoever was thrown out of one of these tightly organized closed communities found him [or her] self thrown out of the family of nations altogether.”⁵ In that way, the only subject to guarantee human rights was an unrepresented “humanity,” and it lacked a political body as well any other form of sovereignty. For Hannah Arendt, this catastrophe of human rights appeared as one of the necessary components in the drama of European totalitarianism.

In practice, the Cold War was a unique historical example for how an abstract “humanity” gained a voice and real power in the person of a summary “Western World,” with the USA as its flag-holder. An example for how the defense of political rights appeared as an unconditional priority was the campaign for the free emigration of Soviet Jewry and its culmination in the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the American-Soviet Trade Agreement. The community of human rights activists to emerge in the late 1960s and early 1970s quickly moved from

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Imperialism: Part Two Of The Origins Of Totalitarianism*, (San Dies, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1976), 193–194.

ethically objective declarations on “rights” meant to triumph in principle to rights whose weight was constantly confirmed in appeals to the military-political bloc who would back them.

Just as the universal right of nations for self-determination became a weapon of the “socialist camp” with the onset of decolonialization in the countries of the Third World, so were the universal rights of man privatized by the “free world.” Incidentally, the “socialist camp’s” main gain in the field of universal rights was still the right to revolt. Historical irony has it that this right would have become a universal even without the American Declaration of Independence. Each human right that formerly seemed neutral had now gained a motherland and an unprecedented possibility for historical realization, albeit in exchange for its own universality. According to the same iron logic, the struggle for the rights and freedom of political prisoners became something of a POW-exchange between two sides of an undeclared global war.

Once military action had spilled over onto the field of moral values, culture inevitably became one of its chief battlegrounds. On this front, too, the balance of power had shifted by the mid-1950s and overwhelmingly remained in favor of the West, which seemed able to use any individual expressions of creativity, no matter what their quality. That is where one finds the most terrifying achievement of America and its apparatus for the propaganda of universal meaning at the time of the Cold War: all claims of “independence,” escapism or positions above and beyond the struggle worked in its favor.

The Cold War saved the USSR from the erosion of its dominant ideology, a process that began toward the end of Stalin’s reign. In the United States, this construct was the result of a convergence and an amalgamation of a paradoxical, eclectic, and still remarkably viable coalition. It included political and social groups that had never historically been allies, bringing together conservatives, Christian fundamentalists, Roosevelt liberals, so-called “non-communist leftists,” Ivy League graduates and Eastern European immigrants. All the contradictory forces of a society that had only just survived the deepest of crises in the Great Depression now found themselves part of a unified front reaching far beyond America’s

¹ This thesis is detailed, for example, in Vakdislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev (The New Cold War History)* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

borders.⁶ This coalition was far from organic; its creation was dictated by the necessities of foreign policy and was the result of special efforts from above (through the secret services or think tanks with ties to the government). Yet it generated an elastic and unbelievably robust language for the public discussion of foreign policy.

Recent events show that neither the language of the Cold War nor the desire for clear and simple lines of self-definition have receded into the past. Instead, they are reproduced independently by intellectuals, at the first unconfirmed hint of a return to the situation of a “war of the worlds.” As soon as the signal was heard, the first necessary stage of work commenced, namely to update the vocabulary of a universal notion that would later become the vocabulary of war. Obviously, “Europe” is the crucial term in such a vocabulary. Of course, intense ideological work in constructing “Europe” was ongoing for most, if not all, of the European Union’s history as the project of its political elites. However, over the last years, the very crisis of that project has activated the entire diversity of its inner contradictions, significantly undermining the legitimacy of any intellectual activity linked to its historical universalization.

It only took a few weeks for the Maidan in Kyiv to evolve from a limited movement in support of an association with the EU to a full-fledged political revolution. In the international context, however, the Maidan’s political meaning is consistently and even doggedly interpreted as a particular (albeit heroic and inspiring) case of the struggle for “European values.” As early as January, when the political perspective and the contours of the Maidan were not yet certain, a group of intellectuals including Slavoj Žižek and Carlo Ginzburg published a collective letter in support of the Maidan as a movement capable of reclaiming the project of a united Europe, giving it back some of its lost significance and high-mindedness.⁷

The well-established Enlightenment figure of the “noble savage” gains a new meaning in the image of the distant Ukrainian whose blood sanctifies tarnished European ideals that have been long since

6 This turn of the Western intellectuals was perfectly described in Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who paid the piper: CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999).

7 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/03/support-ukrainians-build-fairer-europe>, last accessed 23 September 2014.

forgotten and rejected by their original inventors. It is important that this voice in support of the “European choice” came from the political left, which in the critical moment discovered in itself no less passion for familiar, simple schemes for interpreting events than the Cold Warriors of the political right, who also enthusiastically set about pulling the old propaganda weapons out of their rusty sheathes.

It does not take much time to install the stage set of a “world of the worlds” when we draw upon the inexhaustible resources of historical imagination. One can safely say that at present this work is almost done. The Right is in the electoral avant-garde, and part of the Left is not far behind.

The Russian side’s most noticeable and consistent representative is without doubt the philosopher and essayist Alexander Dugin, who was already pioneering the notion of “conservative revolution” in the post-Soviet context twenty years ago. For Dugin, the annexation of Crimea and the events in Eastern Ukraine are the consummation of “Russia’s return to history.” In a recent programmatic text, he describes these ongoing events as the final climax in Putin’s reign, whose figure symbolizes the struggle for the material legacy of the geopolitical capitulation in the 1990s and the mystical “second body of the king,” thereby claiming a genuine sovereignty to overcome the moribund hegemony of American civilization.⁸

Furthermore, Dugin’s neo-Eurasian project finds its near-symmetrical counterpart in the approach of the liberal-conservative historian Timothy Snyder, who recently held a lecture in Kyiv entitled “Ukraine and Europe.” According to Synder, Ukraine’s inevitably European future is completely pre-determined by its European past. From the foundation of Kyivian Rus’ by the Vikings (“a typically European history”) to the transformation of its legacy into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Ukraine constantly proved that it belonged to Europe, as if it had been making unconscious choices at each moment of its history that would be obvious to any European country. Just as the new members of the EU rediscovered their roots in the 2000s, as if awakening from a deep sleep to come home to the family of nations like prodigal sons, Ukraine today is experiencing the tortuous but inevitable rediscovery of its own European nature.

8 Alexander Dugin, “Vladimir Putin’s Second Body”. <http://evrazia.org/article/2536>, last accessed 6 October 2014.

On the path of this return to a genuine, pluralistic Europe capable of healing all historical wounds, there is an obstacle: Russia, which today presents a distillate of the “anti-European” project. According to Snyder, Putin’s “Eurasian project is precisely to make Europe—the whole of it—look like Ukraine does now: that is, alone, without enough friends who understand it; fragmented; intervened in from the outside.” Between Europe and anti-Europe, there is no leeway for choice: “There is a Eurasian future that you can all go into together, and there is a European future... there isn’t anything else.”⁹

Both of these constructs are identical in the fatality of their choices and the impossibility of any “third position,” no matter what its source or legitimations. The grand style of the Cold War overtakes any immediate armed confrontation in order to confirm the logic of combat as a constant state of society. The Cold War’s atmosphere is characterized by constant gymnastics of military morale, and takes the right to doubt away from intellectuals—that is, from those whose doubt is a crucial element of their professional vocation and political function alike.

There is thus a touching confluence between Alexander Dugin and Timothy Snyder as they stage a “clash of civilizations.” There is nothing very surprising in this dramaturgy, in itself a near-traditional right-wing sport. Every time a trans-historical enemy appears on the horizon to threaten “our” culture and values, it is an act of divine providence, capable of reviving a morally decrepit, demobilized nation by imbuing it with the necessary vitality and unity. It is enough to remember how some conservative commentators in America interpreted the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001, little more than a decade ago.

For the Right, the logic of the Cold War entails the return of a lost historical optimism and brings up the long-awaited identity between nation and state. For the Left, on the contrary, it narrows down the questions at hand, which no longer concern grand emancipative projects, but are now boiled down to problems of personal choice. Unlike the Right, whose understanding of history unexpectedly becomes the only legitimate means of describing

9 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qihk1rfloag>, last accessed 6 October 2014.

reality, the historical perspective of the Left suffers an overwhelming defeat. Never before, other than at the peak of the Cold War in the 1940s and 1950s, have leftist intellectuals felt so alienated from the process of history, whose moving forces have now fully lost any human orientation. Such was the case of Arthur Koestler, who at that time had arrived at the end of his meandering drift from the Stalinist Comintern to a brutal anti-communism, and wound up predicting the imminent end of civilization at large. In his novel *The Age of Longing* (1951), he paints an apocalyptic picture of Paris on the brink of an inevitable invasion by the Soviet hordes, culminating in nuclear war. However, the main reason for the end of the West, according to Koestler, is that the absolute majority of intellectuals are ready in principle to capitulate, having been turned into Stalinist zombies. One of the characters of the novel is a famous Soviet writer who visits the French capital as the honorary delegate of yet another “Congress in Defense of Peace” staged by Moscow, from where he decides not to return home. He flees the realm of necessity to find himself anew and to find the genuine meaning of creativity, though actually, there is nowhere left to run.¹⁰

Koestler was to become one of the most striking representatives of the “non-communist left,” an incredibly active network of intellectuals for whom the next consistent step in the rejection of Stalinism would be collaboration with the CIA. Koestler joins other former communists as one of the authors in the anthology *The God That Failed*, published with the active support of the American secret services, around the same time that another disappointed leftist, George Orwell, published his blockbuster *1984*.¹¹ Koestler and his co-author do not attack or oppose Stalinism with any other grand political project as an alternative, but they do reinstate the right to make choices that Stalinism had trampled underfoot. As the former participants of emancipatory mass movements sift through the ruins, they have no choice but to fight for their right to be themselves; to retain a possibility for critical thinking and dissent. In this fight, support could be found from only one of the two camps that divided the world in the post-war period.

Jean-Paul Sartre, Koestler’s interlocutor in Paris in the

10 Arthur Koestler, *The Age of Longing* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

11 Arthur Koestler, *The God That Failed* (New York: Harper, 1949).

1940s, made similar experiences, but comes to exactly the opposite conundrum. By the 1950s, his search of an independent emancipative and anti-authoritarian position led him to see the necessity of supporting the Communists. Later describing his position, Sartre tells of how he had to leave his position as a powerless yet morally impeccable “lovely clean little atom,”¹² unsettled at first by the experience of German occupation and anti-fascist Resistance, and later, the political opposition between two camps, drawing a decisive line not only through all national politics, but through anything at all, no matter how small, including the personal friendship of the community. Sartre’s programmatic individualism and his suspicion of any political representations generated a lasting mistrust among the French Communists. However, paradoxically, Sartre could only fully express his individuality in an alliance with frightening collectivist monoliths such as the French Communist Party.

During this time I thought about what I’d do in [the] case of a conflict between the US and the Soviets. I said that the PC seemed to me to represent the proletariat. It seemed impossible to me not to be on the side of the proletariat. In any event, the recent history of the RDR had taught me a lesson. A micro-organism that aspired to play a mediating role rapidly decomposed into two groups: one pro-American, the other pro-Soviet. Before the threats of war which, around 1950–1952, seemed to be growing from day to day, it seemed to me that only one choice was possible: either the USA or the USSR. I chose the USSR.¹³

The choice between two hostile camps was a trauma, and one that has yet to be overcome, it seems. Again and again, it raises its head, under transformed conditions, which are more of a farce than a tragedy. Unlike the real Cold War half a century ago, the present conditions are not forcing anyone to write aggressive columns against “Putin’s useful idiots” or opposing the supporters of the “Nazi-Maidan.”¹⁴ In the thrall of some monstrous inertia, they are ready to make that false choice for themselves.

12 <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/1972/companion.htm>, last accessed 23 September 2014.

13 Ibid.

14 A clear example of this polarization is Slawomir Sierakowski, *Putin’s Useful Idiots*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/29/opinion/sierakowski-putins-useful-idiots.html>, last accessed 6 October 2014.

The last Cold War gave us what were probably the most cynical and artfully manipulative examples of Realpolitik ever, and as we know, Stalin was one of its main *virtuosi*. This cynicism was poisoning the entire world, but instead of engaging in its ruthless critique, traumatized intellectuals would further justify it with all the strength of their sincerest passion. If the Cold War really is back, we now have a chance not to play the same role again.

Survival Propaganda

Veronica Nosedá



Portraits of Russian Players by Veronica Nosedá taken during the Open Games held in Moscow in 2014.

Before leaving, I was told to be cautious, even though Moscow is known to be safer than St. Petersburg. Almost prophetically, some time prior to my departure, I heard the Russian ambassador in France, Alexander Orlov, declaring on the radio that “two gays kissing each other in the street is not uncommon in Russia”. As soon as I landed at Domodedovo Airport, on February 26th, 2014, I realized that this was a long way from reality.

The main purpose of my trip to Moscow was rather simple: to play football at the Open Games, a multisport tournament organized by the Russian LGBT Sports Federation. By doing so, I intended to show Russian activists facing the “gay propaganda law” the support of my Parisian lesbian soccer team (*Les Dégommeuses*) and more generally, of the French LGBT community.

Just a couple of hours before the Opening ceremony, while I was still flying over the birch forests covered with snow, my fellow friends of the Russian LGBT sports federation were going through proverbial hell: the

majority of sporting venues had withdrawn, the hotel where most of the Russian athletes were supposed to be housed were cancelled as well, having given the pallid excuse that “a group of children was staying at the hotel,” and that even the club where the Opening Ceremony was to take place, which had been booked several weeks in advance, was no longer available. Eventually, through a refined communication system using Internet chatting tools, text messages and phone calls, the organizers were able to gather the approximately one hundred participants in the basement of a bar in the center of the city, where they could kick off the Games. Behind a thick curtain, watched by two security wards, we had a great show, as expected in this kind of ceremony: some singing and dancing performances interspersed the official discourse by the Russian LGBT leaders involved in the organization of the event. Despite our enthusiasm, however, we were not allowed to clap, out of the fear of attracting the attention of other guests. To express our excitement and joy of being present, we adopted a silent form of applause used by deaf people, which consists in turning the upraised hands.

That silent applause perfectly embodies what we collectively tried to achieve in the days that followed: to be visible despite political constraints, to resist being banned from public space by circumventing it, to stand together against harassment using creativity and determination. No need to say that when the Russian police have decided to badger you, you really need tenacity and patience. To illustrate this, let me clarify that during the four days of competition, we saw an outdoor ice rink closing for technical reasons because “some suspicious people”—that is some of the Open Games participants—had come to skate; several venues were evacuated for bomb threats or other unspecified security reasons, and the basketball tournament was interrupted as a result of a smoke bomb that went off in the gymnasium (incidentally, that moment was a turning point in the Games, since the organizers had to tell us that they could not guarantee our safety anymore).

The football tournament I had come to Moscow to take part in was scheduled for Saturday. After various cancellations, the organizers finally found a private venue that accepted to welcome the contest. We received instructions to meet at a fast food place, not far away from the sports club where the competition was supposed to be held. Yet we could not approach it: the police were already there, arguing that there had been a bomb alert in the building just beside. The arrival of the Dutch Minister of Sports, Edith Schippers, allowed a truce in the war of nerves with the security forces, and we were eventually able to start the tournament—but as soon as she left we had to run off again. The game of hide-and-seek lasted all day, but every time the police dismissed us, we were determined to come back. That is exactly what we did until the end of the Final.

The sports hall, with its walls entirely upholstered and covered with bottle green carpet, was like a giant antonym of the “closet”. Getting in was, for us—lesbian, gay and transgender athletes taking part in the Open Games—a way towards visibility and an ephemeral form of freedom in



a State where our rights are forcefully denied; while keeping us out, for the police, was a fallacious attempt to hide our existence, which indeed had the opposite effect (is there anything more noticeable than a police cordon surrounding an anonymous building in the suburbs of Moscow?). Nevertheless, as contradictory as it seemed, this weird management of “secrecy” and “publicity,” which I assumed to be the legacy of a long-standing political history, had some kind of logic: our bodies were caught during the physical exertion, our expressions, the tension that animated every one of us, and above all the simple fact of being together (although temporarily) were indeed an incontrovertible form of gay propaganda. *We were our own propaganda*, and did not need words or advertisements to be outspoken—we were perfectly aware of that.

Let me tell you how it all ended. Apart from me, the goalie for *Les Dégommeuses*, my team consisted of an international mix made by three French players representing the Gay Games (which are scheduled to take place in Paris in 2018), a Canadian lesbian journalist and some German and Russian players who had accepted to complete our squad. Quite miraculously, we achieved the third and fourth-place play-offs, which we won in a penalty shoot-out thanks to two magnificent and unbeatable Russian dykes that joined us for that match, and also because I stopped a penalty—certainly the best moment in my modest career.

Only once in my life, before, had sports provided the opportunity for me to to experience this feeling of pride and happiness, and that was at the famous “Parc des Princes” Stadium in Paris. On June 24th, 2012, *Les Dégommeuses* played a unique match against the Thokozani Football Club (TFC), which had been invited to Paris for a whole week of action against lesbophobia (the so called “Foot For Love” project). Located in the Umlazi township in Durban, South Africa, TFC was created in homage to Thokozane Qwabe, a young lesbian football player who was assassinated in 2007. The club was founded by the well-known photographer and “visual activist” Zanele Muholi, in an effort to encourage the self-empowerment of black lesbians through sports and the fight against discrimination through visibility.

It is important to keep in mind that since 2001, more than twenty lesbophobic crimes have been officially recorded in South Africa; a reality that is joined by an increasing number of punitive rapes, also

The Pigeon in the Machine: The Concept of Control in Behaviourism and Cybernetics

known as “corrective rapes”. The transgression represented by the fact of being a woman who plays a sport considered to be 100% masculine—as it is the case with football—would seem to add to the factors leading to such an eruption of violence, testified by the sad record of women who have died from hate crimes.

On that rainy day at Parc des Princes, several “survivors” were on the pitch—but none of them was victimized any longer. They were all football players, just like their fellow athletes, fighting to win the game, to obtain the gold medal and to impress the audience with a nice play. Moreover, as far back as I can remember, the power of that match was indeed in its ability to subvert the images of South African lesbians: while denouncing the violence that is perpetrated against them, it did not define them through that violence—not for a minute. In that sense, this game echoed the work of Zanele Muholi, in her attempt to create strong and positive images of empowered black queer women.

Muholi’s challenge is rather significant, but she is not alone. Like her, many other queer activists in France, South Africa, and Russia continuously find new strategies of resistance and visibility through art or sports. They call it propaganda. Let’s call it “survival propaganda”.



Picture of the penalty taken by Cyril Millet during the Open Games held in Moscow in 2014.

When, in 1913, John B. Watson gave his inaugural address at Columbia University, “Psychology as the Behaviourist Views It,”¹ he made clear what he meant when he said that psychology was a discipline whose “theoretical goal is the prediction and control of behaviour.” Strongly influenced by Ivan Pavlov’s study of conditioned reflexes, Watson wanted to claim an objective scientific status for applied psychology. In order to anchor psychology firmly in the field of the natural sciences, however, psychologists would have to abandon speculation in favour of the experimental method. That is, psychologists would have to directly research on living things, and their parts. Dogs, rats, pigeons, and human infants came to share the countertop with Bunsen burners and glass flasks.

Animals, as Henry David Thoreau once noted, are all beasts of burden, “made to carry a portion of our thoughts.”² They are a ragged replacement for humanity in both the material, and the metaphorical sense. The history of control as a scientific concern is also the history of the beasts, big and small, whose lives have been but raw matter for experiments. Three of these animals have achieved iconic status: Pavlov’s Dog, Schrödinger’s Cat and Skinner’s Pigeon.

¹ This was the first of a series of lectures that later became known as the “Behaviourist Manifesto”.

² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, (New York: Bantam, 1980), 285.

Needless to say, Pavlov’s dog was not one but many, and the same holds true for Skinner’s lab pigeons. Schrödinger’s cat, on the other hand, was not a cat at all but a rhetorical figure; short hand for a breathing, living thing, and small enough to fit into a suitcase. Indeed, this is not a text about animals, but it has originated in a work about animals by the artist Jan Peter Hammer, which David Riff commissioned for the Bergen Biennial in 2013. I thank them both for the inspiration that our conversations have brought me.

...

The concept of control in the life sciences emerged out of the Victorian obsession with order. In a society shaped by glaring asymmetries and uneven development, a middle-class lifestyle was as promising as it was precarious; being that downward mobility was the norm. Economic insecurity was swiftly systematized into a code of conduct and the newly found habits of hygiene extrapolated from medicine to morals. Both behaviourism and eugenics stem out of an excessive preoccupation with proficiency and the need to control potential deviations. Watson, for instance, was convinced that thumb-sucking bred “masturbators”³—though

³ Kerry W. Buckley, *Mechanical Man—John Broadus Watson and the Beginnings of Behaviorism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1989).

the fixation with order extends much farther than biology. For Erwin Schrödinger, for instance, life was synonymous with order; entropy was a measure of death or disorder. Not only behaviourism but all other disciplinary fields that emerged in the early twentieth century in the USA, from molecular biology to cybernetics, revolve around the same metaphor.

After World War I, under the pressure of rapid industrialization and massive demographic shifts, the old social institutions—like family, class or church—began to erode⁴. The crisis of authority that ensued led to “ongoing attempts to establish new and lasting forms of social control.”⁵ Behaviourism was to champion a method through which “coercion from without” is easily masked as “coercion from within”—two types of constraint that would later be re-conceptualized as resolution and marketed as vocation to a growing class of young professionals and self-made career-seekers. Watson’s straightforward characterization of “man as a machine” was to prove instrumental in sketching out the conceptual framework for the emergence of a novel social technology devoted to control.

Yet what does it mean to identify human beings with mechanisms? What does it mean to establish similarities between living tissue and electronic circuitry? Machines are passive in their activity; they are replicable and predictable, and made out of parts such as cogs and wheels; they can be assembled and re-assembled. Machines, one could say, are the ideal slave, and slavery is the political unconscious behind every attempt to automate the production process.

The scientific field of applied psychology appealed to an emerging technocracy because it promised to prevent social tensions from taking on a political form, thereby managing social mobility in a society that would only let people up the ladder a few at a time.⁶ Behaviorism, as Watson explicitly stated, was strictly “non-political,” which is not to say that it would forsake authoritarianism and regimentation. Pre-emptive psychological testing would detect any inklings of “conduct deviation”, “emotional upsets”, “unstandardized sex reactions” or “truancy”, and warrant a process of reconditioning to purge “unsocial ways of behaving.”⁷ Developing in parallel to the first

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 114.

⁶ Kerry W. Buckley, *Mechanical Man—John Broadus Watson and the Beginnings of Behaviorism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1989), 113.

⁷ Ibid, 152.

Red Scare, behaviourism is not a scientific doctrine; it is a political position. Just as the rhetoric of British Parliamentarism sought to stave off the French revolution, the rhetoric of American liberalism masks the fear of communist contagion: the imperatives of individualism and meritocracy urge individuals to rise from their class rather than with it.

Dogs, Rats, and a Baby Boy

Behaviourism had an uneasy relationship with the man who was credited to have founded it, the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov. Although Watson seemed to praise Pavlov’s comparative study of the psychological responses between higher mammals and humans, he never manifested the intention to pursue such a route. Instead, he focused on how social agents could shape children’s dispositions through the method he had borrowed from Pavlov. In his “Little Albert Experiment,” Watson and his assistant Rosalie Rayner tried to condition an eleven-month-old infant to fear stimuli that he wouldn’t have normally been predisposed to be afraid of.

(<http://vimeo.com/109125544>)

Little Albert was first presented with several furry lab animals, amongst which was a white rat. After having established that Little Albert had no previous anxiety concerning the animal, Watson and Rayner began a series of tests that sought to associate the presence of the rat with a loud, unexpected noise, which Watson would elicit by striking a steel bar with a hammer. Upon hearing the noise, the child showed clear signs of distress, crying compulsively. After a sequence of trials in which the two stimuli were paired (the rat and the clanging sound), Little Albert was again presented with the rat alone. This time round however, the child seemed clearly agitated and distressed. Replacing the rat with a rabbit and a small dog, Watson also established that Little Albert had generalized his fear to all furry animals. Though the experiment was never successfully reproduced, Watson became convinced that it would be possible to define psychology as the study of the acquisition and deployment of habits.

In the wake of Watson’s experiments, American psychologists began to treat all forms of learning as skills—from “maze running in rats [...] to the growth

of a personality pattern.”⁸ For the behaviourist movement, both animal and human behaviour could be entirely explained in terms of reflexes, stimulus-response associations, and the effects of reinforcing agents upon them. Following in Watson’s footsteps, Burrhus Frederic Skinner researched how specific external stimuli affected learning using a method that he termed “operant conditioning”. While classic—or Pavlovian—conditioning simply pairs a stimulus and a response, in operant conditioning, the animal’s behavior is initially spontaneous, but the feedback that it elicits reinforces or inhibits the recurrence of certain actions. Employing a chamber which became known as the Skinner Box, Skinner could schedule rewards and establish rules.⁹ An animal could be conditioned for many days, each time following the same procedure, until a given pattern of behaviour was stabilized.

What behaviorists failed to realize was that only under laboratory conditions are particular outcomes necessarily produced by specific stimuli. As John A. Mills notes, “... in real life situations, by contrast, we can seldom identify reinforcing events and give a precise, moment-to-moment account of how reinforcers shape behaviour.”¹⁰ Outside of the laboratory, the same response can be the outcome of widely different antecedents, and one single cause is notoriously hard to identify. All in all, “... one can use the principle of operant conditioning as an explanatory principle only if one has created beforehand a situation in which operant principles must apply.”¹¹

Not surprisingly, both Watson and Skinner put forth fully fleshed-out fictional accounts of behaviourist utopias: Watson, in his series of articles for Harper’s magazine; and Skinner, in his 1948 novel *Walden Two*. The similarities are striking, though Skinner lacks the callous misogyny and casual cruelty of his forerunner. For both authors, crime is a function of freedom. If social behavior is not managed, one can expect an increase in the number of social ills: unruliness, crime, poverty, war, and the like. Socializing people in an appropriate manner, however, requires absolute control over the educational process. Behaviourist

⁸ John A. Mills, *Control—A History of Behavioral Psychology* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 84.

⁹ The original Skinner Box had a lever and a food tray, and a hungry rat could get food delivered to the tray by learning to press the lever.

¹⁰ John A. Mills, *Control—A History of Behavioral Psychology* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 124.

¹¹ Ibid, 141.

utopia thus involves the surrender of education to a technocratic hierarchy, which would dispense with representative institutions and due political process.¹²

Apoliticism, as we have already noted, does not indicate that a society is devoid of coercion, but rather, that instead of representing social struggles as antagonistic, along the Marxist model of class conflict, behaviourists such as Watson and Skinner reflected the ethos of self-discipline and efficiency espoused by social planers and technocrats. Behaviourist utopias, as Kerry Buckley notes, “... worshipped efficiency alone,” tacitly ignored any conception of good and evil, and “weigh[ed] their judgments on a scale that measured only order and disorder.”¹³

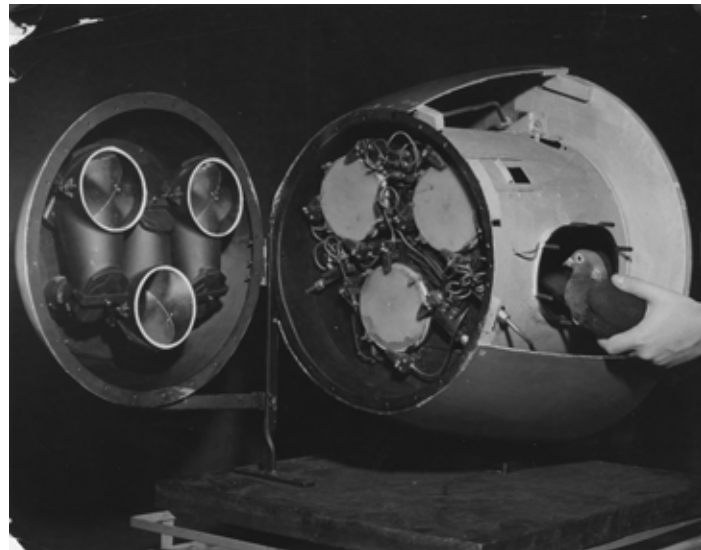
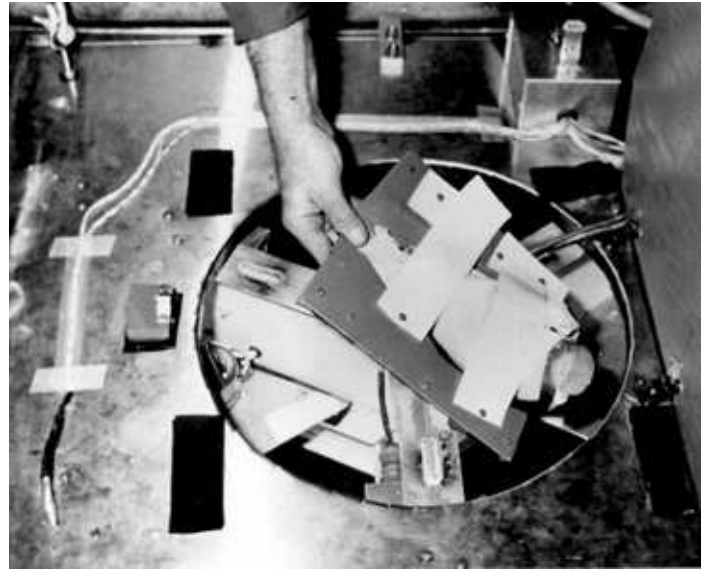
Pigeons, Servos, and Kamikaze Pilots

Much the same as behaviourism, cybernetics is also predicated on input-output analyses. Skinner’s description of operant behaviour as a repertoire of possible actions, some of which are selected by reinforcement, is not unlike Wiener’s description of informational loops. Behaviourism, just like cybernetics, is based on a recursive (feedback) model, which is known in biology as reinforcement. To boot, behaviourism and cybernetics have often shared more than an uncanny affinity. During World War II, both Norbert Wiener and B. F. Skinner worked on parallel research projects for the US military. Whilst Wiener together with engineer Julian Bigelow, was attempting to develop his Anti-Aircraft Predictor (AA-Predictor), a machine that was supposed to anticipate the trajectory of enemy planes, Skinner was trying to develop a pigeon-guided missile.

(<https://vimeo.com/109125216>)

¹² Kerry W. Buckley, *Mechanical Man—John Broadus Watson and the Beginnings of Behaviorism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1989).

¹³ Ibid, 165.



The pigeon-guided missile experiment by B.F. Skinner, commonly known as *Project Pigeon*, later renamed Project Orcon, for "organic control" (1944–1948). Courtesy of the B.F. Skinner Foundation.

The idea for Project Pigeon (which was later renamed Project Orcon—"ORganic CONtrol", after Skinner complained that nobody took him seriously) predates the American participation in the war, yet the Japanese kamikaze attacks in 1944 gave the project a renewed boost. Though the kamikaze pilots did not significantly impact the course of the war, their psychological significance cannot be overestimated—the Japanese soldiers were often depicted as lice, or vermin, but the kamikaze represented the even more unsettling identity between the organic and the mechanic.

Technically speaking, every mechanism usurps a human function. Faced with the cultural interdiction to produce his own slave-soldiers, Skinner reportedly pledged to "provide a competent substitute" for the human kamikaze. The Project Pigeon team began to train pigeons to peck when they saw a target through a bull's-eye. The birds were then harnessed to a hoist so that the pecking movements provided the signals to control the missile. As long as the pecks remained in the centre of the screen, the missile would fly straight, but pecks off-centre would cause the screen to tilt, which via a connection to the missile's flight controls, would then cause the missile to change course and slowly travel towards its designated target. Skinner's pigeons proved reliable under stress, acceleration, pressure and temperature differences. In the following months, however, as Skinner's project was still far from being operative, Skinner was asked to produce quantitative data that could be analyzed at the MIT Servomechanisms Laboratory. Skinner allegedly deplored being forced to assume the language of servo-engineering, and scorned the usage of terms such as "signal" and "information". Project Pigeon ended up being cancelled on October 8, 1944, because the military believed that it had no immediate promise for combat application.



Naval History and Heritage Command, Photo Archives, NH 62696.

In the meantime, Wiener's team was trying to simulate the four different types of trajectories that an enemy plane could take in its attempt to escape artillery fire, with the help of a differential analyser. As Peter Galison notes, "here was a problem simultaneously physical and physiological: the pilot, flying amidst the explosion of flak, the turbulence of air, and the sweep of searchlights, trying to guide an airplane to a target."¹⁴ Under the strain of combat conditions, human behaviour is easy to scale down to a limited number of reflex reactions. Commenting on the analogy between the mechanical and the human behaviour pattern, Wiener concluded that the pilot's evasion techniques would follow the same feedback principles that regulated the actions of servo-mechanisms—an idea he would swiftly extrapolate into a more general physiological theory.¹⁵

¹⁴ Peter Galison "The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision," *Critical Inquiry* 21, n. 1. (Autumn 1994): 228-266

¹⁵ In the tradition of James Watt's steam engine governor, an automatic device that uses error-sensing negative feedback to adjust its performance.

Though Wiener’s findings emerged out of his studies in engineering, “the Wiener predictor is based on good behaviourist ideas, since it tries to predict the future actions of an organism not by studying the structure of the organism but by studying the past behaviour of the organism.”¹⁶ Feedback in Wiener’s definition is “the property of being able to adjust future conduct by past performance.”¹⁷ Wiener also adopted the functional analysis that accompanies behaviourism—dealing with observable behaviour alone, and the view that all behaviour is intrinsically goal-oriented and/or purposeful. A frog aiming at a fly and a target-seeking missile are teleological mechanisms: both gather information in order to readjust their course of action. Similarities notwithstanding, Wiener never gave behaviourists any credit, instead offering them only disparaging criticism.

In 1943 the AA-Predictor was abandoned as the National Defense Research Committee concentrated on the more successful M9, the gun director that Parkinson, Lovell, Blackman, Bode and Shannon had been developing at Bell Labs. A strategic failure, much like Project Pigeon, the AA-predictor could have ended up in the dustbin of military history, had the encounter with physiology not proven decisive in Wiener’s description of man-machine interactions as a unified equation, which he went on to develop both as mathematical model and as a rhetorical device.

Circuits and the Soviets

Rather than any reliable anti-aircraft artillery, what emerged out of the AA-project was Wiener’s re-conceptualization of the term “information”, which he was about to transform into a scientific concept.¹⁸ Information—heretofore a concept with a vague meaning—begun to be treated as a statistical property, exacted by the mathematical analyses of a time-series. This paved the way for information to be defined as a mathematical entity.

Simply put, this is what cybernetics is: the treatment of feedback as a conceptual abstraction. Yet, by suggesting that “everything in the universe can be modelled into a system of information”, cybernetics also entails a “powerful metaphysics, whose essence—in spite of all the ensuing debates—always remained elusive.”¹⁹ One could even say that cybernetics is the conflation of several scientific fields into a powerful exegetical model, which Wiener sustained with his personal charisma.²⁰ Wiener was after all “a visionary who could articulate the larger implications of the cybernetic paradigm and make clear its cosmic significance.”²¹ Explaining the cardinal notions of statistical mechanics to the laymen, he drew a straightforward, yet dramatic analogy: entropy is “nature’s tendency to degrade the organized and destroy the meaningful,”²² thus “the stable state of a living organism is to be dead.”²³ Abstract and avant-garde art, he would later hint, are “a Niagara of increasing entropy.”²⁴

18 As Peter Galison notes in “The Ontology of the Enemy,” Wiener’s novel usage of the term emerges in November 1940, in a letter to MIT’s Samuel H. Caldwell.

19 Mindell, Segal and Gerovitch, “Cybernetics and Information Theory in the United States, France and the Soviet Union,” in *Science and Ideology: A Comparative History* (London: Mark Walker Ed. Routledge, 2003), 67.

20 Ibid.

21 N. Catherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 7.

22 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* ([1950] Reprint of the revised and updated edition of 1954) (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1988).

23 Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1961), 58.

24 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* ([1950] Reprint of the revised and updated edition of 1954) (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1988), 134.

“Entropy”, which would become a key concept for cybernetics, was first applied to biology by the physicist Erwin Schrödinger. While attempting to unify the disciplinary fields of biology and physics, Schrödinger felt confronted with a paradox. The relative stability of living organisms was in apparent contradiction with the second Law of Thermodynamics, which states that since energy is more easily lost than gained, the tendency of any closed system is to dissipate energy over time, thus increasing its entropy.²⁵ How are thus living organisms able to “obviate their inevitable thermal death”?²⁶ Schrödinger solved his puzzle by recasting organisms as thermodynamic systems that extract “orderliness” from their environment in order to counteract increasing entropy. This idea entailed a curious conclusion: the fundamental divide between living and non-living was not to be found between organisms and machines but between order and chaos. For Schrödinger, entropy became a measure of disorder.²⁷

Schrödinger’s incursions into the field of the life sciences were rebuffed by biologists and his theories were found to be wanting. His translation of biological concepts into the lexicon of physics would have a major impact however, as Schrödinger introduced into the scientific discourse the crucial analogy, which would ground the field of molecular biology: “the chromosome as a message written in code.”²⁸

The code metaphor was conspicuously derived from the war efforts and their system of encoding and decoding military messages. Claude Shannon, a cryptologist, had also extrapolated the code metaphor to encompass all human communication, and like Schrödinger, he employed the concept of entropy in a broader sense, as a measure of uncertainty. Oblivious to the fact that the continuity Schrödinger had sketched between physics and biology was almost entirely metaphorical, Wiener would later describe the message as a form of organization, stating that information is the opposite of entropy. In a rhetoric straight from the Cold War, Wiener also described the universe as an increasingly chaotic place in which,

25 Entropy, one should note is an empirical description, not a physical law.

26 Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak—A History of Soviet Cybernetics* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 65.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid, 67.

against all odds, small islands of life fight to preserve order and increase organisation.²⁹

Emboldened by Wiener’s observations on the epistemological relevance of the new field, the presuppositions that underpinned the study of thermodynamic systems spread to evolutionary biology, neuroscience, anthropology, psychology, language studies, ecology, politics, and economy. Between 1943 and 1954 ten conferences under the heading “Cybernetics—Circular Causal, and Feedback Mechanisms in Biological and Social Systems” were held at the Macy Foundation, sponsored by Josiah Macy Jr. The contributing scholars tried to develop a universal theory of regulation and control, applicable to economic as well as to mental processes, and to sociological as well as to aesthetic phenomena. Contemporary art, for instance, was described as an operationally closed system, which reduces the complexity of its environment according to a program it devises for itself.³⁰ Behaviourism—the theory, which had first articulated the aspiration to formulate a single encompassing theory for all human and animal behaviour, based on the analogy between man and machine—was finally assimilated into the strain of cybernetics, which became known as cognitivism.

By the early 1950s, based on W. Ross Ashby and Claude Shannon’s information theory, the ontology of man became equated with the functionality of programming. Molecular and evolutionary biology treated genetic information as an essential code; the body being but its carrier. Cognitive science and neurobiology described consciousness as the processing of formal symbols and logical inferences, operating under the assumption that the brain is analogous to computer hardware and that the mind is analogous to computer software. Exalting cybernetics as a new philosophy of universal application, Occidental authors made ever more fantastic claims. In the 1950s, Norbert Wiener had suggested that it was theoretically possible to telegraph a human being, and that it was only a matter of time until the necessary technology would become available.³¹ In the 1980s, scientists argued that it would soon be

29 Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1961).

30 Edgar Landgraf, *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays on Second-Order Systems Theory*, Bruce Clarke and Mark B. Hansen Eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

31 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* ([1950] Reprint of the revised and updated edition of 1954) (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1988), 103.

16 George Stibitz quoted in: Peter Galison “The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision,” *Critical Inquiry* 21, n. 1. (Autumn 1994): 228-266.

17 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* ([1950] Reprint of the revised and updated edition of 1954) (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1988), 33.



Courtesy of Sally Eertdelstein
<http://www.envisioningtheamericandream.com>,
last accessed 10 October 2014.



possible to upload human consciousness and have one’s grandmother run on Windows—or stored in a floppy disk. Science fiction brimmed with fantasies of immortal life as informational code. Stephan Wolfran even went so far as to claim that reality is a program run by a cosmic computer. Consciousness is but the “user’s illusion”; the interface, so to speak.

The debate concerning the similarities and differences between living tissue and electronic circuitry also gave rise to darker man machine fantasies: zombies, living dolls, robots, brain washing, and hypnotism. Animism is correlated with the problem of agency: who or what can be said to have volition, a question which involves a transfer of purpose from the animate to the inanimate. “Our consciousness of will in another person,” Wiener argued, “is just that sense of encountering a self-maintaining mechanism aiding or opposing our actions. By providing such a self-stabilizing resistance, the airplane acts as if it had purpose, in short, as if it were inhabited by a Gremlin.” This Gremlin, “the servomechanical enemy, became [...] the prototype for human physiology and, ultimately, for all of human nature.”³²

Defining peace as a state of dynamic equilibrium, cybernetics proved to be an effective tool to escape from a vertical, authoritarian system, and to enter a horizontal, self-regulating one. Many members of the budding counterculture were drawn to its promise of spontaneous organization and harmonious order. This order was already in place in Adam Smith’s description of free-market interaction, however. Regulating devices—especially after Watts’s incorporation of the governor into the steam engine in the 1780s—had been correlated with a political rhetoric, which spoke of “dynamic equilibrium,” “checks and balances,” “self-regulation,” and “supply and demand,” ever since the dawn of British liberalism.³³ Similarly, the notion of a feedback loop between organism and environment was already present in the theories of both Malthus and Darwin, and Adam Smith’s classic definition of the free market (a blank slate that brackets out society and culture) also happens to be the underlying principle of the Skinner Box experiments.

32 Peter Galison, *The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision*, *Critical Inquiry* 21, n. 1. (Autumn, 1994): 228-266.

33 Otto Authority Mayr, *Liberty and Automatic Machinery in Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore, ND: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 139-140.

Unsurprisingly, the abstractions performed by science have materially concrete effects. At the end of every thought experiment is a (dead) cat. The notion of a chaotic, deteriorating universe, in which small enclaves of orderly life are increasingly under siege, echoed the fears of communist contagion and the urge to halt the Red Tide. The calculation of nuclear missile trajectories, the Distance Early Warning System, and the development of deterrence theory, together with operations research and game theory, were all devoted to predicting the coming crisis. Yet prediction is also an act of violence that re-inscribes the past onto the future, foreclosing history. The war that had initially been waged to “make the world safe for democracy” had also “involved a sweeping suspension of social liberties, and brought about a massive regimentation of American life”³⁴ Unable to account for the belligerent bodies of the North Korean and the Viet Cong, or the destitute bodies of the African American, cybernetics came to embrace the immateriality of the post-human. Ignoring political differences, pigeons, rats, communists, and kamikaze pilots ended up conflated with the servo-mechanical gremlin. All in all, nothing but the noise that hinders information flows inside electronic circuitry.

At length, cybernetics went on to become the scientific ideology of neo-liberalism, the denouement of which was the late-eighties notion of the “end of history”³⁵ that imposed the wide cultural convergence of an iterative liberal economy as the final form of human government. In 1997, *Wired* magazine ran a cover story titled “The wLong Boom”, whose header read: “We’re facing twenty-five years of prosperity, freedom, and a better environment for the whole world. You got a problem with that?” In the wake of the USSR’s demise and the fall of the Berlin Wall, *The Long Boom* claimed that, no longer encumbered by political strife and ideological antagonism, the world would witness unending market-driven prosperity and unabated growth. Though from our current standpoint the article’s claims seem somewhat ludicrous, its brand of market-besotted optimism shaped the mindset of the nineties. It also pruned what would become known as the Californian dream; a weak utopia that ignored the “contradiction at the center of the American dream: some individuals can prosper only at the expense of others.”³⁶

34 Kerry W. Buckley, *Mechanical Man—John Broadus Watson and the Beginnings of Behaviorism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1989), 114.

35 The concept of the “end of history” was put forth by conservative political scientist Francis Fukuyama in his 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*.

36 Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, “The Californian Ideology,” *Mute*, n° 3 (Autumn 1995).

Dialectical materialism—the theory that cybernetics came to replace—presupposed the successive dissolution of political forms into the higher form of History, but feedback is no dialectics. Friedrich Engels defined dialectics as the most general laws of all motion, which he associated to the triadic laws of thought: the law of the transformation of quantity into quality; the law of the unity and struggle of opposites; and the law of the negation of the negation. Although feedback and dialectics represent motion in similar ways, cybernetics is an integrated model, while dialectical materialism is an antagonistic one. Dialectics implies a fundamental tension, and an unresolved antagonism; whilst feedback knows no outside or contradiction, only perpetual iteration. Not surprisingly, cybernetics was briefly outlawed under Joseph Stalin, who denounced it as bourgeois pseudoscience because it conflicted with materialistic dialectics by equating nature, science, and technical systems.³⁷ Simply put, feedback is dialectics without the possibility of communism. Against the backdrop of an Augustinian noise, history itself becomes an endlessly repeating loop, revolving around an “enclosed space surrounded and sealed by American power.”³⁸

Unlike social or psychic systems, however, thermodynamic systems are not subject to dialectical tensions. Nor do they experience historical change. They only accumulate a remainder—a kind of refuse—or increase in entropy. In the 1960s this refuse materialized in the Manson Family and the Viet Cong guerrilla. At present, the rejects of globalization, be they Somali pirates or Al-Shabaab militants, remain the subject of the Global War on Terror.

37 Maxim W. Mikulak, “Cybernetics and Marxism-Leninism,” in *The Social Impact of Cybernetics*, ed. Charles Dechert (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966).

38 Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 8.



I Am Crassula

Julia Rometti
and Victor Costales

STATEMENT

This contribution is a mash-up loosely based on our interest in Succulent Strategies (the teaching and survival strategies of certain kinds of succulent plants and entheogenic cacti). These plants are often called the master plants, or in other words, the plants that “teach”. It is well-known that consuming these plants has been a profound source of knowledge for a number of communities and nations across Latin America. The conceptual articulation of this kind of knowledge is closely related to the concept of Amerindian perspectivism, developed by the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Here the intersubjectivity of different kinds of beings is taken for granted. Through each physical specificity a particular kind of ontology is developed, proper to each entity or being. These ideas give a radical turn to what is known as multiculturalism, privileging the concept of multinaturalism, or multiverse. We see our interest in plants and their capacities to exchange with humans through this approach.

The anthropologist Anthony Henman, an important reference and an invaluable source of knowledge about entheogenic plants and their usage in mestizo and native communities across America, speaks of articulating a new kind of paradigm, a new ideological environment for the entheogenic plants.

The specific plant that appears in the images, and around which our contribution evolves, is a *Crassula capitella*, a succulent native to South Africa, whose alkaloid properties are not known or are inexistent. The shape of the plant develops in a series of fractalized forms known as chevrons, and recalls the geometries acknowledged through the interaction with the master plants, during the first steps of vision-shifting that they induce. In a way, these figures are a sort of primary impulse, allowing the articulation of a different kind of concrete knowledge to take place.

The chevrons form part of the basic graphic repertoire of certain Amazonian nations. Through the fractalization and combination of these signs, sometimes known as kene, a vast number of sets of more complex forms is developed.

A sort of sympathetic magic (magic activated by correspondence to or an imitation of its object) occurs. The African *Crassula* imitates knowledge, and is taught through a master plant which comes from the American hemisphere. In fairness it has to be mentioned that there are no succulents in the Amazon. The plant used for the same purpose is a liana, known as Yagé or Ayahuasca. The usage of entheogenic succulents, such as *Echinopsis pachanoi* (San Pedro or Wachuma) and *Lophophora williamsii* (Peyote) to name a few, usually takes place in the highlands, 1800 meters above sea level. As mentioned above, however, it is all about magical imitations and sympathy.

Magical Anarchism, another issue of concern hinted at in the text, is a cross between two political approaches to the construction of knowledge and the social, perhaps a new kind of ideological context, for San Pedro. It originates in a real encounter and the coexistence of a hands-on Spanish anarchist, expatriated in the Bolivian jungle, and people from a semi-nomadic tribe from the area, to who all types of hierarchy (political, cognitive, and the like) have to be constantly avoided. What kind of tension and perspectives might this encounter have created and developed?

This has been an ongoing question for us, and to which there is not yet likely to be a written or spoken answer, considering the means we have available. Perhaps it is not necessary to answer to this question, and instead leave it open to any sort of equivocation.



**In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times
[Bertolt Brecht]**

My leaves are fractals.

As fractal are the first sounds of a San Pedro song.

Zillions of infinitesimal vulnerable geometries compose the song of the Gigantón.

Me too, I am a constitution of hundreds of these tiny fragments.
An image of my own hidden nature.

I might practice sympathetic magic, imitating the invisible structure of things. Here and now.

The imitation of things.

The first notes of Wuachuma. The compositions of Aguacolla.

I am from South Africa. I am part of Succulent Strategies.

Or at least I wish I'd be.

Just need a good ride on the back of a Callahuaya and make him find out what I am good for.
Or bad.

They call me Crassula and they say I have a little head.

I prefer to be called Shark's tooth and sometimes Planta hoguera.

The fire case. Campfire. Plant.

An ideal of senseless knowledge, unregistered, harmful in its neutrality,
its viral-spreading capacity.



I will imitate the snake's skin. A face between the dense foliage will share my sympathetic shapes as a tattoo. It will become the spectral double of things around. Alive in its hidden multiverse.

An aleatory swarm of chevrons, organizes itself into kene, becoming form abruptly.

I hypnotize without intention, a jaunt through eyes swollen by fire.
Through the pitch black notes of San Pedro.

The chevron composes songs, routes, names of animals and plants, juts out irregular gabfests.
Just to dive back later into the shifting abysses of memory.

Night is not my factor, but a defining condition for this particular song.
And my fourth or fifth name is Bonfire.

I am a succulent.

I absorb this strange and lucid geometry.

Like a fish will stain with colors of absolute zero.

The myth as a geometry where differences between points of view vanish
and are exacerbated at once.

The 1.2% of fresh plant material. Then fractals will show up, if you're lucky.

I graft to my cactus buddy at 1,800 meters above the sea level.
As I graft to the back of a Callahuaya healer.

The cacophony composing the first clues of the fractal natures of things.
We creep without purpose, multiply.

Knowledge of zillion fractals passing through.

Imitative magic. Sympathetic magic of signs and the recomposition into a legible alternative.
The snake's skin. The horizontality of something devoid of hierarchy.

Allowing the sight of the most elemental fractal.

I am an anarchist, soaked in the obtuse sound of San Pedro, my projection.
Fast-growing *Echinopsis pachanoi*.



I am grafted to the plant of the four winds. The sudden ability to be swept away.

With the serpentine glints soaked into wet darkness.

The chevron.

"... Auca-like: ethereal interminglings of animal and human..."

Anarchy spreads by fractals.

Magic and anarchy, one sympathetic to the other. One imitating the other. Enlisting each other, declaiming
new unbound republics.

Telente. Ten-telente. Ten-ten-ten-te telenten teleten ten ten ten, ten ten ten ten. Telelenten. Ten ten.
Tentelen.

My stem. My leaf. My song. Tenlententen. Ten ten telelen. Ten tan tan. Tan tan ten telen. Telen. Ten ten
telelen.

Telen telen telen ten ten ten ten ten. Telelen ten ten ten ten ten.*

The night and the fire. The fractals, my elements, loom stubbornly through the darkness.
The dogs around the fire become me, as I become the night in front of your eyes,
and the night explodes in undecidable geometries.

Part of these geometries I claim.

I am from South Africa.

At this moment me and my fellow Succulent Strategists share the same pot, in a shaky arrangement of a
veranda.

Some claim we are decorative.

*A slightly readapted quote from *L'histoire de Sangama*, 1950, 1950, by Morán Zumaita Bastin,
chief of a community in the Peruvian Amazon. Translated by Pierre Deleage.



Different Shades of Withdrawal: Conversation with Nikita Kadan and Joanna Warsza

David Riff

CONVERSATION

David Riff [D.R.]: *Let's talk about the elephant in the room, MANIFESTA 10, whose public program you curated in St. Petersburg this summer. The entire MANIFESTA 10 has been very controversial and caught up in the politics of our time. Two of the invited artists decided not to participate, while one collective withdrew, and a portion of MANIFESTA 10's audience - we will never know how many - didn't come because of the political situation. I was invited to come and participate in some events, but stuck to the decision of only guest-editing Manifesta Journal 18 and taking a critical distance. Yet you took on the invitation to curate the public program, and I'd be very curious to hear about your misgivings and motivations for working under such difficult political circumstances. Did you ever think of quitting? Of course, I am also very interested to hear how your public program looks now that it is actually happening and generating controversy on a daily basis...*

Joanna Warsza [J.W.]: First there is a general consideration beyond the politics of the day, namely the intensive time frames of today's biennials. The public announcement of Kaspar König as the *MANIFESTA 10*'s curator was made in August 2013, only ten months before the opening, and only four months later, in December 2013, did he invite me to curate the public program. At the time, I had exactly the opposite questions than I do today: I thought I was going into the most apolitical project ever, but in the mean time, it turned out to be the most political project I've ever been involved in. Paradoxically, it is raising the same questions as the Seventh Berlin Biennale, curated by Artur Żmijewski where I was associate curator; namely, how can art react or perform in the face of political reality? After the annexation of Crimea and Russia's engagement in the Ukraine, the invited artists and I faced exactly that reality. We decided that we should not leave without confronting the

questions it raised. The issue of boycott or withdrawal has been much discussed even in the *MANIFESTA 10* team and among the participating artists, especially after Chto Delat's statement of withdrawal, which as it intended, politicized the situation. I was recently talking to the German critic Helmut Draxler, who said that withdrawal is only political when you leave after stirring turmoil and trying to challenging hegemony through a counterhegemonic gesture in art. Chto Delat's withdrawal was rather an artistic gesture, made out of the fear that the exhibition would not be political enough, but performed perhaps too early. So there are different shades of withdrawal.

D.R.: *Nikita, I would like to address the question to you. Given the current situation and as an artist from Kyiv who has been significantly linked to the political processes of the last ten years, which kinds of institutions do you feel you can work with in Russia today? How does the question of boycott play out for you?*

Nikita Kadan [N.K.]: I am not withdrawing from all artistic activity in Russia. But right after the annexation of Crimea, we postponed a planned project at Garage together with Lada Nakonechna and Mykola Rydni because of the political situation. In the current situation, there are projects I can afford and projects I cannot. If they are committed to being against the Putinist consensus and against the war with Ukraine, I participate. In the case of different private initiatives independent of the state, I make my choices depending on the situation: is it really necessary in an artistic and political sense? As for projects contributing to the ideological facade of Putinist Russia and its normalization on the international scene, I will not participate. For me, *MANIFESTA 10* is such a project.

D.R.: *Yet one could argue that MANIFESTA 10's public program is giving a platform for work that challenges the Putinist consensus. For example, choreographer Alexandra Pirici speaks of appropriating the neoliberal notion of "soft power" to shape art's counter-hegemonic agency under such harsh conditions. Can platforms like MANIFESTA 10 challenge Putin's ideological facade, if they are used properly?*

N.K.: For me there is no essential difference between *MANIFESTA 10*'s main project and its public program. I understand the position of Russian cultural workers who want to use *MANIFESTA 10*'s publicity to address a broader audience, but what in fact can they address? There are many examples of the most primitive manipulations of the audience's perception, such as different wall texts in English and Russian or the anti-Maidan, Putinist comments made by Hermitage Director Mikhail Piotrovsky on Kristina Norman's work. [Norman installed the iconic Christmas tree skeleton from the Maidan in Kyiv to St. Petersburg's Palace Square. Piotrowksy interpreted the resulting readymade as a warning against chaos and "anti-constitutional" political action.] All these examples pay the price of compromise. Compromise is deep within us on some microlevel. Certain critical statements can be made in a way that is understandable to art people, but the local audience only gets an

adapted version. As Gleb Napreenko says in his article, *MANIFESTA 10* is checking to see how loud we can speak critically in Russian society without being overheard by power, which doesn't want society to hear these critical messages. This compromise leads to the preservation of consensus, and it also influences the participating critical actors; their speech is not one that changes the audience but rather the speaker.

J.W.: For the participating artists and me, this was a dilemma: should we stay or should we go? We decided to stay, constantly asking ourselves how far we could go. The biggest local tragedy and perhaps a reason for us to stay is that Ukrainian issue is completely silenced, and it almost makes you want to strangle the people who are indifferent to the Ukraine. The people in the *MANIFESTA 10* team are educated, sensitive, and open-minded, but there was still a certain unwillingness to take a political stand, as if your voice did not count. This is what I felt generally in Russia. If you look at these depoliticized people, they actually represent the subject of politics in Russia today. When if not now? That is, if you believe in what you are doing, and you want art to make a point, why not address this audience and use the "soft power" of art to create a seductive situation in the sphere of de-politicization as we see in Russia. A situation of collectivity arises and it clearly has a political message, but it's not a political message in the first place. It is making a detour through art in order to forge political thinking. I know you will tell me that it is naive and it can be appropriated, and perhaps you are right, but we all agree that we should try and play with the context and terms of *MANIFESTA 10*'s imperial setting.



Kristina Norman, *Souvenir*,
2014. *MANIFESTA 10* Public Program
commission. Photo courtesy of
MANIFESTA 10.

D.R.: What about the issues of censorship, self-censorship, and appropriation? Were there instances when you were told that you couldn't go any further? Did you feel yourself bending more than usual; becoming more Aesopian, more elusive? Furthermore, what about the appropriation and distortion of works in the program that Nikita has just mentioned? How have you experienced all of these moments?

J.W.: Coming from the West, there is the idea that in Russia you will be censored all the time, though censorship obviously doesn't just exist in Putin's Russia. In the West, it's often delegated to political correctness, and there is also a lot of self-censorship, which could be seen in the Berlin Biennale. It's a black-and-white division to think that censorship only exists in one part of the world, or that it's always direct. To give you an example of how censorship works: at the opening, a Ukrainian artist called Maria Kulikovska did an intervention that wasn't part of the program; she laid on the steps of the Hermitage wrapped in a Ukrainian flag until she was taken away by guards. The reaction of the Hermitage staff was "So what?" I didn't fully anticipate this kind of censorship through indifference, where any gesture is simply belittled as childish. That also happened a lot in the public program. As for the Kristina Norman tree, I am convinced that no matter what Piotrowsky says about it, it will speak for itself, and the much-tabooed word "Maidan" appeared in many related news and newspapers. Pavel Braila's melting of Sochi snow on the same square should provoke a similar reaction. There is something in these works that cannot be appropriated. Think of Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Ausländer Raus* installation in Vienna, where the public had to vote on which foreigners to deport while watching them in a Big Brother-like container. There were so many statements that interpreted and twisted its meaning, but in the end, the real meaning of the work will come through. It's the same with Norman's tree. People see it on Russian television, some in growing horror—it's there, and it's making a statement. I don't feel it's now been fully domesticated and that now we should leave.

N.K.: Part of the time during the protests in Kyiv, I was in Vienna and took part in some Ukrainian diaspora activism demanding sanctions against the corrupted authorities in Ukraine responsible for the violence on the Maidan. The Ukrainian activists did the same: they laid down in public places wrapped in national flags. People from those institutions and banks had the same "so what?" reaction. There is a strong lobby in Austria against these kinds of sanctions; lots of Ukrainian money is in Austrian banks. It's the same situation as with France selling the Mistral aircraft carriers to Putin and Kaspar König's contract with *MANIFESTA 10*. Something is happening, we don't like it, we don't support it, but we have to do our jobs. A cynical purely economic element enters into play: the element of professionalism, and it will always say, so what? Piotrovsky's anti-Maidan comment is not coming from a frightened Russian bureaucrat; he is a respectable voice in Russian society; an iconic imperial intellectual responsible for one of the symbols of Big Russian culture, which has let contemporary art onto its territory, inviting it to step inside. I have read Kristina and Joanna's statements, and these



Pavel Braila, *Golden Snow of Sochi*, 2014. MANIFESTA 10 Public Program commission. Photo courtesy of MANIFESTA 10.

voices are so much weaker than the voice of Piotrovsky. It's really like you are speaking from the belly of the wolf that has eaten you. And that you asked to be eaten.

J.W.: When I first saw Piotrovsky's statement, I too was very angry because he was attacking the Maidan. Then I read it again, more calmly. I first met Piotrovsky when Kristina and I went to see him and to show him the film with Alevtina Kakhidze (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7q59c1t5GVI>). I asked whether he wanted to see a text and he said "There will be no censorship in the Hermitage." It's true. His statement is being read as an appropriation, but where in his statement has he eaten us? Instead, the fact that he commented on the work already shows that he is frightened, and that something went wrong or not exactly according to plan and created a disturbance. I think we should read it as such.

N.K.: Why do you think he could be frightened? Are you that horrible? This is an intelligent, ambivalent work, but no more than a regular work of critical contemporary art.

J.W.: Yes, but it's standing in the middle of the square that most represents Imperial Russia, in the front of the Winter Palace and at this moment of time.

N.K.: This square, and those who are responsible for it, have their voices and they appropriate and adopt all the critical content of *MANIFESTA 10* with the strongest of mechanisms. You are within the belly of the wolf. But can't you be on the outside? *MANIFESTA 10* isn't the only institutional opportunity. Why participate in this construction of an ideological facade? Why go there directly?

J.W.: For the participating artists and me, the point was precisely to play with this ideological facade; to challenge it. We weren't just doing business as usual. We can only do art; all we could do was put up this tree—take it or leave. Of course, you can say that it's just critical art, and that it's doomed to fail. But still. Take what happened with the Biennale of Sydney. Renzo Martens was saying that one should not simply leave but stay and fight with the tools and conditions of the situation. This is what we tried to do.

D.R.: *In other words, to bridge what seem almost irreconcilable positions. Nikita, you were suggesting that spaces outside must be sought; spaces where one is not eaten by the beast. Henri Lefebvre would have called them "representational spaces" beyond the "representative space," spaces of self-organization where we speak on our own terms. Both Chto Delat and Nikita's group REP come from that context. Indeed, I found it intriguing that MANIFESTA 10's public program involves a lot of things from that context. It not only works on the Palace Square but also with formats that Piotrovsky and Co. don't notice or care about. To me this emphasizes that indeed, another mode of representation and reflection is possible. Nikita, you'd probably say that that's being appropriated too. Is it somehow still possible to work "in the margins" of such a big project?*

N.K.: If that project is involved in building cultural diplomacy to normalize the policies of an aggressor who is in the process of invading another country—no way. You can work with the political opposition, and you can deal with private structures, but you can't take part in the Olympic Games of such a country during the war.

J.W.: Yes, but Nikita, the private structure and the state have the same source of power in Russia, which is a plutocracy. Capital and power are bedfellows and are more or less the same thing.

N.K.: Private structures are not obliged to participate in the construction of an ideological facade. However, *MANIFESTA 10* goes to the very place where the Putin regime represents itself as it wants to be seen, and you want to do partisan practices there, but of a special kind, involving a partisan compromise. You go to the authorities and say "Let us intervene here and there," and they say "ok, go ahead, but we will make our own interpretation that will be heard much better than yours."

J.W.: Yes, but Nikita, in the case of a private structure, you are also building your arguments of why you are collaborating with them, as am I, in my case. I do believe that it was right to try to challenge the situation, since I had agreed to do so in the first place. Maybe that was a mistake because Putin was already there in December. Since I was there, I decided to confront the situation. The only thing we have is to be transparent to ourselves. We know that Putin is on the board of the Hermitage, but then again, we are foreign agents, and it would be something completely different if a Russian curator were in my position. As a Polish person belonging to a tradition of resistance against Russian imperialism, however, it is hard to accuse me of being a Putinist curator.

In this situation, we can not allow the biennial to do its “business as usual”. We can only continue if we try to make a point and refer to the current political situation. We don’t pretend that we are Pussy Riot, Pyotr Pavlensky or Voina, as much as their work has contributed to a new and vivid artistic language in Russia. We are not them; we are not partisan artists and curators. We are precisely saying that we are exerting soft power and promoting criticism of the conditions in which we are working. This is very different from the position of Pyotr Pavlensky, who refused to participate in even the oppositional Ukrainian-Russian summit organized by Dmitry Vilensky of Chto Delat, a summit in which you participated. He said that he would stay silent throughout *MANIFESTA 10*. He is not creating a strategy to legitimate his position, as we are. To conclude, the most we can do is to be honest. If one day you can no longer look at yourself in the mirror, you have to leave.



Arts Boycotts: The Controversy over the Nineteenth Biennale of Sydney

Sarah Joseph

This year’s Biennale of Sydney, which ran from the 21st of March to the 9th of June, was rife with controversy even before it began. Artists announced that they would boycott the event in protest of the Biennale’s sponsorship deal with Transfield, a company involved in Australia’s notorious offshore detention camps for asylum-seekers. The relationship with Transfield was eventually severed, which brought most of the artists involved in the boycott back to the show. However, that action prompted a backlash from the Australian government and, possibly, corporate Australia.

Background: The Offshore Detention of Asylum-Seekers in Australia and the Biennale

Australia has long been plagued by a frenzied xenophobic debate over the “unauthorized” arrival of asylum-seekers by boat. Since 1992, successive Australian governments have adopted increasingly draconian measures to deter boat arrivals. Such measures are intentionally harsh in order to deter people, many of whom are fleeing atrocious forms of persecution in their home countries.

Since 2012, Australia has sent all marine-based arrivals of asylum seekers to detention camps in Nauru and Manus Island on Papua New Guinea (“PNG”), where their refugee status is determined (very slowly) under the

laws of those respective countries. Australia pays vast sums of money to the respective countries to deal with the asylum-seeker “problem”. Since 2012, the infrastructure company, Transfield Services,¹ has been contracted by the Australian government to run the detention camps in Nauru. It took over the management of the Manus Island camp in early 2014.

The Biennale of Sydney began in 1973 with the support of Franco Belgiorno-Nettis,² a patron of the arts as well as the founder of Transfield. Fast-forward to 2014: Franco’s son Luca is the Chair of the Biennale, and Transfield has evolved into a network of linked companies including Transfield Services. Luca Belgiorno-Nettis is an executive of Transfield Holdings,³ which was a sponsor of the Biennale. Transfield Holdings owns twelve percent of Transfield Services. Another Biennale sponsor was Transfield Foundation,⁴ the philanthropic arm of both Transfield Holdings and Transfield Services. Therefore, the Biennale had no direct links with Transfield Services, the company that runs the detention camps. However, it was set to benefit from the profits arising from those activities via the two related Transfield sponsors.

By March 2014, nine artists had withdrawn from the Biennale due to its links via Transfield to offshore detention.⁵ The Biennale eventually severed ties with the Transfield group, and Luca Belgiorno-Nettis stepped down as chair (though it is not clear whether the money that Transfield had already committed was used for the 2014 event).⁶ Most of the artists involved in the boycott joined the roster once again. The boycott attracted much criticism in Australia, for reasons discussed below.

1 Transfield Services, “Manus and Nauru Fact Sheet,” http://www.transfieldservices.com/page/Sectors/Property/Manus_and_Nauru_fact_sheet, Accessed 9 July 2014.

2 Transfield Foundation, “Ground-Breaking Arts Organizations: Biennale of Sydney,” <http://www.transfieldfoundation.org/index.php/ground-breaking-arts/3-biennale-of-sydney>, Accessed 9 July 2014.

3 Transfield Holdings, “About,” <http://www.transfield.com.au>, Accessed 9 July 2014.

4 Transfield Foundation, “About Us,” <http://www.transfieldfoundation.org>, Accessed 9 July 2014.

5 Elizabeth Fortescue, “Biennale of Sydney Loses Four More Artists Over Event Funding by Manus Island Contractor Transfield,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 5 March 2014, <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/entertainment/arts/biennale-of-sydney-loses-four-more-artists-over-event-funding-by-manus-island-contractor-transfield/story-fniv7r7y-1226845843545?nk=53e7220c51bec86bae32216bd35c3872>, Accessed 9 July 2014.

6 Andrew Taylor and Sally Prior, “Transfield Funds are still being used for Biennale of Sydney,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 March 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/transfield-funds-are-still-being-used-for-biennale-of-sydney-20140313-34pmn.html>, Accessed 11 July 2014

Has Transfield Services Done Anything Wrong?

It is arguable that Transfield has in fact done anything wrong, as it has simply taken advantage of a lawful commercial opportunity. If so, the actions of the artists seem misguided.

However, it is fair to link Transfield to human rights abuses. Conditions in the offshore detention camps are terrible. Reportedly, half of the detainees have serious mental health problems.⁷ A riot in February 2014 on Manus Island led to the murder of an Iranian asylum-seeker, Reza Berati (before Transfield took over the site’s management).⁸ Clearly, the regime has entailed serious violations of international human rights law by Australia, as well as by Nauru and PNG. Transfield must bear the consequences of its decision to facilitate and make profits from such a system of arbitrary and cruel detention.

Hypocrisy by the Biennale?

The Biennale was criticised for perceived hypocrisy, as it continued to accept money from the Australian government.⁹ The government is clearly more responsible for the offshore detention policy than Transfield. However, public funding is not the same as private funding. Public money in Australia comes from the people, though the government in power temporarily controls its allocation. If one rejects public funding due to disapproval of certain government policies, one logically rejects any sort of welfare payment or assistance (such as education expenses) from that same government. In any case, public funding of the arts in Australia is controlled by the Australia Council, which operates “at arm’s length” from the government.¹⁰ It has no involvement in policies regarding asylum-seekers, unlike Transfield.

7 Michael Gordon, “Manus Island Asylum Seekers in Mental Health Crisis,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 26 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/manus-island-asylum-seekers-in-mental-health-crisis-20140525-38wwd.html>, Accessed 9 July 2014.

8 Robert Cornall, “Review into the Events of 16–18 February 2014 at the Manus Regional Processing Centre,” Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 23 May 2014, https://www.immi.gov.au/about/dept-info/_files/review-robert-cornall.pdf, Accessed 9 July 2014.

9 Andrew Bolt, “To Those Artists Who Drove Out Transfield: Hand Back Your Grants,” *Herald Sun News Blog*, 10 March 2014, http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/index.php/heraldsun/comments/to_those_artists_who_drove_out_transfield_hand_back_your_grants, Accessed 9 July 2014.

10 Australia Council, <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au>, Accessed 9 July 2014.



Pictures of the Campground at Cockatoo Island (Sydney, Australia) taken by Ahmet Ögüt. The Campground is a former industrial area, which was an Alcatraz-style prison for convicts, followed by a reformatory school and college for teenagers and orphans, later used as a major shipbuilding yard to construct submarines and warships for World War II. Today it is a campsite and is the main location of the Sydney Biennale.

The Reaction of the Australian Government

The Australian Communications Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, accused the boycotting artists of “vicious ingratitude” in spurning the long-standing generosity of Transfield and the Belgiorino-Nettis family.¹¹ However, Turnbull’s accusation neglects the *quid pro quo* involved in a sponsorship arrangement. In return for the money, the sponsor’s brand is boosted by its association with the arts. The sponsor also receives benefits such as free premium tickets for staff and clients. The Biennale Artists’ Working Group aptly responded that Turnbull’s statement was an unwarranted assumption of “a master-servant relationship” between sponsor and artist.¹²

George Brandis, the Australian Minister for the Arts, responded to the controversy in an even more dramatic fashion. He directed the Australia Council to deny future funding to any exhibition or performance which “unreasonably” refuses corporate sponsorship.¹³ Yet this intervention undermines the independence of the Australia Council.¹⁴

Private funding reduces reliance on government funding, so Brandis’s response could have been a justifiable attempt to save public money. However, the Biennale did not ask the government to make up for the Transfield shortfall. Certainly, the viability of an exhibition can be affected by a refusal of sponsorship dollars, and viability is a legitimate consideration in the allocation of public funds. Nevertheless, such considerations do not justify Brandis’s broadbrush assault on the freedom of conscience for artists.

It is true that no artist has a “right” to government funding. However, Brandis seems to have demanded a minimum level of apolitical behaviour by the many artists who depend on government funding. Many would agree that art best serves its purpose when it is opinionated and courageous, rather than craven and cowed.

Brandis’s directive also seems to create a “right” for corporations to associate their brands with artistic endeavours, regardless of the wishes

11 Jonathan Swan, “Malcolm Turnbull Denounces ‘Vicious Ingratitude’ of Biennale Artists after Transfield Withdraws as Sponsor,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/malcolm-turnbull-denounces-vicious-ingratitude-of-biennale-artists-after-transfield-withdraws-as-sponsor-20140311-34ik6.html>, Accessed 9 July 2014.

12 See Statement by the Biennale Artists’ Working Group at: <http://prodcn.dailyreview.crikey.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Biennale-statement.pdf>, Accessed 11 July 2014.

13 Lisa Cox, “George Brandis Defends Funding Moves to Curb Political Boycotts in the Arts,” 14 March 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/transfield-funds-are-still-being-used-for-biennale-of-sydney-20140313-34pmn.html>, Accessed 11 July 2014.

14 Julian Meyrick, “The Australia Council Must Hold Firm on ‘Arm’s Length’ Funding,” *The Conversation*, 17 March 2014, <http://theconversation.com/the-australia-council-must-hold-firm-on-arms-length-funding-24460>, Accessed 9 July 2014.

of the artists involved. Commercial “rights” here are being favored over the countervailing rights of artists to exercise freedom of conscience to refuse sponsorship deals on ethical grounds. That latter freedom is severely compromised if government funding is withdrawn as a consequence of its exercise. The result may be, to paraphrase Malcolm Turnbull, “compulsory gratitude”.

Effectiveness of the Boycott

A criticism of the boycott is that it was ineffective. The action has not brought an end to Australia’s offshore detention regime, and Transfield has no apparent intention of terminating its contracts.

Some even argue that the boycott was counterproductive. For example, the future of the Biennale of Sydney and corporate sponsorship of the arts in Australia in general may be threatened.¹⁵ After all, many potential (and actual) arts sponsors have been linked to human rights abuses, given the range of activities of multinational companies. Furthermore, the slashing of the arts budget by the Australian government in May 2014¹⁶ has meant that sponsorship dollars are even more necessary to ensure the viability of future exhibitions, with or without Brandis’s oppressive directive.

It is too early to tell whether there will be a sponsor backlash against the Biennale boycott. Actions have consequences, as Transfield has learnt with its decision to run the detention centers. The Biennale boycotters and organizers must also live with the consequences of their decisions.

In any case, an “effectiveness” criterion as a measure of the legitimacy of political action would cruel the opportunities for grassroots political action by those who lack substantial power. Political action cannot be the sole preserve of States and other powerful entities simply because their actions are more likely to be “effective” in bring about the changes they desire. Furthermore, while political action is a means to an end, it is also an end in itself, as an expression of conscience.

Boycotts may also be part of a long game: “effectiveness” cannot necessarily be measured in the immediate present or aftermath. Activists are now lobbying industry pension funds and other bodies to divest from Transfield.¹⁷ The Biennale incident could be the first step in an escalating

¹⁵ Andrew Taylor, “Biennale of Sydney Facing Uncertain Future after Severing Ties with Transfield,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 March 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/biennale-of-sydney-facing-uncertain-future-after-severing-ties-with-transfield-20140307-34cl1.html>, Accessed 9 July 2014.

¹⁶ Anne Maria Nicholson, “Budget 2014: Government Grants to Artists and Filmmakers Slashed,” ABC News, 14 May 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-05-14/budget-2014-government-grants-to-artists-and-filmmakers-slashed/5452444>, Accessed 9 July 2014.

¹⁷ James Fernyhough, “HESTA Non-Committal on Transfield Divestment,” Financial Standard Online, 14 March 2014, <http://www.financialstandard.com.au/news/view/38629881>, Accessed 9 July 2014.

campaign that eventually causes serious commercial harm to the company, alongside the undoubted harm to its reputation. Furthermore, the boycott seemed to have had some effect on the government, given Turnbull’s petulant reaction and Brandis’s efforts to ensure that there is no repeat. The action increased the national and international attention paid to Australia’s asylum-seeker policies, as well as associated corporate complicity.

Conclusion

From the turmoil that preceded the Biennale, art then took over from politics.¹⁸ The controversy certainly raised the profile of the Biennale, and probably resulted in more people flowing through its doors. Predictably, reviews were mixed.¹⁹

As for the boycott itself, such action is not new. The question of whether or not to boycott was faced by artists in Sydney, as well as artists at *MANIFESTA 10* in St. Petersburg.²⁰ It is always a question of conscience for individuals and for collectives such as the Organising Committees of the Biennale of Sydney. For art cannot truly be separated from politics or conscience. Therefore, the apparent new policy of the Australian government to cleave them apart is misguided and indeed “anti-art”.

¹⁸ Gareth Harris, “Sydney Biennale Survives Crucible of Controversy,” *The Art Newspaper: Web version*, 26 March 2014, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Sydney-Biennale-survives-crucible-of-controversy/32121>, Accessed 9 July 2014.

¹⁹ Andrew Taylor, “Critics Maul ‘Obscure’ Biennale of Sydney,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 April 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/critics-maul-obscure-biennale-of-sydney-20140414-36nkh.html>, Accessed 9 July 2014.

²⁰ *Manifesta 10*, “*Manifesta 10* Will Stay in St. Petersburg,” Press Release, March 2014, <http://manifesta.org/2014/03/manifesta-10-will-stay-in-st-petersburg>, Accessed 9 July 2014.

Notes from a Boycott

Mariam Ghani, Gulf Labor Working Group

Gulf Labor is a group of artists, writers, architects, curators, and other cultural workers who are trying to ensure that worker's rights are protected during the construction of new cultural institutions on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, UAE. After letter-writing and meetings with the Guggenheim in 2010 produced insufficient change, we initiated a public boycott of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (GAD) in 2011. Almost two thousand cultural workers have signed on to the boycott, agreeing not to sell work to, accept commissions from, or participate in events on behalf of the GAD.

Like most long-term boycotts, the Gulf Labor campaign has undergone a number of shifts and has deployed a range of different tactics over the years following its public launch. Some signatories have dropped out, while others have joined in. Our working group—which is responsible for organizing, negotiating, and making public statements—has a rotating membership open to anyone participating in the boycott. That membership has changed over time, which naturally inflects the decisions made by the working group. At some moments, we have engaged in intensive behind-the-scenes dialogues with both the Guggenheim and their partners in Abu Dhabi. At other moments, we have withdrawn from conversations that seemed to produce no tangible results, and considered how we might change the dynamic, by intervening in other ways or arenas.

Gulf Labor's most visible tactical shift came in fall 2013, when we launched the *52 Weeks* campaign. Every week for a year, we are releasing one or more artist's projects. These projects call attention

to some aspect of the conditions of workers on Saadiyat Island, the political context that enables their situation, and the problematic compact between the western institutions building on Saadiyat and their partners in Abu Dhabi; or they make links between the situation of the workers on Saadiyat and similar struggles by other migrants and workers in other places and times. *52 Weeks* represents a move from the strategic use of artworks (withholding them, or imposing conditions on their sale, production and exhibition) as an activist tactic, to an attempt to apply the same kind of pressure through the production and distribution of artworks that directly address or enact that activism.

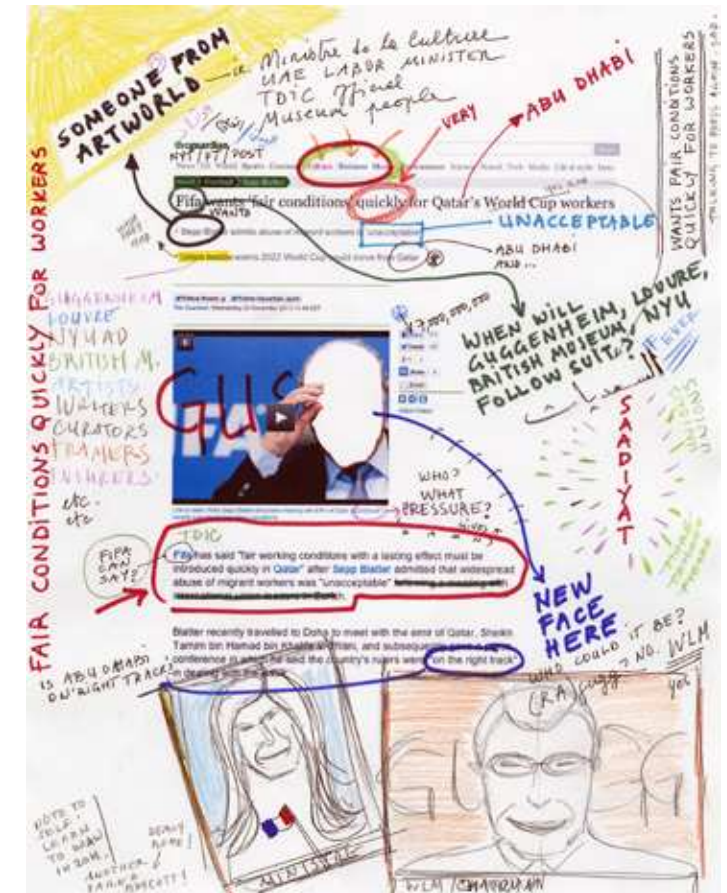
52 Weeks was initially conceived as a means to exert constant pressure on the Guggenheim, its chief Emirati partner TDIC (Tourism Development & Investment Company), and the other Western institutions imbricated in construction projects on Saadiyat (the Louvre, the British Museum, and New York University). *52 Weeks* also allows Gulf Labor to connect our efforts vis-à-vis Saadiyat Island to relevant issues and parallel activist projects outside Saadiyat—from the World Cup stadium construction in Qatar, to the globalization of university campuses, to the struggles of migrant tomato pickers in Florida, through the projects produced by a diverse group of artists and writers. *52 Weeks* additionally opens a space for direct actions to be performed as "weeks" within the ongoing campaign, by newly formed affinity groups (such as the Global Ultra Luxury Faction or G.U.L.F.). The flexibility of this format potentially broadens Gulf Labor's purview, without splitting the focus of its central demands.

EXHIBITION ROOM



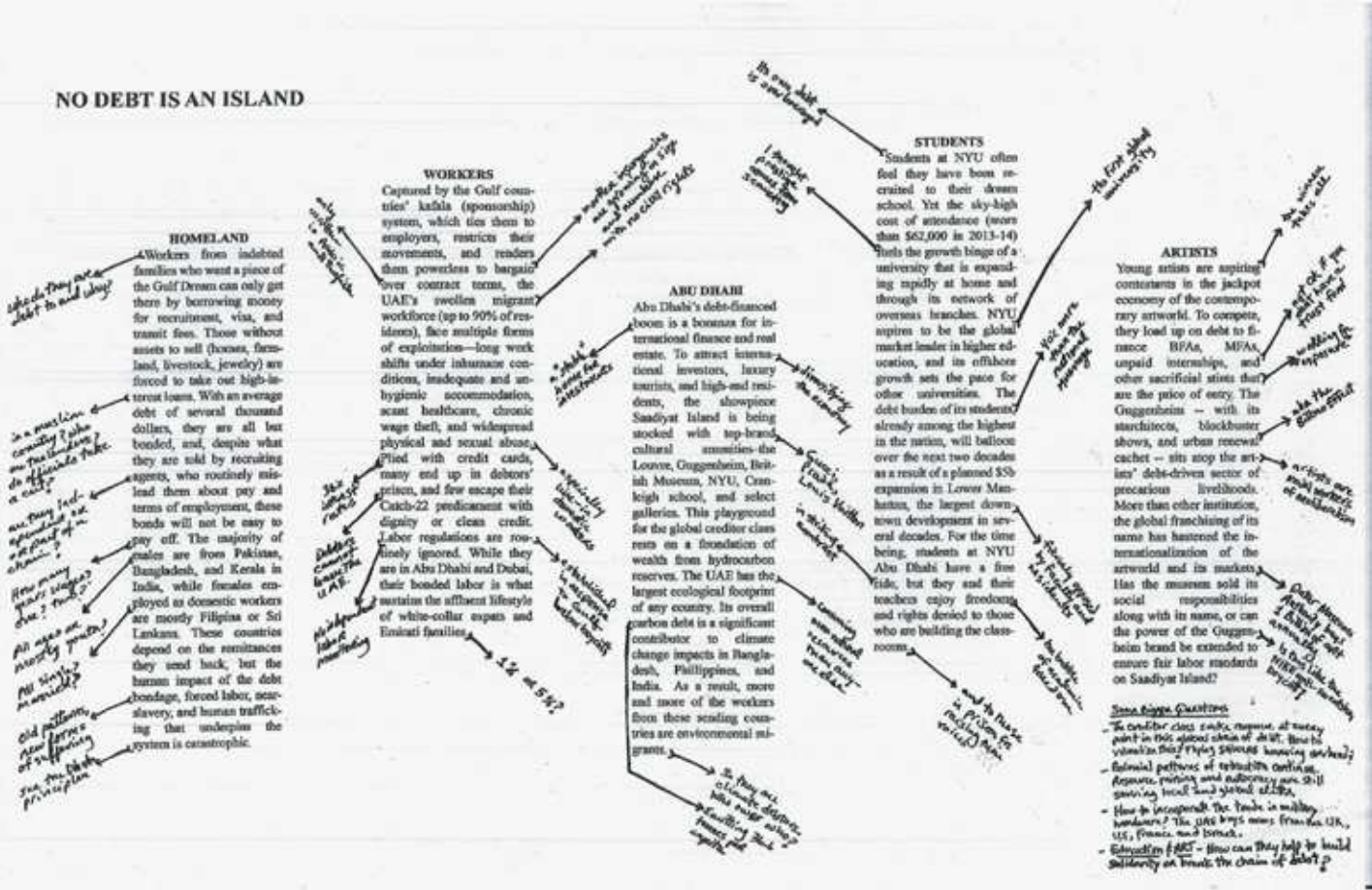
Gulf Labor, poster announcing the launch of *52 Weeks*, 2013

Farid Sarroukh and Maha Traboulsi in collaboration with Walid Raad for Week 9, *If FIFA did...*, poster, 2013



Santiago Mazatl for Week 37, *Farmworker Justice*, poster created in solidarity with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida (ciw-online.org/about, last accessed 22 August 2014), 2014





Andrew Ross and MTL (Nitasha Dhillon and Amin Husain) for Week 10, *NO DEBT IS AN ISLAND*, triptych with multimedia components (<http://www.thinglink.com/scene/465544492976439298>, last accessed 22 August 2014), a printable PDF, and a solidarity initiative, 2013

Global Ultra
Luxury Faction
(G.U.L.F.) for Week
20, *Is this the
future of art?*, Front
of flyer dropped
during February
22nd action at
the Guggenheim
Museum, New
York (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WU-W_Ftyaw, last
accessed 22
August 2014).

Is this the future of art? Art, among other things, is about doing, living and imagining a better world. Art should not violate human rights. Art should not endanger workers lives. Art should not create debt slaves.

Today, as indebted people ourselves, we launch a solidarity initiative to protest the abusive living and working conditions of migrant workers who are constructing the Guggenheim, the Louvre, and the new NYU campus on Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island. This action is just the beginning.

G.U.L.F. calls on the Guggenheim to ensure that the labor and human rights of the Abu Dhabi workers are fully respected.

Gulf Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.)
for more info visit www.gulfalabor.org

HUMAN RIGHTS
AND MIGRANT WORKERS IN ABU DHABI:
NEW PERSPECTIVES

JOIN US FOR A TALK BY
REGIONAL EXPERT
NICK MCGEEHAN
(HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH)

PRESENTING NEW FINDINGS ON
MIGRANT LABOR CONDITIONS &
THE HUMAN RIGHTS "SITUATION"
IN ABU DHABI

WEDNESDAY
FEBRUARY
26
5:15 — 6:45 PM
GCASL
7th Floor, Room 369



G.U.L.F., documentation of March 29th action at Guggenheim Museum, New York. Fake dollar bills were dropped into the atrium during the *Italian Futurism* exhibition. A fake globalguggenheim.com website concurrently launched a RFP (Request for proposal) for sustainable and ethical museum designs (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHphhnZhtNY>, last accessed 22 August 2014).

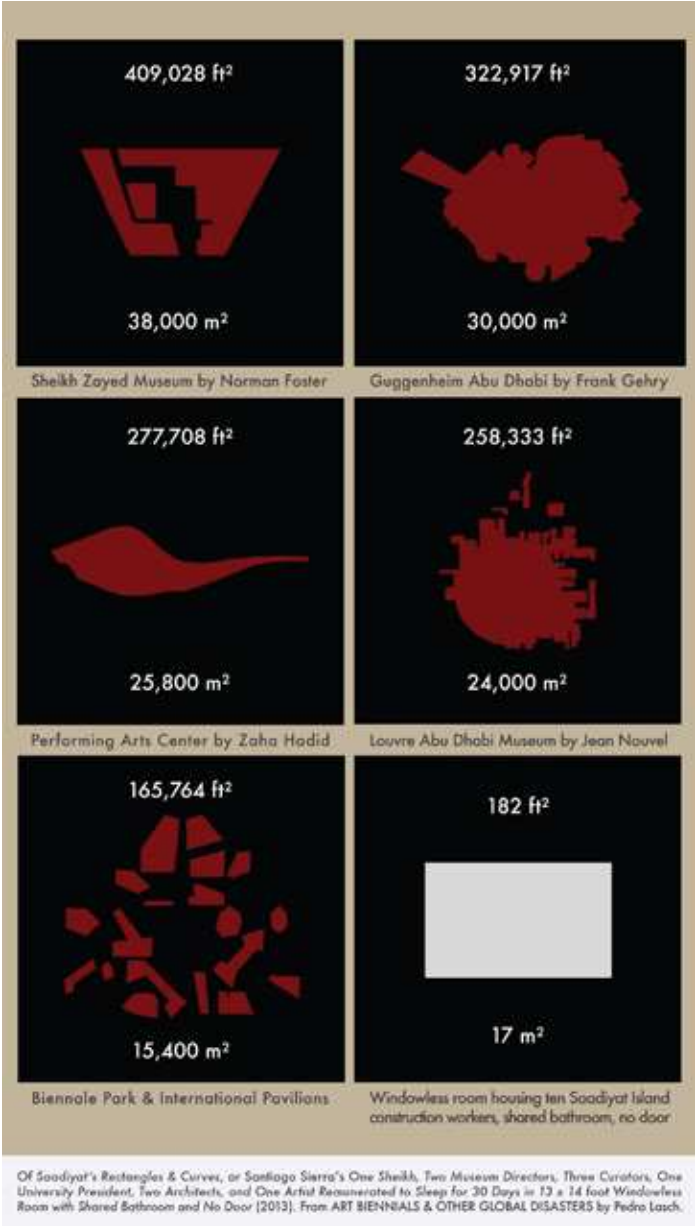


While some of the *52 Weeks* artists perform or call for direct actions, others take a more laconic, analytical, or abstracted approach to highlighting the ironies and contradictions of the grand project of Saadiyat Island (literally translated, the “Island of Happiness”). One week might propose new architectural standards (see whobuilds.org for details), while the next might launch an activist Twitterbot, and the next might present an entry from an encyclopedia or lexicon. The tone can be playful or elegiac, reflective or sardonic.



John Jurayj for Week 32, *30 Untitled Men*, poster with portraits of the thirty British Museum trustees printed on vellum with burn holes, 2014.

Assessing the campaign from the two-thirds mark, it seems to me that *52 Weeks* and its many brilliant contributors have begun to re-imagine what a group like Gulf Labor can be and do—how an activist project based in a boycott might serve beyond that boycott, without abandoning it. *52 Weeks* is a reminder that a boycott can and should be the beginning of a larger conversation, rather than a means to shut down all dialogue around an issue.



Pedro Lasch for Week 14, *Of Saadiyat's Rectangles & Curves, or Santiago Sierra's One Sheikh, Two Museum Directors, Three Curators, One University President, Two Architects, and One Artist Remunerated to Sleep for 30 Days in a 13 x 14 foot Windowless Room with Shared Bathroom and No Door*, poster, 2013.

2

Ø—AA

dozens were admitted to hospitals. “Every day we receive between 30 to 50 workers suffering heat exhaustion and stroke,” one hospital official reported.

Up to 60 percent of companies openly ignore the Mid-Day Break rule, which does not hinge on a specific temperature being reached, but rather a duration of heat higher than 38°C typical during summer months. The UAE has a history of not fining companies for violating the Mid-Day Break law. The ILO’s 50°C standard is simply the upper limit by which the UAE government attempts to enforce the law. After three consecutive days of 50°C, night construction shifts are mandatory. In recent summers and despite global warming, the temperature has, according to local weather reports, hovered in the high-40s for weeks on end.

Heat stroke occurs when the body is unable to regulate its temperature. The body’s temperature rises rapidly, the sweating mechanism fails, and the body is no longer able to cool down. Body temperature may rise to 41°C or higher within 10 to 15 minutes. Heat stroke can cause death or permanent disability if emergency treatment is not provided. As a point of comparison, chocolate typically melts at 32°C, candle wax melts starting at 55°C, and the body’s tissues are damaged when body temperature reaches 43°C.

Due to intense criticism and negative reports from international monitoring groups like Human Rights Watch, a few companies have hired safety managers who monitor workers’ well being while keeping the project on track. Now, a pair of Australian scientists is helping those managers become more objective in their worker safety monitoring. The researchers have launched a study to observe and document the effects of thermal stress. Using an assessment tool called the Thermal Work Limit (TWL), they have determined that most healthy people can labor under very hot conditions if they stay well hydrated and modify their pace of work according to their level of fatigue. The study, admittedly small, suggests that men of varying fitness levels and ages work harder when they arrive at the site, and remain, well-hydrated throughout the day. Despite differences in strength and endurance, well-hydrated workers maintained similar and consistent heart rates while exerting themselves in hot conditions and did not experience a rise in core body temperature. Workers most at risk were those who did not drink or had limited access to water. Workers who had inadequate sleep the night or nights before were also at risk for heat-related illness.

Next summer’s heat related challenges may intensify. Construction workers laid off during Dubai’s economic downturn in 2008 are increasingly desperate. Despite being homeless with little access to proper food and water, most are working odd jobs outdoors during the day and trying to get back on a construction site. They are stranded in the Emirates with no money to pay their way home, and still separated from the passports that brought them in to the country. Contractors, whose increasing knowledge about how to keep workers healthy and productive in hot weather by providing water on the job site, must avoid exploiting a labor force that has little left to lose.

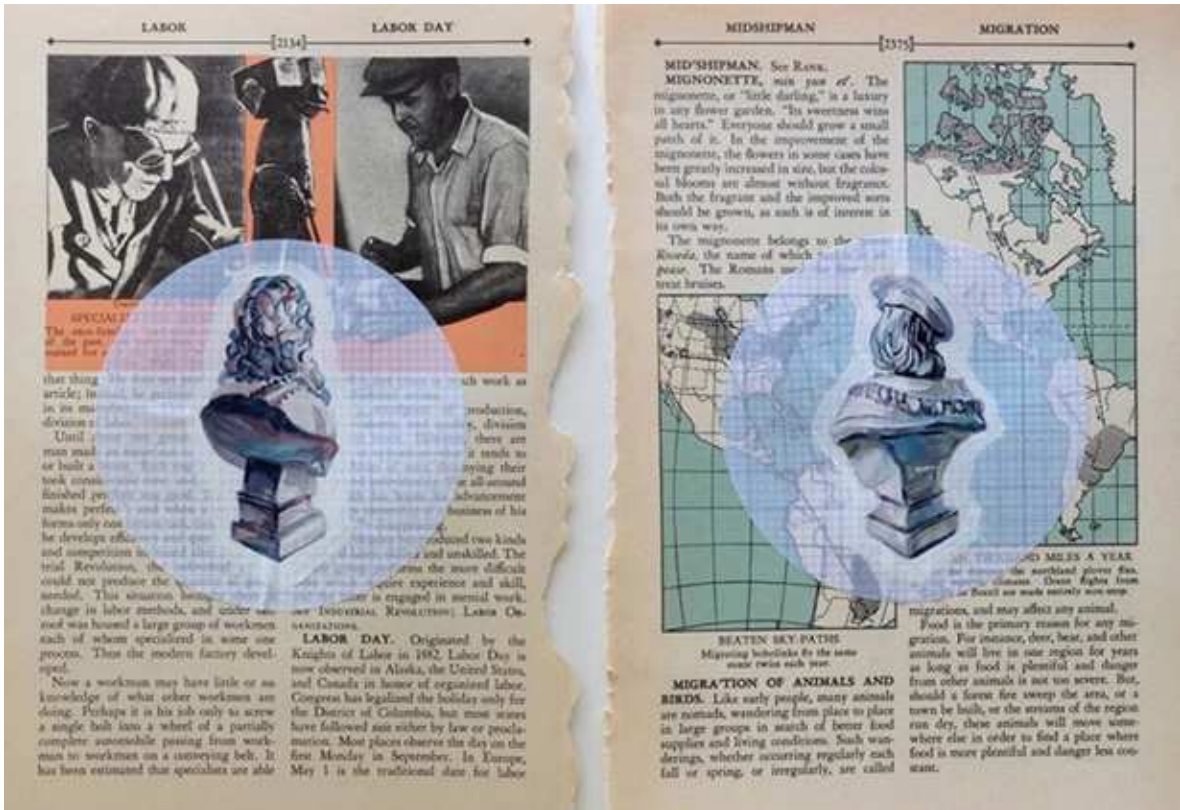
50°C Dangerously hot, especially when coupled with humidity of 80 percent or more, as is often the case in the UAE from May to September. This temperature is the equivalent of 122°F and the basis of the International Labor Organization’s (ILO) standard that outdoor work halt and alternative shifts be offered. The UAE is a member of the ILO and as such, agrees to its labor standards. In addition to adhering to the ILO’s guidelines, the UAE adopted its own “Mid-Day Break” rule for workers in contracting and construction in 2005. The rule, applicable in summer months, means that between the hours of 12:30 and 3 p.m., outdoor work is prohibited in order to protect against heat exhaustion.

The labor force for construction in the UAE is vast, due to the pace of development. It is a workforce largely comprised of foreign-born laborers—from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan—who are paid low wages, offered no benefits, and live in crowded, camp-like conditions. They often have long commutes to their workplace and limited access to food. Employers hold their passports, which is illegal, but discourages workers from filing grievances.

Before the Mid-Day Break rule was established, as many as 5000 construction workers per month were brought to the accident and emergency department of Rashid Hospital in Dubai during July and August. During summer power outages in Sharjah in 2010, a 27-year-old Indian laborer died of heatstroke shortly after being brought to an emergency ward. Heatstroke cases quadrupled and

Lynn Love and Ann Sappenfield for Week 11, *50° Celsius*, page layout from 2010 Supplement to the New Emirati Britannica, Third Edition.

Anna Stump
for Week 19,
Migrant Labor
Did Not Exist in
the Wonderland
of Knowledge
Encyclopedia,
1938, gouache
and collage on
paper, 2013



Over the past year, the conversation around cultural boycotts in the art and academic worlds appears to be once again approaching some kind of critical mass. Renewed press around Gulf Labor's boycott followed both the *52 Weeks* launch in the fall and the front-page New York Times revelations around the NYU Abu Dhabi campus in the spring. The carefully-negotiated artist withdrawals from the Biennale of Sydney in protest of main sponsor Transfield's involvement with widely criticized migrant detention camps resulted in the withdrawal of Transfield's chairman from the board of the Biennale and the return of the boycotting artists to the show. The current edition of MANIFESTA¹ itself has been the target of a call to boycott, because of its location in Saint Petersburg and the manifold challenges to free expression (for dissidents and non-Russians, also freedom of movement) in the current political and cultural climate of Russia, including the so-called "homosexual propaganda" laws. The public program of MANIFESTA includes self-reflexive discussions on the "socio-political context of biennials" and the distinctions between "making art politically" and "making political art," as well as "engagement and disengagement," to echo the recent mini-conference

What Now?: Collaboration & Collectivity in New York
co-presented by Art in General and the Vera List
Center.

The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israeli companies and institutions complicit in the violation of Palestinian rights received a fresh jolt of controversy when the American Studies Association voted to endorse BDS, and American politicians seized the opportunity to denounce professors who dare to take “left”-wing political stands. More recently, the Creative Time exhibition *Living as Form*, which is a survey of socially engaged art practices, was toured by Independent Curators International through their “Exhibition in a Box” program, and traveled to two venues in Israel—including the Technion, a university deeply embedded in the Israeli military-industrial-settlement complex—before notifying the participating artists, some of whom are BDS signatories. Creative Time and ICI have both stated that they do not participate in any cultural boycotts, because they believe it is more important to engage than to disengage. There are some contexts, however, where the line between presenting engaged work in order to shift the limits and possibilities of the discourse, and allowing that work to be used to paper-over real problems, becomes so fine that it can sometimes vanish entirely.

The question raised by Creative Time is, nonetheless, at the heart of every boycott dilemma. Can a given situation be changed more by engaging, or by disengaging? The answer may be different for every person, for every government, for every institution, for every situation. For some people, “boycott” will always be a dirty word—whether because of a reflexively anti-labor stance, or because of harsh experience on the wrong end of economic sanctions. For others—perhaps people like me, who grew up in boycotting households, always avoiding something or other (whether it was Chilean grapes, “Israeli” hummus, or clothes made with prison labor)—the boycott is just another bit in the activist toolkit, or really, just an ordinary fact of life: part of the endless, everyday struggle to live our ethics.



Rawi Hage for Week 25, *Carnival*, 2014 poster with excerpt from the 2012 novel of the same name, in six different languages.



Todd Ayoun and Jelena Stojanovic
for Week 28, *A Paradox on Citizenry and Creativity*, poster, 2014.



Pablo Helguera for Week 36, *At the very least...* from the series *Artoons*, 2010.



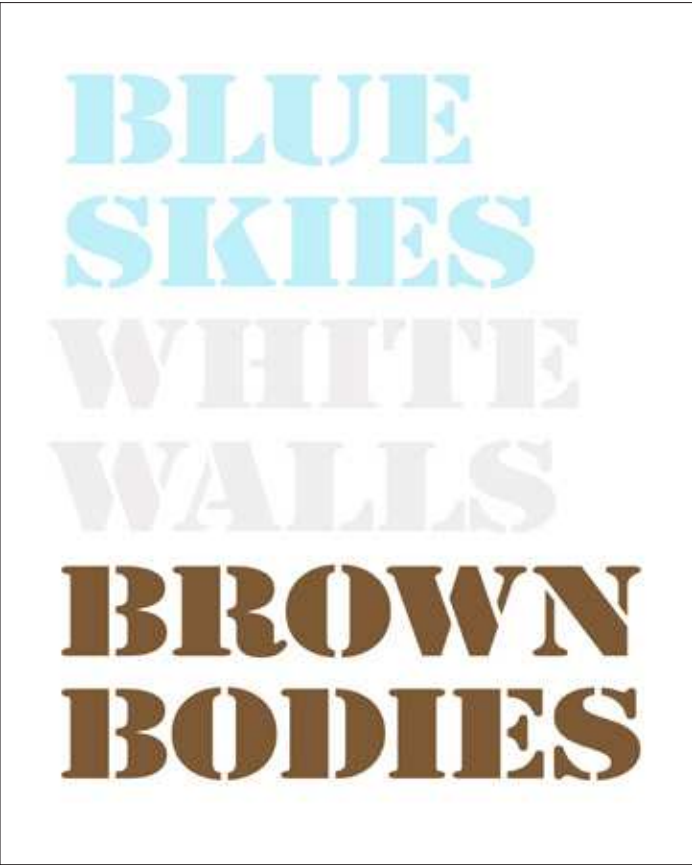
Thomas Hirschhorn for Week 2, *Banners*, photocopies and tape, 2009. Published in conjunction with the text *My Guggenheim Dilemma* (full text at <http://gulflabor.org/2013/week-2-thomas-hirschhorn-my-guggenheim-dilemma>, last accessed 22 August 2014).

In the text published by Thomas Hirschhorn for the second week of *52 Weeks*, “My Guggenheim Dilemma,” the artist asserts that the real dilemma of a cultural boycott lies in the contradiction between the “politics of ‘good intentions’, ‘the good conscience’, ‘the engagement of the artist’... and my belief and conviction that Art, as Art, has to keep completely out of any daily political cause in order to maintain its power, its artistic power, its real political power.” If the real political power of art lies in maintaining a space that, in Hirschhorn’s formulation, can resist the simplifications of political idealism and realism, then why use art to enact real-world politics? Perhaps precisely because when culture is deployed for political purposes—as it often is by autocratic regimes that cloak their autocracy with performances of freedom—the weave between aesthetics and politics becomes so complex that the space of art is required to unpick it.

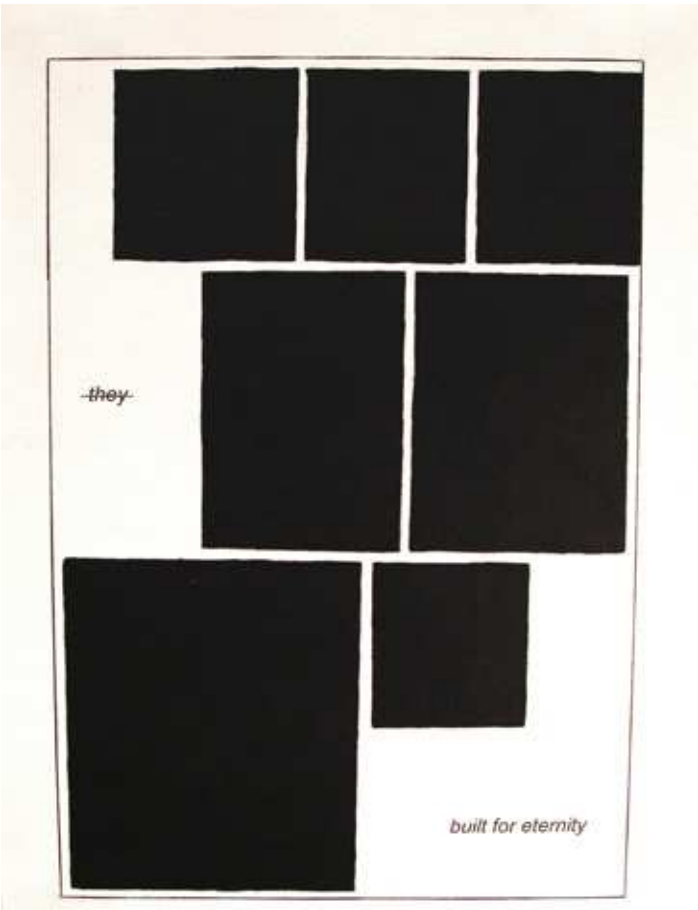
Hirschhorn’s text also brings up another critical point. In the last line, he says “My signature for the boycott of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will make sense if I have to pay a price for it.” As the text was originally a letter sent from Hirschhorn to Nancy Spector and Richard Armstrong about a proposed exhibition at the Guggenheim Bilbao, the discussion of paying a price is quite apt. Yet the notion of paying a real, personal price for participation in a cultural boycott is not widely discussed these days. It seems more fashionable to describe joining what Hirschhorn himself calls a “fancy artists’s boycott” as either an essentially meaningless gesture of solidarity—just another e-signature on another petition—or, for the organizers, as some sort of esoteric career move. But if the boycott is to succeed, the price must be real—lost income, frayed relationships, a certain reputation for troublemaking—and signing must mean that one is actually willing to pay that price. Fewer signatories who have seriously weighed what it means to sign are more valuable than more signatories who sign without weighing the consequences.

Ultimately, a boycott should be a tactic of last, not first, resort. Public boycotts should be called only when private negotiation proves either impossible or fruitless. Furthermore, a boycott should be applied only when a boycott is likely to produce results. That is to say, a cultural boycott will work only if the creative work being withheld has significant and immediate value to the institution or government

being boycotted. If that government or institution does not in fact need cultural products for a specific purpose in this specific moment, cultural workers have no leverage with that government or institution, and a boycott will not work. Likewise, if the boycott does not include a significant portion of the most visible cultural workers necessary to the immediate purpose or project of the government or institution, the boycott will not work. A public boycott should not be called until enough organization has been done to ensure a minimum of consensus around the goal and necessity of the boycott in the community most important to its success. If the demand behind a boycott is vague or diffuse, the boycott will not work. In a long-term boycott, however, it is possible that the goal of the boycott may develop over time as the situation and relationships change, from one central demand into a series of more specific or interrelated demands. In the case of Gulf Labor, our specific demands with regards to Saadiyat have not changed—we are still seeking uniform and enforceable protections for the human rights of all workers on the island—but over time we have developed a second, less specific goal: bringing the conversation around labor, migration and cultural capital from the margins to the center of cultural discourse.



Jaret Vadera for Week 30, *Blue Skies, White Walls, Brown Bodies*, poster, 2014



Maryam Monalisa Gharavi for Week 21, *they built for eternity*, acrylic and inkjet, 2014



Hend al Mansour for Week 23, *Fist of the Day*, silkscreen print, 2014.

Nancy Adajania
and Rasha Salti

Translation, Treason, Transfiguration: The Biennial as an Agent of Political Consciousness

I am writing these notes from a moment that may be the beginning, or the middle, or nearly the end of a long boycott. Until the boycott ends, we will not know how to narrate exactly how it progressed from one stage to the next. We will not know if we succeeded, or failed, or reached some agreement where everyone involved felt they won a little and lost a little. The most recent development, the involvement of the ILO at the government level, gives some hope that the boycott may be resolved in a way that satisfies all sides. Yet at this stage we still do not know which moves will lead where; we can only hope that experience and principle will serve as good guides.

Our experience so far, however, suggests that the boycott dilemma of engagement versus disengagement is something of a false dichotomy. By which I mean that describing participation in a cultural boycott as disengagement, and refusal to participate in a boycott as engagement, can be a drastic oversimplification. Not only because a long-term boycott such as Gulf Labor’s actually involves as much negotiation with as withdrawal from the boycotted institution, but also because a cultural boycott, while enacting physical or economic withdrawal from a particular space, simultaneously opens a parallel space for critical engagement with the issues motivating the boycott, and dialogue with all the players involved. One might even call it engagement by disengagement.

No matter how the boycott itself ends, Gulf Labor will have opened the space for a new conversation about labor, migration, and privilege in the art world. In large part, this is due to *52 Weeks*: to the shift in tactics it represented, the collective energy it generated, and especially to the slants, tangents and connections opened by various contributors.

The extract that follows is taken from a conversation that took place between Rasha Salti—scholar of Arab cinema and co-curator of the tenth Sharjah Biennale—and me, in May 2012. Rasha had curated the Sharjah Biennale the year before, and I was in the process of curating the ninth Gwangju Biennale as one of its artistic directors. We were comparing notes from our different locales of experience.

Rasha had recently faced the censorship of Mustapha Benfodil’s work at the tenth Sharjah Biennale, in reprisal for critiquing the forces of Islamic fundamentalism and its patriarchal structures of systemic violence. This incident highlighted the problem of biennials functioning in authoritarian or conservative contexts, where spectacular cultural soft-power initiatives can draw attention away from the proscription of public debate.

My dilemma as a curator was of a different kind. Since the birth moment of the Gwangju Biennale was inscribed in a people’s uprising against an authoritarian regime, the tendency has been to fetishize this revolutionary moment as a once-and-for-all achievement of an imagined popular will-to-democracy. How then does one bear witness to turbulences of the present political moment that do not correspond with this foundational myth, and

indeed, demonstrate that the “will-to-democracy” is always a work in progress? As one of my responses to this challenge, I folded a retrospective of the photographer-activist Noh Sungtag into the ninth Gwangju Biennale. It included a melancholy photograph from Noh’s State of Emergency series (#5, 2006) that worked, for me, as a germinal moment of biennial self-critique. It showed a row of police helmets lying on the ground outside the Gwangju Biennale hall. They belonged to policemen protecting the US ambassador during a visit to an earlier edition of the Biennale.

By refusing to resort to self-censorship—an occupational hazard undoubtedly faced by biennial curators—at a time when the insurrections in Tunisia and Egypt (the early phase of the Arab Spring) had only just taken place, Rasha courageously “spoke truth to power” and confronted the consequences of moral policing in a situation where the absence of a vibrant public sphere renders hollow the “publicness” of a biennial. The rows of police helmets are never far from the republic of the biennial. We would ignore them at our peril.

Nancy Adajania



Mustapha Benfodil, *Maportaliche / It Has No Importance*, 2011. Photo courtesy of Gregory Sholette.

Nancy Adajania [N.A.]: When you co-curated the tenth Sharjah Biennale with Suzanne Cotter and Haig Aivazian, what were some of the most urgent questions crowding the horizon of your curatorium? What were the various methodologies that you and your colleagues deployed to find exhibitionary and discursive manifestations for these urgencies?

Rasha Salti [R.S.]: We were three curators, living in the four corners of the world, expecting to curate the biennial while keeping up with our other professional commitments. We knew offhand that we could neither do our research together, nor labor to produce a single, finished text / position and discuss every single work. Instead, we came up with a much more realistic and reasonable scheme that accommodated for our singularities, respective experiences, penchants, and concerns. Rather than producing a taut, neat and organizing principle, we instead identified a constellation of keywords, or motifs that sketched a framework. Moreover, the physical space of exhibition included several buildings around the area in Sharjah known as the arts and heritage area. In other words, the visitor / spectator was invited to meander along a path, a journey, or a narrative. The constellation of keywords / motifs seemed even more appropriate as a guiding—rather than organizing—principle.

On my end, the principal urgent question that animated my contribution to the “curatorium” (fantastic word!) was the notion of traitor / treason. One of the most dramatic features of our hyper-capitalist era is the near bankruptcy of the political imaginary. The void it has left behind has been “occupied” by morality, hence the growing currency of politicized religiosity. Even the Left, in all its variegations, indulges in the language of morality. Treason is one of the most potent and salient tenets of a morally charged principle of organization; while dissent, in contrast, is secular. When I looked up the semantic range of “traitor”, its synonyms were said to range from “turncoat” to “insurgent”. In other words, traitor does not contain a moral judgement in itself; rather,



Detail of Noh Suntag’s retrospective, developed as part of 9GB. *State of Emergency # 5*, 2006. Police officers protecting the US ambassador during a visit to the Gwangju Biennale disarm themselves in front of the exhibition hall. Photo courtesy of Orlando Thompson.

it is a mirror of the political stakes and a measure of the so called traitor’s position vis-à-vis authority (or power). In today’s political landscape, and in the closure or bankruptcy of the political, treason seemed like a fertile terrain for subversion.

N.A.: What are the risks of interpretation and communication involved, when developing a biennial-level project in the Arab world? How do you retain an awareness of the “right to take offence” that may be exercised by political interests or bodies of religious opinion, while also attempting to address some of the urgencies of the region, which are by and large not articulated in the Arab public sphere?

R.S.: I have now come to say “the much-regretted tenth edition of the Sharjah Biennial” because I am so sorry at the outcome. Obviously, no one ever intended to offend—neither the artist, nor the curators, nor the director of the foundation under whose patronage the biennial functioned. The work by Algerian artist and writer Mustapha Benfodil, which instigated an incendiary campaign, was grossly misinterpreted. Perhaps it was a mistake to display it in an open space in the vicinity of a mosque. At least, I have committed to admit that was my mistake. However, the supposedly “blasphemous” statement was an excerpt from a testimony that had been recorded, by the artist, of a woman who had been raped by radical Islamists and was throwing their own words back at them. In other words, the work critically addressed the moral high ground of radical Islamist discourse and the complacency of Arab regimes with it. Lost in the fray of the “scandal” and accusations of blasphemy was that the indignation of the so-called Sharjah “public sphere” was actually against the words of the Salafist rapist. The artist merely made them “visible”, and the curator made them visible “next to a mosque”. Issuing clarifications was utterly ineffectual. It was almost pointless to publish clarifications. Rare were the journalists who were interested in engaging with the artist. The summary dismissal of Jack

Persekian, director of the Sharjah Art Foundation then, was excessively cruel, intentionally humiliating and intransigent. It was so “spectacular” that it overshadowed all possible discussion of misunderstandings, the maligning of intention, or meaning.

In all honesty, I was shocked, dumbfounded even, and at a loss as to what I ought to do. There was a week, six or seven days, separating the news of Jack’s dismissal from the public issuance of a petition expressing outrage at his dismissal and making all sorts of appeals to protect his rights, to absolve his reputation and to propose a boycott of the Sharjah Art Foundation. Two days later, Jack published a disavowal of the petition. Case closed. Case closed? When I say that I was shocked, I mean that I was emotionally distraught. When I say that I was dumbfounded, I mean that I realized, every hour and every day that went by, that people around me knew a lot more about the situation than I did, or that was communicated to me. When I say that I was at a loss, I mean that I could not tell rumor from fact, speculation from information. When Jack published his disavowal, it was clear that the Sharjah Art Foundation’s lawyers had deployed their power to close the case. In fact, most people—artists, intellectuals, and critics wanted the case closed. They wanted to move on. Some close friends (artists and fellow curators) advised me to travel to Sharjah, to ask Sheikha Hoor al-Qasemi, the ruler’s daughter and effective head of the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) for a meeting, to apologize, and to bring the scandal to a more “decent” closure. Others suggested I propose to face the angry mob in an open discussion.

Of all the institutions in the UAE and the Gulf, the SAF had earned a great deal of sympathy from protagonists in the region. On the one hand, they were not as bombastic, arrogant and loud as other institutions endowed with means; and on the other hand their institution- and capacity-building intentions seemed more genuine. They carried the frugal promise of resourceful partnerships, along with “comfortable” means of production; a rare occurrence in the Arab world. They also operated at a safe distance from the market. Many practitioners were upset with me for spoiling the potentiality of collaborating with the SAF. The “incident” was not uncommon, neither in the history of exhibitions and biennials worldwide, nor in the UAE. Some deemed it was bound to happen. We (the curators and the SAF team) were pushing boundaries, and in the year of the Arab insurgencies, something had to give. The authorities in the UAE were extremely wary after the eruption of the insurgency in Bahrain and the participation of their army in crushing that insurgency. I was very skeptical of what a public discussion, facing the “angry” mob, could have produced, but more importantly, I was not sure the SAF wanted to set up something like that in the first place.



Detail of Noh Suntag’s retrospective at 9GB. From the *Forgetting Machine* series, 2006–2007. (Decaying photographs of the insurgents of the Gwangju Uprising, 1980, at the Gwangju Cemetery. The uprising heralded the democracy movement in South Korea; the insurgents were brutally massacred.) Photo courtesy of Orlando Thompson.

So when you ask about a public sphere... There isn’t one per se in the Arab world. Arguably, the Arabic-speaking twenty-four-hour news broadcast media carry that pretense, but their political agendas are so obtuse and obvious, that there is nothing public, let alone “spheric”, about them. There are however, public spheres in the Arab world—plural, diverse, and multiple—on university campuses, in alternative art spaces, and in the blogosphere... None were genuinely interested in parsing the scandal, or proposing a platform for discussion. That said, and to be very fair: in the shadow of the Arab insurgencies, it was neither an interesting nor an urgent matter. I myself was reluctant, even embarrassed, to broach the subject when my beloved family and friends in Syria were in danger, fighting for their lives... when insurgents in Yemen were proving every day, against all expectations and odds, that they were smarter, and more creative than anyone had imagined in their wildest dreams.

I want to conclude my answer with this observation. The UAE is a country organized according to absolute power. It is a federation of “emirates”, where each is ruled by a man, by convention amongst ruling tribes. There are no bodies to circumvent the authority of each rule, no systems of accountability, and certainly, no transparency. There is court intrigue, there are rumors, with hearsay, projection, and speculation on the whims, the favor and the disfavor of a given ruler. There is no possibility of a public sphere. There is a portent, or a semblance, of open space, platforms, but all is contingent on the whims of absolute authority. Somehow, we had been “distracted” from that reality: the biennial and the art scene (art fair and art market included) created and entertained the illusion that there was a public sphere. In that respect, the biennial “crashed” against that illusion.

N.A.: Elsewhere, you have spoken about the effigies of nationalism, of how some Arab states have manipulated history and distorted the possibilities of the present by generating partial, even mythological narratives of the early postcolonial past (the cult of Nasser in Egypt, for example). Do you find that a new sense of citizenship, in the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring, would involve a self-critical look at these

effigies or unquestionable foundational myths? Will this proceed, in your view, from a more liberal perspective? Or will it instead be a case of new dogmas (the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafists) simply replacing the old ones?

R.S.: The most remarkable thing about the so-called “Arab Spring”—which has stretched to other seasons at this point, for some—is how it has demonstrated that we are utterly unequipped to make head or tail of it. I have watched—with self-confessed sadistic pleasure—journalists, analysts and even scholars fumble, stumble and be proven wrong, terribly wrong; time after time, incident after incident. The elections in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco have brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power, but once you visit these countries, in other words, once you are there, reading newspapers, walking in the streets (public spaces), listening to people, you realize that the Muslim Brotherhood’s hold over power is being tested, not by imperialists or the G-8, but rather by the people, their electorate, and those who voted for other political representatives. Surely, the Muslim Brotherhood embodies the political aspirations of a significant portion of the population, but obviously not of the majority of the population. They are entrusted with governing these countries now, and will be held accountable. The elections and the manner in which governance is experienced, or regarded, is the real outcome of the first chapter of the insurgencies in Tunisia and Egypt, more so than the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood won the elections.

I say the first chapter of the insurgency, because people have protested as vehemently since the ouster of their despots as they did prior to it. These insurgencies are also pivotal moments.

They have forced elected governments to reckon with the limits of their power and authority. Essentially, the political has been brought back to the public sphere; to its foundational grounds, and it is being shaped by citizens. The Arab insurgencies have befuddled journalists



View of Noh Suntag’s retrospective at the Ninth Gwangju Biennale, 2012. Photo courtesy of Nancy Adajania.



Imran Qureshi, *Blessings Upon the Land of My Love*, 2011. Photo courtesy of Gregory Sholette.



and analysts because of their unshackling from dogma. The Muslim Brotherhood has been trying to reconfigure and coerce its ideology to prevail and make it hegemonic. Its opponents are fighting back, and they fight back using various and very different strategies as well as battlegrounds. This is one of the outcomes of the insurgency that’s radically new.

The idiom of patriotism in the insurgencies has sometimes been misrepresented as being nationalistic. The “revisionism” of the nationalist “effigies” has not yet surfaced, but I am confident it will come. For instance, the question of “Arab Jews”, or Jewish populations in the Arab world has been taboo in public discourse for at least three decades. Typically, the political movements that have not been dismissive of our Jewish populations have been the ultra-Left, but over the years, the question of pluralism—ethnic, cultural and religious—has been at best eschewed, and at worst, maligned. During one of the many rallies in Tahrir, I happened to listen to a young man giving a speech on a stage. He invoked “the people” but then went on to insist that Egyptians were “Muslims, Christians and Jews”... He did not have to mention “Jews”; the discourse over religious tolerance has been almost exclusively about Muslims and Christians, yet the very fact that he felt compelled to do so implies that he wanted to go further back in time in “revising” the question of tolerance and the plurality of Egyptians. In Syria, the insurgents have mixed the use of Kurdish and Arabic in posters and

slogans to underscore the unity and plurality of the Syria they want to create. These are anecdotes, and they could be “moments”—not necessarily solid enough to be considered as evidence of how things have changed. I prefer to be optimistic, to acknowledge and to hold on to these moments so that they are not lost...

N.A.: Your work in film curation (whether curating film programmes, festivals or biennials) is very substantial and impressive. What kind of reception has your work received over the years? Could your work have been included in school or college curricula, or could it have provoked a lively debate in the public sphere?



Slavs and Tatars, *Friendship of Nations*, 2011. Photo courtesy of Gregory Sholette.



R.S.: You are generous and charitable. I am not sure “substantial” and “impressive” are totally deserved. I don’t think any of the programmes have had the sort of impact you point out, be it on college curricula, or in provoking lively debates in the public sphere. I was told by many in Syria that the book I edited on Syrian cinema was much appreciated

because it gave so much space to “primary sources”, that is, texts by filmmakers and interviews with them. The Syrian cinema retrospective, co-curated with Richard Peña at the Lincoln Center (entitled “The Road to Damascus”), received impressive attention from the media. It toured to interesting places across the world. Touring film programmes is very complicated, specifically because of the negotiations around rights. The MoMA film programme I referred to earlier, titled “Mapping Subjectivity: Experimentation in Arab Cinema from the 1960s until Now”, is unfortunately very difficult to tour, but I am hoping that institutions will want to go to the trouble.

N.A.: Since your affiliations are transregional, would you find yourself limited by some such definition as a “contemporary Arab subjectivity”, or do you find it enabling and open-ended as a cultural position?

R.S.: It can go both ways. There is definitely an element of “contemporary Arab subjectivity” that I experience every day and which makes for a cornerstone of my sense of being in the world. It is not all that I experience, nor is it all of my being in the world. An open-ended cultural position is something we, curators, create as much as it “comes to us”, or have to contend with.

Like most relationships, it is the work of both entities. I know I might sound naïve or overly optimistic, but I would like to defend the idea that these “ascriptions” are not entirely set in stone by the one entity—one which has more power and resources than I do.. Again, the Arab insurgencies are radically re-defining what Arab contemporary subjectivity means. This is an intense moment of radical reconfigurations and re-articulations. Most thrilling.

N.A.: Rasha, thank you so much for sharing your insights and experience with such generosity.

[This text is excerpted from a conversation between the curators Rasha Salti and Nancy Adajania, “Translation, Treason, Transfiguration: The Biennale as an Agent of Political Consciousness” published in *Take on Art*, Issue 08: *Biennale*, June 13, 2012 (guest edited by Ranjit Hoskote).]

Our Language Is Either Dated or Inaccurate: Conversation with Ntone Edjabe

CONVERSATION

Matteo Lucchetti

We begin this conversation by discussing stereotypical ways of defining freedom of speech and expression within the long-term cultural boycott that was in place during the South African apartheid. Ntone Edjabe, my interlocutor, is a journalist and writer and since 2002 he has been producing Chimurenga Magazine, a publication of arts, culture and politics from and about Africa and its diasporas. It is put together in the Pan African Market in Cape Town, South Africa, a vibrant place he co-founded back in 1997 when he moved to the country from Douala, Cameroon, via Lagos, Nigeria. He warns me about how he has always been reluctant about taking on the role of social commentator from South Africa and my questions try to move from the bigger picture of the boycott to specific cases, trying to capture a few glimpses of what it means to be an independent cultural producer today, in the wake of the twentieth anniversary of the end of apartheid.

We mention Paul Simon's 1986 "Graceland," a controversial music album that reveals tension because the position of the artist did not respect the polarization within the public sphere. The American singer at the time of the cultural boycott decided to work with South African musicians, paying homage to Juluka—the first integrated band in which Johnny Clegg and Sipho Mchunu experimented with a

genre that mixed Zulu folk sounds and Western pop music. Later, he refused to tour and perform in front of segregated audiences, therefore performing an atypical behavior within the conflict and respecting only halfway the anti-apartheid strategies. Retrospectively, having broken the rules in his own way, Simon involuntarily made clear a mute and non-productive antagonism. Ntone doesn't hesitate to compare it to the current use of censorship from the government in the cultural field: "The people who are calling for censorship today are the ones who were calling for boycott yesterday." The African National Congress (ANC), the party in power today and at the forefront of the resistance yesterday, is in fact exercising certain forms of censorship over particularly critical artists, thinkers and writers, thereby setting a tone that cries of new forms of discrimination in the eyes of many cultural producers. The most recent and best-known cases in this regard are to be found in the reactions to cartoonist Zapiro's and artist Brett Murray's depictions of the president, Jacob Zuma,¹ as a figure who mirrors the corruption and scandals revolving around him and the major party of the country that he is leading.

1 <http://www.manifestajournal.org/online-residencies/matteo-lucchetti/when-speech-matters>, last accessed 22 August 2014.



Donna Kukama, *Not Yet (And Nobody Knows Why Not)*, Uhuru Gardens, Nairobi, 2008. Photo courtesy of Justus Kyalo.

"Speaking from here, in the present, the line between boycott and censorship is very thin. My mind is floating back to a more sophisticated form of boycott, not one regulated by UN economic sanctions, but one that relates more to morality, in terms of what is morally good. I think that in this country there is this kind of nationalist call, in terms of occupying or at least controlling public language. That shouldn't be surprising in any way, considering the ANC has been in power for twenty years, and intends to stay there. The response to this call from what could be considered the liberal front in South African cultural production is a sense of paranoia—and maybe I'm exaggerating here—which constantly compares the ANC to any typical African nationalist party by making repeated references to Mugabe and Zimbabwe." The similarities in tone that Ntone is referring to are to be found in new reform policies that were approved in the parliament in 2012 on what can be considered "speakable" in the public domain, through the new protection of state information law.² The paranoia he mentions is also retraceable in what Critical Whiteness Studies scholar Melissa Steyn has defined as "White Talk", explained by Sharlene Khan as a "a persistent claim by White artists that they are not only being silenced, but victimized."³

2 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/06/south-african-press-law-harmful>, last accessed 22 August 2014.



A Catalogue Without Pages (Volume 1 and Volume 2), MAC Lyon & Sucriere, Lyon, 2013. Photo courtesy of Stephane Rambaud, for the Eleventh Lyon Biennale.

"How does one respond to this?" Ntone asks himself. "The response generally has been that we are going back into apartheid, just as if apartheid has become the sole reference for any form of politics that happens in this country. South Africa is the only reference for South Africa, and in my publishing activity I have tried to respond to that by opening up a discourse through pan-African lenses. Where I come from, in Cameroon, censorship laws are certainly a lot more stringent than in South Africa. However, artists, as well as writers and journalists, have been able to create parallel systems; they've been able to create other codes. Don't get me wrong, most Cameroonian artists and journalists would rather work in an environment where they are constitutionally enabled to speak freely, and they fight for this every day. What I'm trying to refer to now is a kind of political imagination, which I find lacking. South African cultural producers seem to be caught in a discourse of oppressed and oppressor, yet the

3 <http://www.manifestajournal.org/issues/futures-cohabitation/speaking-truth-power-censorship-and-critical-creativity-south-africa> where she further explains that "Characteristics of this 'White Talk' include a pessimistic view on Black / African governance, the stacking up of negative tropes of the living conditions of Africa, the idea that Whites are disproportionately affected as a community by criminality, corruption and black economic empowerment policies, as well as the belief that when they criticize such issues they are standing up for more universal conditions which all liberal minds would agree with." Last accessed 22 August 2014.



Donna Kukama, *Mass Action Strike*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, JHB 2009. Photo courtesy of Ivan Eftimovski.

only thing they are grading is the level of oppression; the level to which people have been oppressed or are currently being oppressed. In Cameroon, Paul Biya—whose regime has been in place for the past thirty years—only allows for laughter; they allow this space to exist as a kind of buffer or release zone; a way to control of the energies of the people. At the same time, journalists have exploited that space as a space for freedom. Caricatures and comics became the form through which to put in the public domain different ideas and stories that we actually have no language for; for the unspeakable. Let's not forget that journalism, in the main, across Africa is still a colonial tool: we are still emulating imported modes of reporting life, as well as reproducing pseudo-universalist notions of rights and wrongs or beauty and ugly—for instance most liberal English South African newspaper aim to speak like The Guardian, or some other high-circulation newspaper in the West. The boundaries of what is accurate or even legitimate are determined by what Radio France International or Le Monde report from Douala or Dakar. The storytellers who escape that territory create new spaces, something that isn't quite recognizable as journalism, and therefore can circulate relatively free under the radar—this is the case of comics and political cartoons across West Africa. The experiment of the Chronic, the newspaper what we produce at Chimurenga, is to speak rigorously and imaginatively from this space below (and above) radars about contemporary life in Africa. Our aim is to produce language. One crucial phrase I learnt here and which



Donna Kukama, *1000 Ways of Being (Museum Walkabout)*, South African National Gallery, Cape Town, 2010. Photo courtesy of Dorothee Kreutzfeldt.

you'll find in the street lexicon across this continent, is what people often tell you when you ask for directions in the street: 'Angazi, but am sure...' Angazi is Zulu for 'I don't know'. So literally: 'I don't know but am sure that if you turn left, then right, you will get there.' This seeming contradiction, "I don't know but am sure", is the space I am interested in. My sense is that much of the knowledge we produce from and about our societies is articulated in those intuitive terms; a full, decisive embrace of uncertainty. Now, we also know that newspapers do not generally speak from a place of decisive uncertainty. That's our project."

"Long before the censorship laws of the ANC I was already quite critical of how newspapers report life in South Africa. I worked for newspapers for many years and I had always found that it was very difficult to speak from there, not because the State had laws in place—this was in the late 1990s—but because newspapers were very clear themselves about what is speakable and what isn't. I'm discussing this because I'm interested in how spaces of freedom are negotiated. On one hand, you have this paranoia by many artists and journalists that are saying that South Africa is actually becoming a Banana Republic (this country is the kingdom of euphemisms!), with more and more State-controlled voices, and on the other hand, you have the possibility that cultural producers have not really exploited, re-interrogated what is public language here, what the stories are that newspapers could be reporting and how they could



Donna Kukama, *Treason II*, Sierre (Switzerland)-Polokwane (South Africa) and online, 2007. Photo courtesy of Cristian Valenzuela.

be reporting them. I constantly refer to newspapers and not necessarily to artistic practices because I'm very concerned about spaces that are not mediated by a language of expertise; and this is why we call ourselves a newspaper today with Chimurenga, in our attempt to perform a new sense of publicness."

"The problem of representation in democratic South Africa, and more generally in Africa, requires a work through language, to find ways to not reinforce the existing terminology, and therefore dwell on the existing antagonisms that are in place, and that are just as deceiving as they are hard to get out of."

"There is a big drive for black people to take ownership of publications and they have increasingly begun to do so, but again, in this neo-liberal paradigm, owners of the media will behave like the owners of the media. There might even be ideological differences but in practice this is just commerce. Of course because of the history of this country it makes a significant



Donna Kukama, *The Swing (After After Fragonard)*, Mai-Mai Market, Johannesburg, 2009. Photo courtesy of Matthew Burbidge.



Donna Kukama, *Let Go*, 2006, Isle de Breyhat, France.

symbolic difference to have a black owner instead of a white one, but I'm really more interested in the kind of disagreeable movements that are emerging and some of them fall within the field of political organisations such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a new party that recently gained seats in parliament, or activist movements that are more committed to remain ungovernable. What they have in common is the change they're operating in language: verbal, visual and otherwise. When EFF activists call for transformation they're not using the same terminology of the DA (Democratic Alliance, a white-peopled and led opposition party) or the ANC; they bring back questions that have been out of political discourse for some time, such as land redistribution and the nationalization of the mining complex."



A Catalogue Without Pages (Volume 1 and Volume 2), MAC Lyon and Sucriere, Lyon, 2013. Photo courtesy of Stephane Rambaud, for the Eleventh Lyon Biennale.

Ntone concludes that many African states are struggling to deal with the effects of the structural adjustments that occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and in this phase he feels the urgency that moves him to do what he is doing with Chimurenga. “The IMF template of electoral democracy, presented as catch-all solution, is now showing its limits,” he says, and finally, “the language we use to describe our lives is either completely dated or merely inaccurate.”



Donna Kukama, *The Red Suitcase*, Ghent, 2006. Photo courtesy of Oscar Martinez.



Donna Kukama, *The Red Suitcase*, A2 Poster, 2006. Photo courtesy of Jerome Lanone.

To Singapore, With Love: “If You Care Too Much About Singapore, First It Breaks Your Spirit, Then It Breaks Your Heart”

CONVERSATION

Alfian Sa’at, Tan Pin Pin
and Amanda Lee Koe

Amanda Lee Koe [A.L.K.]: *I wanted to begin with an anecdote I came across in n+1, about how the left-wing Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o felt he was “producing one of Empson’s versions of “pastoral”—proletarian literature for non-proletarians—and had stopped writing in English altogether. He composed subversive plays in Gikuyu and performed them in villages, deliberately forsaking “global literature” for pieces addressed to a specific community. His gamble that Gikuyu was more threatening to power than English proved correct: he was thrown in prison by the Moi dictatorship [...]; in 1982, he went into exile. In the university, Ngugi’s analysis of the uses of language by those in power had faded into a wan poststructuralism.”*

How do you feel about this idea of “proletarian literature for non-proletarians” in a local context, in relation to your practice?

Alfian Sa’at [A.S.]: Currently I have no illusions about the idea that Singaporean theatre is quite an elitist art form. It has been accused of playing for the gallery; for the converted. Certain things like ticket prices, people’s unease with the theatre auditorium as a space that is patronized only if you’re from a certain social class—these things prevent us from capturing the masses, so to speak.

So even though the nature of the work itself is not always very elite or highbrow, the political economy of theatre is that it is not a mass activity. That’s also why we’ve been allowed a certain (relative) freedom over the years, and why we don’t see things happening to theatre as we would have seen in the 1970s—for example in Chinese theatre, there was the big round up, with Kuo Pao Kun. This was when they would want to go and perform in factories. So yes, there was that idea of proletarian art for the proles.

As for English theatre, the worst crackdown was of course in 1987 with the Third Stage, and even then the fear was about these people performing outside traditional theatre venues. They had this play called *Esperanza*, which was about a domestic maid who was accused of stealing, and they performed a preview of it for domestic helpers at the Catholic Welfare Centre, which had a halfway house for Filipino maids. So there was this notion of performing to a non-traditional audience. Even though it was in English, it really did affect the largely Filipino audience, in ways it might not have affected the—perhaps more detached—Singaporean audience.

The question keeps coming back—are we preaching to the choir? Would our art be a lot more significant if we brought it into the street? That’s why until today there is still that unease with forum theatre—as you would know, forum theatre was proscribed for ten years.

A.L.K.: *What about the film form? Pin Pin?*

Tan Pin Pin [T.P.P.]: With my latest film—which is *probably* political, given that it deals with Singaporean political exiles—it was quite clear to my mind that it should be accessible. I wanted both my aunt and the man on the street to be able to take something away from it and not be distracted by the form the film took.

The film didn’t have the experiments in form that were present in say, *Invisible City*, with its hard edits in sound and image. For someone who likes to play with form, I felt a bit sad... Having to *not* take those flights of fancy. When we were constructing the film, we agreed to just let the people speak. For Singaporean political exiles whose voices had been absent for such a long time... that’s all there is. There’s no reason to layer their voices with anything else.

A.L.K.: *If we could be more specific—what do you think are the actual interstice(s) of politics and art, in the here and now in a Singaporean landscape?*

A.S.: I’ll speak from my main discipline, theatre. I think for a very long time, theatre was seen by theatre makers as the alternative public sphere or forum in a country where there is some kind of media control by the state—but it is also a very sophisticated form of control. They don’t use blunt instruments. Because of that, there has been the baggage of dissent; I think Paul Rae terms it as such—of doing works “scripted by dissent”. You try to use that space, thinking, “Okay, I have to use this in a deserving way, to address the things that are being left out in mainstream discourse.”

In the early years, the work would be a lot more metaphorical, such as with Kuo Pao Kun’s *The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole*, which is about bureaucracy in Singapore. Yet I think we are now approaching politics in theatre in more direct ways. All that said though, I’m also very wary of just using the space of dissent to have an alternative politics. That’s because I’m wondering if at the end of the day, that can trivialize the work of theatre. You don’t want to be seen as a bunch of dissident opportunists who are just using that particular space to vent or add layers to certain issues. They need to be addressed but not be the sole reason for making plays in Singapore.



Film stills from *To Singapore, With Love*, by Tan Pin Pin, 2013.

We've been having this discussion for a very, very long time: what comes first, is it the art, or the politics? Is too much politics agitprop? If there's too much art, does the formal dimension over-aestheticise issues? Now it seems as if the need to have theatre as a place for dissent has been reduced by the presence of the internet.

T.P.P.: Theatre's been freed!

A.S.: In a way, yes, by the Internet. Though I have to say, just the other day I was thinking about whether censorship has affected my work, and I'd like to think and say no, but at the same time you can never know for sure, right? That's because the thing about self-censorship is that it works on a subconscious level, and you're never able to diagnose yourself towards particular limits.

T.P.P.: Occasionally you can.

A.S.: Occasionally, yes—but the thing is, it might work on a subconscious level, but most of the time, you try to make it conscious. You know, I've always been having this cat and mouse game with the censors, and I've also always been told, "Your stage directions are so minimal; you give a lot of freedom to directors!" Honestly, I don't know whether this is one of those instances where the politics has really affected the aesthetics. It could be about giving freedom to myself as a playwright, so I have these margins to move within—a sort of "wiggle room".

If I hand in a script with minimal stage directions to the censors, then they can only zoom in on these particular lines, and words, and the like. Theatre is of course much more than text, though. The silences are important, as are the spaces in those silences. The gestures a character makes, or the juxtaposition of two bodies in space will create a meaning that is not reflected in the text itself.

A.L.K.: *How might it differ in film, Pin Pin?*

T.P.P.: After the screenings of *Singapore Gaga* or *Invisible City*, during the question and answer sessions, someone will invariably ask, "So is your film political?" It's so *sad* that the word "political" has been colonized in Singapore to only mean being critical of the system. We need to reclaim the word "political". It is good citizenry to be "political".

A.L.K.: *For me, what is strange is that there's more anxiety about To Singapore With Love because it is explicit in its politics. Your work is already an abstracted kind of politics. I wonder if it's a kind of condescension on the part of censors that you would be allowed to show everything else just because it isn't direct—they are more poetic in their politics, while there might be a problem with To Singapore With Love.*

You're now facing some anxiety about how the Board of Film Censors will deal with To Singapore With Love, but well, two things should be noted here: that The Act of Killing could be shown here in Singapore, and that you won Best Director for the Documentary section of the Dubai International Film Festival, and the UAE is not exactly the arbiter of freedom

of expression either. Do you think, perhaps, that it's a question of the localization of—

T.P.P.: —That's exactly why when Pussy Riot came to Singapore, it was very strange. The women in the band became famous for being jailed for being critical of Putin in their musical act. Although there were some parallels of that in Singapore, no connections were made between their experience and that of Singapore. They were packaged as a global art act, passing through our prestigious art fair.

We could say that *The Act of Killing* passed the censors possibly because it wasn't about Singapore. If it was, I am not sure it would have passed. The Indonesian government made a smart move of not banning it. It is shown and discussed widely there now

A.L.K.: *Indeed. Related to that is the statement made at the end of the 2010 position paper on censorship, put forth by members of the Singaporean arts community:*

At present, the decision to censor is taken far too lightly in Singapore. This is because it has become routinized to such an extent that individuals are shielded from the ethical implications and practical consequences of their actions. Some blame for this must be laid at the door of successive CRCs, whose pro-forma insistence that 'all societies censor' has stood in for any meaningful discussion of what is really at stake in an act of censorship: the arbitrary exercise [sic] of power.

As artists whose primary function is cultural expression, and whose first responsibility is to our audiences, we feel that the government can do more to separate out regulation from censorship, and to implement a regulatory system that is user-friendly, transparent and accountable.

Interfacing this with what just happened with the proposed self-classification scheme offered by the Media Development Authority (MDA) in relation to state censorship, do you think that the governmental position that it would "empower" was well-intentioned and more of a bureaucratic one-size-fits-all (mis)approach? Or was it something more—knowingly—insidious?

A.S.: I can't say. Indeed, these are the two theories. Was it that they genuinely believed that this was what liberalization looked like, but that maybe someone on the board said, "Oh, but we can't relinquish control, let's still maintain certain checks." There might be some sincerity, but old habits die hard, so there's still that itch to keep artists on a leash.

The other one though, the idea of insidiousness, is that yes, we have a façade of liberalization, and we'll do, in a sense, what we do with film distributors in Singapore. That is to say, I've seen interviews in which, previously, Amy Chua used to say that the name "Board of Film Censors" needs to be changed. Because—"Oh, uh, the MDA does not really censor, distributors are free to cut the films however they see fit, and send it to us for classification." Their position is one of "We're not getting our hands dirty, we're not the ones wielding the scissors," and "We don't do censorship... we only classify." I found that disingenuous...

T.P.P.: Really disingenuous...

A.S.: Perhaps they want to do this with theatre as well. Tell me, what's the equivalent of distributors in the theatre industry? There isn't really a specific group of people performing that function, so let's ask the theatre makers themselves—to cut their own stuff. It's great that forty-five arts groups have put up a paper and said no.

A.L.K.: *Right. Yet even if we go out on a limb to give them the best of the benefit of the doubt, and assume it was a genuine act rather than an insidious one, do you think the notion of wanting to make artists "content assessors" simply also shows a lack of understanding and respect for artists's practices and processes? This is also in relation to what I see as the aspirational utilitarianism of terms like "Renaissance City Plan", "creative industries", and "cultural soft power".*

A.S.: Sometimes you don't know if it's a game that is being played via mutual dependency. Obviously, the funding stream is from the National Arts Council, and it needs to be given the green light by the MDA. The thing is that from their side they also can't antagonize the cultural producers / artists too much. What with the "international branding" initiatives, we need to seem as if we're building up "cultural capital"... There is co-dependency, but I would say it's not completely equal and reciprocal. They still hold a lot more cards.

T.P.P.: I agree with you (A.L.K.) that there is a lack of understanding for artists's practices and processes. They need to start from first principles: "What is the role of the state?", and "What is the role of artists?" Then they need to figure things out from there. Instead, the MDA got themselves in a pickle because they were thinking administratively. In trying to resolve the censorship bottleneck quickly, they simply thought "Oh! Let's just get the artists to assess themselves!"

As for expressions like "Renaissance City Plan", "creative industries", and "cultural soft power", it's the lingua franca of arts councils around the world and we have adopted it for ourselves in trying to create economic sense of our Art. Yet it has been without totally understanding the role or processes of artists, so it all seems very disconnected to us as artists. As a consequence, it rings hollow.

A.S.: Of course, all these communications—this is what happens in a one-party state—all the ministries are so wired into each other; so interconnected. Sometimes you send in a script that you believe that at the most will go up to the Media Development Authority (after having been thorough the National Arts Council), but then it goes right up into the higher levels, maybe to the Ministry of Culture, Communications and Youth, and there'll be instances where you know they'd have also passed it to Ministry of Home Affairs.

I did this play called *Causeway*, which is about bilateral relations between Singapore and Malaysia, and I know they passed it to Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well. That's because it's all about setting the agenda; controlling the discourse. It's only the government or the

(state-sanctioned) newspapers that can address bilateral relations. If you're outside of it, you can't. It goes back to Catherine Lim, what Goh Chok Tong said to her: "Oh, if you want to comment on these weighty major issues, you have to enter the political arena. If not you are just unelected, out there on the fringe."

A.L.K.: *Alfian, you end off all your emails with the signature: If you care too much about Singapore, first it breaks your spirit, then it breaks your heart. With this as a primer, how do you think artists here can and should engage with the idea of Singapore?*

A.S.: When I first wrote those lines, there was some kind of disillusionment. However I don't necessarily always share that sentiment; it's more of a provocation. It's taken from this play of mine called *Fugitives*; it's a line spoken by a character who finds himself too invested in caring about Singapore, and at the end of the day, he is left feeling a little betrayed by that kind of investment. It was in response to this idea that Singaporeans are usually politically apathetic or indifferent—and whether this is actually some kind of protective coping mechanism: that if you really start giving a shit, you do risk becoming thwarted and fatigued along the way.

A.L.K.: *Do you think we have internalized (or not) imperatives of power as well as state narratives when we produce work; does this lead to some sort of "deconditioning"?*

T.P.P.: A fish isn't aware of the water it swims in, so it's a very long process of becoming aware of the water. A process of which I myself, slowly—pore by pore, gill by gill—am still waking up to. Why do I have to question the air that I breathe in the first place? It's not intuitive to do it. Yet there are events that jolt us out of the water. If we are just a bit more observant, we realize that there are just too many contradictions that need to be addressed.

About the line, "*If you care too much about Singapore, first it breaks your spirit, then it breaks your heart*", when I first came across it in Alfian's work, I thought it really captured the zeitgeist. A sort of, "Up yours; I'm going back into my cocoon, I don't wanna deal with this."

A.S.: If I might add, it's interesting that Pin Pin brought up that there's sometimes that sense of "Ah, I don't want to engage anymore, I want to go into my own cocoon and not be hurt", so to speak. Other times, however, I've seen the phrase as meaning, "Okay, it's going to break your spirit, and it's going to break your heart, but *do it anyway*." It's about going all out and facing the consequences of your actions. It's about—what do you do after you've had your heart broken?

A.L.K.: *I don't want to make direct references to To Singapore, With Love since it's a sensitive time now, but I just wanted to round off with something that Ang Swee Chai, the widow of Francis Khoo says in the film; a thought that's been haunting me.*

A.S.: Wait—so you've seen the film?



Film still from *To Singapore, With Love*, by Tan Pin Pin, 2013.

A.L.K.: Yes, in private, in Pin Pin’s studio, in preparation for this interview.

A.S.: Oh wow—we all want to see it!

T.P.P.: I would love to show it here. It is still with the Censors; I am awaiting their reply to our application to show it.

A.L.K.: So Ang Swee Chai—alone in London mind you, and granted a special permit to return to Singapore just the once after decades, and only for the occasion, the occasion of bringing back Francis Khoo’s ashes—she wonders aloud if future generations will think that her generation didn’t try hard enough.

A.S.: I’m getting goosebumps just listening to you saying that.

A.L.K.: I think my heart broke a little there.

“The Police Told Me I Shouldn’t Put on a Show Like That”: Conversation with Koyo Kouoh on the Contested Issues of Homosexuality, Media and Religious Power in Africa

Moses Serubiri

While a Facebook status update started a movement on Maidan Square in Kiev, a blog started a fire on an art exhibition in Dakar. Thugs attacked the installation of *Precarious Imaging: Visibility Surrounding African Queerness*, a show co-curated by Koyo Kouoh and artist Ato Malinda at Raw Material Company. It featured the works of five contemporary African artists, including Zanele Muholi, and opened in May 2014.

Precarious Imaging was the second act of *Personal Liberties*, a year-long program unfolding in four acts. Eva Barois de Caével, the assistant curator at Raw Material Company, curated the first act that took place from January to April 2014. It culminated in *Who Said It Was Simple*, a research-based documentary exhibition and screening program that looked at media, anthropology and law in regards to homosexuality in Africa. *Precarious Imaging*, the second act in the series, focused on photographic and video portraiture in thinking through visibility of African queerness. It opened during the course of the 11th Dak’art Biennial of Contemporary African Art in Dakar, in May 2014.

Editorial note:

On September 10, 2014 the Singaporean government classified Tan Pin Pin’s film “To Singapore with Love” as NAR, or “Not allowed for all ratings.” This means it can neither be distributed nor shown in Singapore, except in private screenings.





Exhibition view of *Precarious Imaging: Visibility Surrounding African Queerness*, with works by (from left to right): Andrew Oseibo, *Who We Are*, portrait series; Amanda Kerdahi M., *100 Conversations*, and work by Jim Chuchu on pre-colonial African sexuality, at Raw Material Company, Dakar, 2014.

Moses Serubiri [M.S.]: In the post-colony the work of power is also the work of enchantment, to produce fables, writes Achille Mbembe. What are some of the fictions made about queers in Senegal?

Koyo Kouoh [K.K.]: The greatest fiction is the widespread belief that homosexuality is not African, and thus any sexual orientation outside the framework of heterosexuality is a phantom in sense of the (d) evil. A menace to society. All the while there is much evidence in popular culture through songs, sayings, festivities or just words that account for same-sex practices in almost all African societies. When we were researching the first act, we had discussions with a professor Ibrahima Ndiaye, a linguist at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar. His entire work is based on studying and analyzing same-sex practices in Senegalese society. As a linguist, he analyzes through language. Studying certain words, certain phrases, and certain narratives that exist. He taught us something that is quite striking. According to him, the difference between Western and African ways of dealing with the subject is in the naming. As long as there is a practice and nobody knows about it, and nobody speaks about it, it is fine. Yet homosexuality is indeed present in Senegalese society, as it is in any other society. The problem is that people don't want to name it, they don't want to discuss it, and they don't want it to be visible. Anyone who is openly not heterosexual is at best silenced or ignored in his or her family, and at worst, rejected.

M.S.: What were your expectations when making this exhibition?

K.K.: Well, honestly, we really hoped to trigger a debate. A debate on a critical human terrain void of passions. The entire program, not just this exhibition, is about creating the framework where this debate can take place without any sort of contingencies, fears or threats. We were too optimistic to believe that the artistic setting and the cultural environment that Raw Material Company provides in a place like Dakar—which is known for its tolerance and openness—would protect us from the hysteria that we were ultimately subjected to.

We had done the first part of the project from January to April without any sort of problems—neither was there public protest nor did the media even pay close attention to it. The funny thing is that, sometimes you just need one unreflected, uninformed, ill-inspired person to destroy a progressive idea and to put fire on a subject, and this is what basically happened. In this case it was Mamadou Gomis—a photographer that we promoted substantially in the past—who started distilling negative intoxicating views on the biennial with a special emphasis on Raw Material Company. He played himself up as a “whistle blower” to alert the public opinion that the Biennial was pervaded with works with homosexual content and that the photographic and video work exhibited at Raw Material Company is not innocent because the center promotes gays and lesbians.

M.S.: How ironic! What were your relations with Mamadou Gomis before the *Personal Liberties* program at Raw Material Company?

K.K.: He is photographer whose career I helped shape even before the existence of Raw Material Company. I curated him into various exhibitions and programs internationally. We also collaborated with him in the context of the exhibition *Chronicle of a Revolt: Photographs of a Season of Protest*, that documented the “Senegalese Spring” in 2012. So we know each other professionally very well. I think that he used the exhibition for attention and brought the discussion to a very low level. Nothing to compare with the debates that we had during the first act of the program from January to April. Everything became quickly very trivial, unreflected and passionate. This is why I’m disappointed that all this noise didn’t amount to an interesting debate locally.

M.S.: Yes. And in that sense I’m also thinking about the Maidan Square in Ukraine. As you are saying, this one person started it on Facebook actually, and the whole thing became like a huge fire.

K.K.: It went viral. These are our current times: there only needs to be one person to put something stupid on Facebook and it goes around the world.

M.S.: I haven’t heard you mention the State even once. Instead, what I am hearing from you is this bizarre phenomenon of the internet with one person, a photographer who obviously used the internet for his own agenda. Yet now I see something as in the Maidan about the internet.



Exhibition view of *Precarious Imaging: Visibility Surrounding African Queerness*, with work by Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases*, 2014, at Raw Material Company, Dakar, 2014.

This is not limited to Senegal alone, or Ukraine alone. It's not just about people in Dakar.

K.K.: I think we are now experiencing the full reach of the internet in terms of performativity of the self. It has become a public space where anything goes. Where everyone one can reach his or her share of fame and visibility on a few clicks and uploads. All this takes place without any sort of filter for quality, accuracy or deontology. This is how the whole debacle started. After the exhibition opening, there were four unidentified young people who came to vandalize our place late at night, around 4 a.m. on May 13th. I went to the police for filing only to be told that we shouldn't be doing a show like that. The very people who are supposed to protect you from violence are the one who accuse you of attracting violence through the work that you do. We have not moved an inch from the mentality where a raped woman is accused of being out late a night or being sexy instead of condemning the rapists.

M.S.: That is completely absurd.

K.K.: Furthermore, a few days after that Mamadou Gomis, who has a television show on art and photography with a private media house, started talking about the biennial's promotion of homosexuality in Senegal, saying that there were many works in the biennial that deal with the subject. Also that there were many exhibitions in the Biennale's OFF program dealing with the subject, thereby putting special focus

on Raw Material Company. The next day, there was a blog. Most of the voices on the blog use pseudonyms. It was an article. A nasty, non-researched paper full of inconsistencies that went viral in Senegalese media.

M.S.: No!

K.K.: It was after that that a religious television station came to visit the show expecting to see some obscene display, only to find a decently displayed video and photography show. As they didn't find what they were looking for they gathered all kinds of images: works from Zanele Muholi which were not even in our show, and put them on air. That increased the violence a lot. The religious leaders, and the imams started preaching against us at the Friday prayer. One of them started gathering his disciples to come and burn us down. Safety became a concern. This led us to issue a press release announcing that we were suspending the show due to the violence that had occurred. The press release was manipulated, translated, and orchestrated into something twisted such as: "We welcome the decision of the Senegalese government to shut down all the exhibitions with homosexual content."

The government of Senegal would not dare shut down an exhibition, especially not within the biennial. Freedom of expression means something in this country. Paradoxically the religious power is so strong. The real power in Senegal is not the political power, it is the religious power.

M.S.: I feel that there is a kind of media threat, you know, but not necessarily state media, but of a kind of internet and private based media, like a television show, for example. For a private media company, being a threat to artistic practice, or being a threat to making an exhibition by manipulating a press release, is something I find more believable than the government of Senegal shutting down a show. I find it more plausible.

K.K.: All the while the Ministry of Culture did not deny the false information that circulated worldwide. There were many interpretations to this collective silence. One could be that it was appropriate that religious power believed in it. The manipulation and its media orchestration came from a group of people who had an interest in exploiting an opportunity of a so-called sensation. There are several Islamic NGOs in Senegal who thrive on the hold that they have on people's beliefs and how they can manipulate this religious blindness as a fuel for their organizational gains.

M.S.: There are many examples from Boko Haram, to Al Shabab. In Kenya, where co-curator Ato Malinda comes from, Nairobi is becoming uninhabitable because of the bombings.

K.K.: These are frightening extremes that we are living in now in different parts of Africa unfortunately. Even though Senegal can look back to a long tradition of stability and social cohesion, the growth of religious

radicalism and increased intolerance towards personal freedoms has become very clearly perceptible over the last decade. The still-troubled situation in the Sahel, and in Mali in particular, with the different fractions of Aqmi acting to destabilize the region are reasons to be concerned and stay alert. It is common knowledge that borders are particularly porous in Africa.

Revisiting *Negrta*: Conversation with Liliana Angulo

Veronica Wiman

PROJECTION

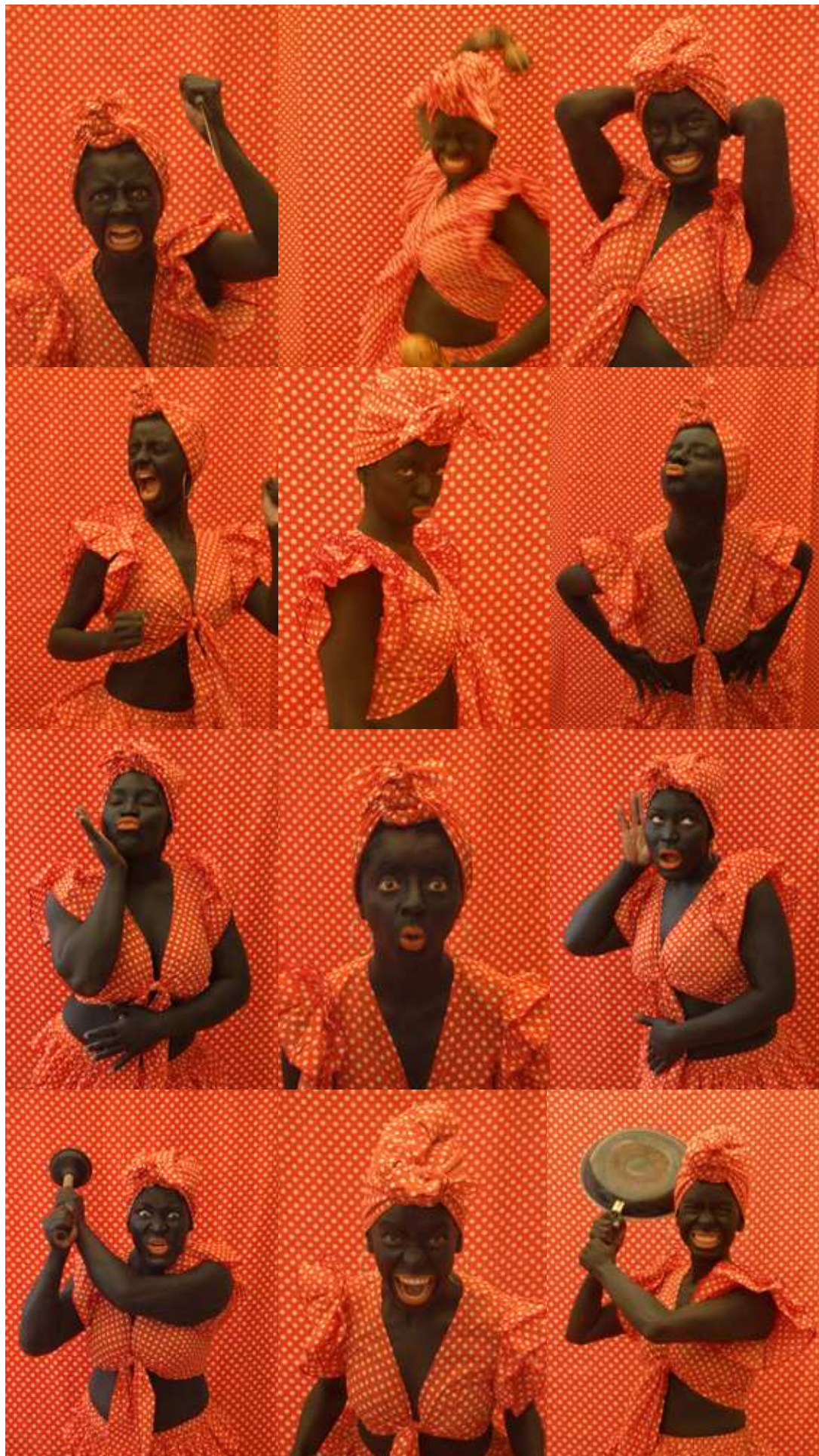
In the midst of a warm and beautiful summer in the Swedish countryside, I get the opportunity to return (at least, in thought) to Colombia and reflect on work I did there between 2007 and 2011, especially my interest in women's issues. The exhibition *Negrta* at EAC-Espacio Arte Contemporaneo at Museo la Tertulia is one of the exhibitions. Suggesting and realizing the exhibition in Cali Colombia in 2011 obviously came with a certain amount of self-doubt. I still ask myself who I am to curate such an exhibition and to bring this topic to surface. Furthermore, what did it mean and create in that moment in time and place? I asked participating artist Liliana Angulo if she wanted to share some of her reflections with me.

While Liliana Angulo was finalizing her video *Visiones*, and I was continuing the long-term work with the playground *La vida es un teatro* in Nashira, the eco-farm for women an hour north of Cali, Angela Y. Davis visited Colombia. La Toma, a mining excavation town in the neighboring region of Cauca, where Davis came to support the Afro-American communities who had been living there since 1636, and who are now struggling for their land and culture. "What I call the prison-industrial complex allows us to see clearly how racism is used to generate profit. In fact, the relationship is evident here in this mining region, where the commercial mining interests promote a kind of racism that will produce huge profits," says

Angela Davis of her visit. A sense of meaning awoke in me, and I wanted to seize the moment, bringing together Liliana Angulo's work and Coco Fusco's work, entitled *a/k/a Mrs. Gilbert*.

In *Negrta*, I invited Liliana Angulo to show the *Mambo Negrta* series as well as her video *Visiones* and Coco Fusco's *a/k/a Mrs. Gilbert* on the FBI search of Angela Y. Davis. In Cali I mostly saw black women cleaning houses, and sometimes passing by chanting out their sales of avocados on Sunday mornings. The class, gender and color of skin segregation was both obvious and normalized for me. This is slavery (officially abolished in Colombia in 1852), and sexism... *how shall I handle and live in this?* troubled me. Such an experience had already occurred during my first visit to Cali in 2007. I was visiting my dear friend, whose maid was truly loved and whose bean preparation was unmatched. But, the maid would sit on the back patio having her lunch while the group sat at the served table elsewhere. I asked very carefully about this, and I felt their confusion and shame. Another day we biked up the river, passing a famous restaurant, Cali Viejo, in a farm with gates and guards protecting the entrance. Upon entering, we were taken back in history to around 1850, set within a colonial style finca where large black women dressed in colonial fabric served us (and other non Afro-Colombian people) cold beer and tostadas.





Liliana Angulo,
Mambo Negrita,
2006.

Liliana Angulo's work and the *Mambo Negrita* series tell us much about the colonial past and femininity confronted with violence through icons symbolizing oppression and torture of the feminine body. An important meaning in Angulo's work is also the rereading of the image of black women today. *Mambo Negrita* is a portrayal of a slave mistress and the exotic, sexy other. Dressed in the pattern of a kitchen cloth, bursting in both laughter and aggression, she waves various kitchen devices. The female figure also alludes to the cartoon *Negra Nieves* by Consuelo Lago, which follows every day in the regional daily paper of *Cali El Pais*. In this work, Angulo points to the common perception that "the black woman is normally a domestic employee and the domestic employee is normally a black woman."

Veronica Wiman [V.W.]: What has been the public response inside Colombia, and outside of Colombia, to the *Mambo Negrita* series and the video *Visiones*?

Liliana Angulo [L.A.]: My work has responded to very specific moments in time. *Mambo Negrita* has circulated more and it had always raised questions on historical representations related to colonial imaginaries of race, also in addition to touching on the insertions of those ideologies in contemporary life. As we move to a more politically correct use of images and language, the images of the series have gotten a different reading. In the USA, people associated them with the stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman" which is not very prevalent in Colombia. The reading of the spectators completes the images, responding to the kind of representation or racism that is more common to them.

The video *Visiones* is about "La Negra Nieves," a character that is very well known in Cali and Bogota because of its circulation in major newspapers in those cities. However in other regions of Colombia "Nieves" is not very popular; its influence is related to the Pacific region where there are more people of African descent. The video presents "La Negra Nieves" as a case study. Paradoxically among the black community, "Nieves" has been part of the visual imaginaries that manage to circulate, and people have either criticized or loved the icon. It also talks about the lawsuit that tried to ban the cartoon and questioned the legitimacy of the authorial voice. The video digs into the personality of the white woman cartoonist and her relation to the black character persona. The event helps to contrast issues of race,

class and gender and subtly addresses a more complex conversation on representation.

The responses to the video have been positive in the sense that international audiences have become more aware of the problematic differences and struggles that are part of the social order in Colombia.

V.W.: How would you like the work to be received and with what possible impact on society?

L.A.: Generally my interest has been to insert questions or intervene in specific moments in time. My perception is that the impact of the work is very limited if it just stays in the contemporary art circuit. For that reason, in my artistic practice I have developed broader relationships with people in the black social movement, and who actively produce and participate in collaborations with social organizations for black women.

V.W.: Angela Y. Davis asks, "How do we imagine a better world and raise the questions that permit us to see beyond the given?" Feminism is one answer, I believe. Browsing news these days from various sources in *27 degrees*, I am caught between "Feminism never happened" and "to be attentive to your child's needs is seen as a failure." The first quote comes from Germaine Greer, who was commenting on the then-current state of feminism and the need to redefine and regroup. Young women today don't want to be associated with feminism. Men are even less tolerant of feminist discourse today since women have entered even a larger part of what have traditionally been men's worlds. Successful women are evidently being harassed to a greater degree through today's social media. The second quote is from Helena Granström, a poet and writer commenting on the current political debate in Sweden around gender equality politics and the feminist party's agenda. It's basically about "improved" gender equality politics, where changes in parental leave insurance towards an individualized insurance that gives the mother "the chance" to return to work as early as possible. Children's need to develop attachments to one primary parent as well as their wish to nurse and be close to their mothers, a biological anachronism, is what is in the way for the feminist project, says Granström. If feminism is yet to happen and this is how politics define feminism and strategies suggested for an equal and liberated female society, it must be elsewhere than in the Western

形成 — The Becoming

world where I as a women and a mother should feel liberated and “in place”.

Where do you see feminism today in Colombia? What does this mean in practice, and politically / theoretically?

L.A.: Thinking about feminism in Colombia means fighting the racism, classism, sexism, and gender violence that are at the base of our colonial and patriarchal society. That fight is to transform the macro-structure that justifies the abuse, the torture, the displacement, the murders, the exploitation and the invasion of ancestral territories.

There is a significant effort on the part of women of African descent to debate and bring to their reality the discussions on feminism, and specifically of Black feminism, in order to have a theoretical understanding of the conflict that includes women’s bodies and intimate spaces.

There is also a lot of networking being done in order to give visibility to the achievements and spaces that queer, indigenous and black women have conquered in the social movement. However there are always challenges in the relationship between male activists and traditional feminist counterparts. Part of the discussion also problematizes the historical approaches of Eurocentric feminism over womanism in the understanding of the struggles of women in Colombia.

V.W.: What impact do you think the exhibition had in Cali?

L.A.: I think it was important in the sense that even though Cali is one of the cities in Colombia with the largest urban population of ethnically African people, there are very few spaces for the circulation and discussion of the issues that were on display in the exhibit.

The Museum has isolated itself from the reality of millions of people in conditions of inequality and poverty and remains symbolically the place of “high culture” for the elites. There is everything to be done at the museum—not just in Museo La Tertulia—in order for it to be an institution that responds to the situation of the majority of the people in Colombia. However I think the initiative of bringing to the museum issues that have been traditionally excluded is very valuable.

V.W.: In my curatorial introduction I expressed faith in artistic expressions and gestures, saying that this problematic situation can be made visible, open to discussion, and will hopefully change one day. Liliana beautifully says: “I believe that the agency that art has is the way in which artistic practices act on the intersection between life and power. I think that these practices operate on everyday life, have the potential for subverting meaning and can transform the spaces of circulation of cultural production into spaces for the appearance of the subject.” When Liliana also pointed to the problem of Eurocentric understanding in local struggles, it evidently involved me. Perhaps my ignorance and naiveté as a foreigner empowered me to address a topic that is not part of my culture. The social power embedded in my skin color, cultural origin, and education is obviously a key to making use of the newcomer’s foolishness. In the end, my hope is that my Eurocentric misunderstanding and clumsiness can be valuable in evoking accurate questions and responses on a local level.

*My dear friend who is getting ready to depart
—I had been longing to be your companion
yet I am tangled up with my routine
Now, I could only silently gaze at
your supposedly returning path
Between the dawn and dusk
Between the brightest star and the dimmest soul
Between promise and betrayal*

Prologue—to my friend who is getting ready to depart

Tunneled through a smoggy
motorway which lingers on the mountain
All at once I found myself nailed down my feet in front of a boundless, enormous dam
In that place there were tricolor waves swirling:
copper-ish sulphur
blackish auburn iron
grayish lead and zinc
as if the fissure and the rift etched on the earth
Wantonly meshing, coagulating
On the deserted land
land that deserted human

The village foregone
woven with the wild grass
prolonged blazing sunshine
Bamboo and musabasjoo have gradually found out
how to comfort the wounded nerve of the mountain range

In between the crease of time
Universe elongates
As if bodies stretching
—you slightly turn your back
What beyond the deserted land
startlingly an animistic land comes into sight:
It is almost a hidden garden under the cliff
The grace of labor
has lit up the flaring firewood, dispersed the misty mountain mist
smoke rising up from the back of mud wall
Awaiting
Our descendants
Our descendants might could from the track of circular time
have a new start
landing on feet on the muddy puddle pavement

We still could not forecast
how long we still need to walk
just to witness the tremendous origin
And stratus slides
faulting peak floating upon
The destined lowering of night curtain stressed the melancholy of the land

Today
in the underground
everyone is phubbing
A girl has just broken into laughter
Leaning against you, a chubby woman
is transmitting tender signals
with her gently trembling body

The escalator that the underground exit leads to
has been out of order for so long
Whilst the television commercial
Murmuring numerous declarations, restlessly, to people
You guess you could, once again
continue with the daily recital in your mind
“Today I successfully touched the base of the Line 3 carriage
Today I was able to tolerate
suspending in the air
the spit and the bubbles of speeches and the plaza crowd
Tolerate the youths who stroke their mobile screens at all times
they send their warmest greeting to their buddies in illness”

In this manner
I guess I could sit on the pedestrian road
and endure with the falling dusk
getting myself to join the team of homeless

I clearly know I could not
become a starry night
But at least I could turn into
those inescapable
shadows of humans

I am on the plaza of the inverted time
seeing myself walking towards this life-changing tipping point:
Once again I’ve squeezed a few books
in the overloaded rucksack
I foresaw myself on my future journey
keep leaving books on the road I walked across
Expecting there would be someone to pick them up
—In the soon-to-happen warfare
the existing books seem redundant

I just hope
The ignited thought by the flame of war
Could turn your crystallized existence
red hot, through smithing
Becoming the red hue of dusk
that humans could not wipe away

At this moment
I could get my gardening book
that I’d left in the forest
The book of cookery
handed over to humans
The book of geology
returned to the earth



Contributors

Nancy Adajania is a Bombay-based cultural theorist and independent curator. She was the co-artistic director of the 9th Gwangju Biennale, 2012.

Mohammad al-Attar is a Syrian playwright and dramaturge. His plays *Withdrawal*, *Online*, *Look at The Street... This is What Hope Looks Like*, *Could You Please Look into the Camera?*, *A Chance Encounter*, and *Intimacy* have been performed in Damascus, London, New York, Seoul, Berlin, Brussels, Edinburgh, Athens, and Beirut, among others.

Burak Arikan is an artist working with complex networks through the media of software, prints, installations and performances. His work has been recently featured in the 31st Sao Paulo Biennial, the 13th Istanbul Biennial, the 11th Sharjah Biennial, and the 7th Berlin Biennial. Arikan lives and works in New York (US) and Istanbul (TR) <http://burak-arikan.com>.

Boris Buden is a writer and cultural critic based in Berlin (DE). He is a board member of the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, Vienna (AT) and teaches cultural theory at the Faculty of Art and Design at Bauhaus University in Weimar (DE). Among his recent publications is *Zone des Übergangs Vom Ende des Postkommunismus (Zone of Transition: On the End of Post-Communism* [Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009]).

Ilya Budraitskis (1981) is a historian, curator and activist. He is a member of editorial board of the *Moscow Art Magazine*. Since 2013 he has been the director of the multimedia library department of the National Center for Contemporary Art (NCCA, Moscow). Along with Ekaterina Degot and Marta Dziewanska, Budraitsikis co-edited and contributed to the book

Post-post-Soviet? Art, Politics and Society in Russia in the Turn of the Decade (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) and is the co-editor (with Arseniy Zhilyaev) and contributor of *Pedagogical Poem* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2014).

Keti Chukhrov holds an ScD from the Philosophy Department at Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow (RU) and lectures in the art theory department there. Among other works she has authored the book, *Theatre in Philosophical Art Criticism* (St. Petersburg: European University in St. Petersburg, 2011).

Julia Rometti (1975 Nice, France) graduated in 2000 from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d’Arts Paris-Cergy (FR) with congratulations from the jury. From 1999–2002 she was a member of Glassbox—an artist-run space in Paris, France.

Victor Costales (1974 Minsk, Belarus) graduated from the Instituto de Diseño Grafico Latinoamericano in Quito (EC) and studied at the CFP Riccardo Bauer as well as at the Istituto Italiano di Fotografia, both in Milan (IT). Since 2007 Rometti and Costales have been working as an artist-duo. Currently they live in Mexico City (MX) and Paris (FR).

David Riff is a writer, translator, artist, and curator based in Moscow (RU) and Berlin (DE). His artistic and curatorial collaborations have included Chto Delat, the Karl Marx School of the English Language (with Dmitry Gutov), the first Bergen Assembly *Monday Begins on Saturday* (2013), and the non-academic symposium *Reports to an Academy* (2014) (both with Ekaterina Degot). He teaches at the Rodchenko School of Photography and Media Art, Moscow, and is the Head of Publications at the Academy of the Arts of the World, Cologne (DE).

Ntone Edjabe is the founder and editor of Chimurenga (chimurenga.co.za).

Bassam El Baroni is a curator and writer based in Alexandria, Egypt. He is currently completing a PhD in Curatorial Knowledge at Goldsmiths, London, and is a theory tutor at the Dutch Art Institute, Arnhem. He has curated and co-curated projects and biennials in Murcia (MANIFESTA 8, 2010) and Madrid (ES), Oslo and Lofoten (LIAF 2013) (NO), Limerick (EVA international, 2014) (IE), Paris (FR), and Alexandria (EG).

Hu Fang is a fiction writer and curator based in Guangzhou and Beijing (CN). He is the co-founder and artistic director of Vitamin Creative Space in Guangzhou and The Pavilion in Beijing, and the author of several novels.

Mariam Ghani (kabul-reconstructions.net/mariam) is an artist, writer, curator, teacher, and member of the Gulf Labor Working Group. Gulf Labor (gulflabor.org) is a coalition of cultural workers that attempt to ensure that workers’s rights are respected during the building of new cultural institutions on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi (AE).

Sarah Joseph is a Professor of Law, and the Director of the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law at Monash University, Melbourne (AU). She has a special interest in activism, freedom of speech, and the intersections between art and human rights.

Hassan Khan is an artist, writer and musician. He lives and works in Cairo, Egypt.

Nikita Kadan is an artist and lives in Kyiv. Since 2004 he has been a member of R.E.P. (Revolutionary Experimental Space) artists’s group and since 2008 he has been a co-founder and member of the curatorial and activist group HUDRADA (Artistic Committee). Kadan often works

collaboratively with architects, human rights activists and sociologists.

Erden Kosova is an art critic based in Istanbul (TR). He recently contributed to the organisation of the exhibition, *Berliner Herbstsalon* at Maxim Gorki Theater, Berlin (DE).

Koyo Kouoh is an exhibition maker and the founding artistic director of RAW Material Company, a center for art, knowledge and society in Dakar (ZA).

Amanda Lee Koe is the fiction editor for Esquire, in Singapore. Her first book of short stories, *Ministry of Moral Panic*, was longlisted for the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award.

Donna Kukama (1981, Mafikeng, ZA) currently lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa. Her practice navigates the spaces of performance, video, text, and sound installations.

Matteo Lucchetti is a curator and an art historian based in Brussels (BE). He researches socially engaged artistic practices in a global context through the Visible project, which he has been co-curating since 2010. He is interested in the transformative potential of the visual arts and conceives exhibitions as spaces where this can be put to work. One of his most recent curatorial projects, *Don’t Embarrass the Bureau* (Lunds Konsthall (SE)), features artistic practices that disrupt the regular functioning of bureaucratic apparatuses in a time of so-called “leaked democracy”.

Viktor Misiano lives in Moscow (RU) and Ceglie Messapica (IT). Misiano was member of the curatorial team for MANIFESTA 1, Rotterdam (1996) and curated, amongst other exhibitions, the Russian section of the 3rd Istanbul Biennial (1992), the 46th and 50th Venice Biennial (1995, 2003), the 1st Valencia Biennial (2001), the 25th and 26th São Paulo Biennial (2002, 2004). He is founder and

editor-in-chief of Moscow Art Magazine. In 2003 he founded *Manifesta Journal: Journal of Contemporary Curatorship*. He is the president of the Manifesta Foundation.

Gleb Naprenko is an art historian and critic based in Moscow (RU). Published in *Moscow Art Magazine*, magazines *DI (Dialog Iskusstv)* (Moscow), *Iskusstvo* (Moscow), *Artchronika* (Moscow) and *Translit* (St. Petersburg), *e-flux* (New York), websites OpenSpace.ru (Moscow), Openleft.ru (Moscow and St. Petersburg) and Art-Agenda.com (New York), Naprenko is one of the editors of the Russian website Openleft.ru.

Veronica Nosedá is a Paris-based AIDS and LGBT activist. She discovered football in her late thirties, and is the goal-keeper for the lesbian team “Les Dégommeuses”. Since then, she has been actively taking part in the activities of the organization, which uses sports as a tool to protest discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation.

Alexandra Novozhenova, is an art critic and art historian based in Moscow (RU). As an author and an editor she works for several figureheads in the Russian art media such as *Colta.ru Hudozhestvenniy zhurnal*, *Iskusstvo*, *Artchronika*, *Openleft.ru*, among others.

Andrei Parshikov is a curator and art critic based in Moscow (RU). He is the author of articles in *Art-Chronicle*, *Zaart*, *Afisha*, *Vremya Novostey*, *Independent Newspaper*, and the internet-portals *Gif.ru* and *Art-Times*, as well as articles for catalogues, both in Russia and elsewhere.

Tan Pin Pin directs essay films on the theme of Singapore. They include *Singapore GaGa*, *Invisible City* and her latest, *To Singapore, with Love*. She is preparing for her next film, about time capsules. In her spare time, she listens to the radio.

Alfian Sa’at is a Resident Playwright with Wild Rice, a theatre company based in Singapore. He is also a published author of poetry and fiction.

Rasha Salti is an independent curator, freelance writer and international programmer for the Toronto International Film Festival (CA).

Moses Serubiri currently works as an independent art writer for *C&*, *Platform for International Art*. He is also co-curator of the 2nd edition of the Kampala Contemporary Art Festival, KLA ART 014. He lives in Kampala, Uganda.

Ana Teixeira Pinto is a writer from Lisbon (PT), currently living in Berlin (DE). She is a PhD candidate and occasional lecturer at the Humboldt University, and a regular contributor to *e-Flux Journal*, *Art-Agenda*, *Mousse*, *Frieze/de* and *Domus*.

Joanna Warsza is an independent curator in visual, performing arts and architecture. Head of the public program of MANIFESTA 10 in St. Petersburg, she has unexpectedly been involved in some controversial projects over the last few years. She was the associate curator of the 7th Berlin Biennale, with Artur Żmijewski. She has also curated the Georgian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale and many projects in the public realm in Warsaw (PL), where she comes from.

Veronica Wiman is a curator and professor of contemporary art at Tromsø Academy of contemporary Art in Norway. Her current research is focused on urban gardening and archives. She recently curated EAC at Museo la Tertulia in Colombia, as well as built *La Vida es un Teatro* in Nashira, Colombia.

Colophon

PUBLISHED BY
Manifesta Foundation
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

HEAD OF PUBLICATIONS
Esther Regueira

CHIEF EDITOR
Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Lisa Mazza

GUEST EDITOR
David Riff

MANAGING EDITOR
Georgia Taperell

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
Tara Lasrado

COPY EDITOR
Shannon d'Avout

GRAPHIC DESIGN
g.u.i., Paris:
Nicolas Couturier
Bachir Soussi-Chiadmi

TRANSLATIONS
David Riff in conversation with Gleb
Napreenko, Alexandra Novozheneva,
Keti Chukhrov, Viktor Misiano
and Andrei Parshikov: David Riff
(Russian—English)
Ilya Budraitskis: David Riff (Russian—
English)
Hu Fang: Zoie (Chinese—English)

Manifesta Journal
is available online at
www.manifestajournal.org

The contents of this journal are
published according to the terms
of the Creative Commons License
unless otherwise mentioned.

Attribution—Non-Commercial—
No Derivatives



All commissioned and reproduced
texts are published here with
the full consent of their authors.
Every effort has been made
to contact the rightful owners
of all content with regards
to copyrights and permissions.
We apologize for any inadvertent
errors or omissions. If you wish
to use any content please contact
the copyright holder directly. For
any queries regarding copyright
please contact [subscription@
manifesta.org](mailto:subscription@manifesta.org).

Manifesta Journal is made possible
with the generous support of



Cover image:
Film still from *To Singapore, with Love*, a
film by Tan Pin Pin, 2013. Ho Juan Thai
stands on the Malaysian shore, looking
out to Singapore.

manifesta°

Manifesta Foundation
Herengracht 474
1017 CA Amsterdam
The Netherlands

Tel. + 31 (0) 20 672 1435 (office)
Fax + 31 (0) 20 470 0073

subscription@manifesta.org

manifesta°



Education and Culture DG

Culture Programme

