

The answer can often consist only in the critique of the question, can often be provided only by negating the question itself.



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Reader accompanying the residency and the exhibition *It is part XVIII and I'm here to be part of the assembly, and this assembly is no longer necessarily ceremonial.*

De Fabriek Eindhoven
Bas van den Hurk, Jochem van Laarhoven, Bo Stokkermans
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Preface

This reader contains seven texts or parts of texts that can be divided into two categories. The first text is by Noortje de Leij and it is especially written for this residency. The other six are existing texts or parts of texts that were chosen by us as part of our research during this period.

The text by De Leij introduces the residency in a broader, mainly art historical context. She chooses as her starting point the title of the exhibition: It is part XVIII and I'm here to be part of the assembly, and this assembly is no longer necessarily ceremonial and picks that apart to get into different aspects of our practices. At the beginning she refers to the idea of 'the assembly', first within a political context ranging from early Greek society to our current time in which for instance Negri and Hardt use the idea in relation to the power of coming together to research new revolutionary forms of democracy. She then extends the notion to the idea of an assembly line as it came into being in the early 20th century to compare that with our ways of working, for example the series of drawings on A4 format that we produce in collaborative sessions where we pass on works on long tables from one to the other. For De Leij our practices are a radical opening up to each other and to external influences, ranging from visitors to ideas to theories, questioning authorship and forming a moving, organically 'gesamtkunstwerk'. She underpins her arguments by a broad (art)historical contextualization that refers to modernist and vanguard thinkers, notions and works, such as Alexander Rodchenko's attempt to make painting egalitair by using primary colors to produce monochromes. In the final chapter of the text she comes back to the title, referring there to the notion of the ensemble and the fact that it has a defined number - part XVIII in this case - that on the one hand makes for a specific constellation of time, space and material, but that on the other hand, because the number is part of an endless series, also could be considered as opening up to an unlimited future.

During our residency we worked with the formal aspects of the reciprocity between living, working and exhibiting. Producing works was organically woven into our research in ways of being together. Part of this research was theoretical and consisted of reading and discussing existing texts or parts of texts that are relevant for our current practices. During six weeks we shared these texts accompanied by a self written introduction on the social media platforms of De Fabriek as 'Sunday Readings'.

The first and most influential text that we read and discussed was 'Ohne Leitbild' by Theodor W. Adorno. It is published here in its Dutch translation: 'Zonder richtlijn', as strangely enough it was never translated in English. The text was originally delivered in 1960 as a lecture at the RIAS Funkuniversität.

Adorno was invited by that university to speak about norms and guidelines. The only response he could give to a question like that, he said, was to criticize the question itself. Adorno thinks that in our contemporary time it is no longer possible 'to formulate a general, normative, invariable aesthetics what so ever'. He states that by drawing conclusions and formulating such an aesthetics one would take the risk of abstracting the specificities of artistic labor. He concludes that only in the realm of what conformism would label 'experimental' the real artistic can find shelter.

The text felt relevant for us within our current practices because of the ambiguity and the openness Adorno advocates. An ambiguity that on the one hand refuses to come up with guidelines and that on the other hand gets into discussing the urgency of every singular work.

The second text of this reader is 'Listening Music' by musician and philosopher John Maus. What is pop capable of? he asks; 'I wouldn't claim that my music is new, but generally speaking pop music begs for some kind of radical new way of talking about it, he states. The main question of the text is 'what is music?' Because the status of what music is seems to be confined by the state, he claims that it gets into a tautological mode in which it becomes only self-confirming, self-referencing. In the text music is researched by comparison with other forms of listening, such as silence or that 'which is neither sound nor silence'.

The text is relevant for us where Maus speaks about music - or all other art forms for that matter - where it has not longer the task of translating things into a shared reality, but opening up things in their sovereignty. Where music no longer is a representation of reality, but cracks it open from the inside. Instead of asking the question of what music can be, we should rather ask what it is not, or what else it can be. For Maus music should have the quality of that which you can hear or experience in a certain moment, instead of it being part of a hierarchical system: 'and so perhaps, each listening there that can listen it may.'

The third text we read was 'Sculpture Not To Be Seen' about the practice of Franz Erhard Walther by Elena Filipovic. Filipovic was the curator of the exhibition 'Franz Erhard Walther: The Body Decides' at Wiels Brussels in 2014. Art historically the work is hard to categorize, she writes. Is it sculpture? Is it performance? Architecture? Minimalism? Is it important to ask after such categories? But in whatever categories works of art can be subsumed, they can be activated, with the emphasis on 'can be'. Filipovic states: the sculptures of Walther are neither authoritarian, nor bound to rules, in whatever way: 'I never give instructions to the users. I never have. How it is to be used, is determined by the instrument, not by me'.

The relevance of the text for us is the fact that, as Walther, we combine many mediums, such as painting, photography, film, printing, architecture, performance, theatre and sculpture into all encompassing installations, or maybe even better, constellations, which are hard to pin point and because of that sometimes might be hard to decipher.

The next text we discussed was 'Breathing' by Franco "Bifo" Berardi from 2018. We read the first four chapters of the book, gathered under the title 'Inspiration'. In the wake of the Occupy movement in 2011 'Bifo' wrote The Uprising. Back then he had a sense of triumph that turned out to be illusory. 'Was Occupy a failure?' he asks, and he answers: yes and no. Yes, because 'it was unable to stop the neoliberal devastation and the fascist backlash that is now deploying worldwide', and no, because it 'was the beginning of a long-term process of reactivation of the social body, particularly that of the cognitive workers of the world'. Now, seven years later he comes back to the subject that was at the center of The Uprising: 'the place of poetry in the relations between language, capital, and possibility.' In Breathing he tries to 'envision poetry as the excess of the

field of signification, as the premonition of a possible harmony inscribed in the present chaos'. He retraces the problem of the oppression of financial capitalism in terms of respiration: rhythm, spasm, suffocation and death.

The first chapter of the book is called 'I Can't Breathe'. It starts with the 'assassination' of Eric Garner on July 17, 2014 in Staten Island, when a police officer put Garner in a chokehold for fifteen to nineteen seconds while arresting him. The words "I Can't Breathe" that he panted eight times before expiring, had been chanted by thousands of demonstrators all over the country in the months since. This book is about our contemporary condition of breathlessness. It gets into the abstract relations between numerical entities that define power today. 'While the sphere of finance is ruled by algorithms that connect fractals of precarious labor, the sphere of life is invaded by flows of chaos that paralyze the social body and stifle breathing into suffocation', 'Bifo' writes. How to deal with this suffocation, with the abstraction it has produced? 'I go back to the metaphor of poetry as the only line of escape from suffocation', he states. I cannot say what poetry "is", he continues, 'because, actually, poetry "is" nothing. I can only try to say what poetry does.' Poetry is the excess that goes beyond the limits of language, which is to say beyond the limits of the world itself. Poetry opens multiple ambiguous pathways to meaning in our contemporary post-rational condition. Poets, artists make a slit in the umbrella that people are constantly putting up, they tear open the firmament itself, to let in a bit of free and windy chaos and to unchain the hidden possibilities of the cosmic primeval origins of the human history. The poet is the idiot of the world, 'Bifo' states, but 'might this idiot be trying to speak of something that is untranslatable into our known language?', he continues. 'Might the idiot be saying something that exceeds our understanding, because his noise and his fury require a different system of interpretation, a different language, a different rhythm?'

Where John Maus two weeks ago spoke about opening up the format of the pop-song from the inside, 'Bifo' now brings poetry and idiocy into the loop to open up the current discourse that seems to be stuck in the mud it drove itself into. Poetry and idiocy can open the discourse and enable us to breath a new harmony, a new language, and a new rhythm into the current chaos.

The fifth text was the prologue of *Foams* by Peter Sloterdijk from 2004. *Foams* is the third and final part of a Sloterdijks Magnum Opus, *Spheres*. *Spheres* is an epic project in both size and purview: in a 2.500 pages trilogy Sloterdijk describes the phenomenon of globalization. It is the return of a 'grand narrative' in philosophy, this time retelling the history of humanity, as related through the anthropological concept of 'Sphere'. It could be read as the late-twentieth-century bookend of Heideggers 'Being and Time', and well as 'Being and Space'. In *Spheres* Sloterdijk no longer asks 'what is man?', but 'where is man?' The trilogy reinterprets the history of Western metaphysics as an inherently spatial and immunological project. Using - in line again with Heidegger - a very specific personalized language, Sloterdijk explores the world from the micro the macro space. Starting in Volume I, *Bubbles* from the controversial idea that man always lives in co-existence - describing for instance in about 300 pages how a foetus lives inside its mothers womb - and zooming out into the endlessness of the cosmos in Volume II, *Globes*.

'Almost nothing, but still not nothing', in the third volume *Foams*, *Plural Spherology* Sloterdijk answers to the question 'where is man?' with: 'man is in foam', we live in the

century of foam, ‘...something real, but also a hypersensitive whole, that splashes at the slightest touch.’ In this volume Sloterdijk moves to our contemporary era, offering a view of life through a multifocal lens, in which the extreme vulnerability of our time is contained in the metaphor of foam. It could be described as a phenomenology of spatial plurality: how the bubbles that we form in our duality bind together to form what sociological tradition calls ‘society’. Foam is the newest form of the sphere man has to live in. The volume describes the exploration of our modern space of pampering with its capsules, islands and hothouses.

For us the text is related to our practices in the sense that the loss of criteria that is inherent to contemporary art echos in this idea of foam. Everywhere we grasp or try to punch, we find ourselves confronted with the precarity of this foam we now all live in.

The final text in this reader is Nautomat Operating Manual. A Draft Design for a Collective Space of ‘Nautonomy’ for Artist and their Friends by Raqs Media Collective. The text is distilled from a seminar Raqs did with students and the faculty within the painting department at RISD at the RISD Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence and Brown University in 2015. It provides propositions of the ‘nautomat’ and preliminary notes towards its possible operation.

What is a nautomat? A nautomat is a craft of autonomy. ‘It is a vehicle, a scenario, a loose, changing, evolving protocol of doing things together and sharing time, ideas and testing a few visions whenever necessary’. The word nautomat comes from what Raqs defines as ‘nautonomy’, something which is ‘more than autonomy’; it is ‘nautical, voyaging and mobile.’ With nautonomy they want to re-articulate the self-organizing principle, by recognizing that what we call ‘self’ actually is an unbounded constellation of persons, organisms and energies that is defined by ‘its capacity to be a voyager in contact with the moving world’.

The text is a hands-on manual. It is comprised as a lexicon with mostly practical guidelines of how to design a space and how to come together with groups of people. The content varies from serving beverages, to having a Xerox machine around, to more abstract propositions such as ‘script nothing, document everything’. Its final aim is ‘the rediscovery of conversation and collective learning as an art form’, in such a way that ‘the sighting of worlds becomes a commonplace activity’.

For us the text is relevant in relation to the text we started with, Adorno’s ‘Zonder richtlijn’, which translates as ‘without guidelines’ and that was, as said at the beginning of this text, to be a question that was with us for the whole time of the residency. And then we ended with a manual that consists solely of guidelines. Guidelines - contradictory as it may sound - almost all of which we relate to in the way we organized our residency at De Fabriek.

The texts formed a growing chain of references that inspired both our works and the conversations around it. From early morning coffees to late night dinners, we over and over discussed the ideas that came forward from these texts and the consequences they could or should have for both our practices and for society at large. We find it important to provide a hard copy theoretical framework for our residency and exhibition and we hope you enjoy reading it.

Noortje de Leij

*Some Paths through It is part XVIII and
I'm here to be part of the assembly, and
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1A. *I'm here to be part of the assembly*

Artists Jochem van Laarhoven and Bas van den Hurk have enjoyed a collaborative partnership for several years now. In 2018, the duo met Bo Stokkermans, who subsequently participated in their 2019 exhibit *Support Structures*. This collaboration was the genesis for the trio's decision to complete a joint residency at De Fabriek, an artist-run initiative in Eindhoven. *It is part XVIII and I'm here to be part of the assembly, and this assembly is no longer necessarily ceremonial* — the title of the work they produced while at De Fabriek — signals the union of the three artists as it represents a minor change to the serial title Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk had previously used for their work: *It is part [x] of an ensemble, and this ensemble is no longer necessarily ceremonial*. Stokkermans, as announced, is now here to be part of the ensemble, which transformed into an 'assembly' during the residency.

Starting with the title of the trio's work may not be the most obvious choice. A title, literally the naming of something, often has a delimiting function. Even when a title refuses to provide the viewer with any additional information, like the many *Untitled* pieces found in modernism, it still ensures that the work is framed: *this work*, made at this time by such and such artist. Whereas, if an encompassing 'framework' for the individual and shared practices of Stokkermans, Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk does indeed exist, it is the unceasing attempt to avoid, interrogate or disrupt established frameworks. And yet, despite the contradiction of this gesture in relation to the work, I still want to begin by focussing on the title. What's more, the title, though broken down into its constituent words and fragments, will serve as the guiding principle for this text.

1B. *assembly*

The initial plan for their residency at De Fabriek, was to research forms of communal living and working. The idea was to cohabitate during the working period and to let the work develop out of this. The term 'assembly' is appropriate in this respect: the most common definition refers to a group of people who congregate in pursuit of a common goal. The assembly of citizens (the *ekklesia*) was the very foundation of the democratic city-states of ancient Greece and historically has a broader meaning in both political and legislative contexts – from the fight for the right to associate to the 'national assembly' whose origins lie in the French Revolution. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt use the word assembly to "grasp the power of coming together and acting politically in concert".¹ 'Assembly', however, also refers more generally to 'come together' or 'put together' in the sense of 'to assemble', the meaning it took on at the dawn of the twentieth century when the 'assembly line' became the backbone of industrialized production.

The convergence found in the word 'assembly' between people assembling

and the assembling of objects is characteristic of the work the artists created at De Fabriek. Not only did Stokkermans, Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk convene at this location, but they also created a space in which objects, ideas, theories, friends and other visitors were brought together in ever-changing constellations. Visitors, for instance, were invited to join in the painting or drawing; the artists read through texts together and filmed and photographed one another; while silk-screened images (inter alia, from the texts they read) drawings, objects and paintings, as if in a continuously moving composition, were endlessly juxtaposed, shifted, changed, piled, cleared away or re-used in new objects. In an attempt to radically open themselves and the material to one another as well as to the influence of external visitors, ideas or theories, the process-based quality of forging connections, of relationships, becomes the basis for a continuously moving, organic *gesamtkunstwerk* (in the broadest sense of the word). In other words, the work could be considered as a dynamic field of connections/relationships that unfold both materially and immaterially. The concept of resonance figures significantly here: people, voices, images and ideas echo forth in one another and continue, whether or not just below the surface, to play a formative role. One thing leads to another without any comprehensible or observable cause-effect relationship that can, much less needs, to be identified. A specific image lingers and leaves its traces in a new form or an encounter or conversation inscribes itself in the material. The final installation is but a condensed selection of everything the artists created in De Fabriek. However, like coagulated sediment, it contains an entire history of was actions, ideas and connections.

One consequence of this wide-ranging notion of 'working together' and 'bringing together' is that, strictly speaking, it is virtually impossible to identify the author(s) of *Part XVIII* (despite the fact that I am writing about the work of Stokkermans, Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk). This is due, in part, simply to the fact that a significant portion of the work was made by multiple people. But this de-individualisation also forms a more structural condition of the work, given that the material harbours an immeasurable multitude of voices and ideas. In this respect, the connotation of the word 'assembly' with the industrial 'assembly line', also becomes significant in a different respect.

The conveyor belt has to be one of the most expressive symbols of the de-subjectification of labour. Socio-historically, this Fordist organisation of production introduced extreme forms of alienation. But more broadly, the radical abolition of individualism, in the forms of cooperation and collectivity, historically also played a central emancipatory role in socialist and communist movements.² As such, a critique and undermining of individual authorship, frequently accompanied by the 'de-skilling' of the artist, was also used by avant-garde and neo avant-garde artwork. Alexander Rodchenko, for example, attempted to make painting more egalitarian by using only primary colours in his abstract monochromatic canvases. That normally disapproving platitude: 'My five-year-old son/daughter could make this' was the actual objective. Everyone should be able to make art. In a similar manner, critical postmodernism demonstrated that the emphasis on individual authorship was part and parcel of the ideology of capitalism, in which individualism and competition are systematically prioritised

over collectivity and solidarity. While more directly concerning the field of art, it was emphasised that the signature of the individual artist plays an essential role in the value mechanisms of the art market.

One method that Stokkermans, Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk repeatedly employed during their residency was to pass out A4s, pre-printed or otherwise, and to continue working on them until someone decides the A4 is 'ready'. By developing a collective series of works as if they were produced on a conveyor belt, this approach explicitly questioned the notion of authorship. The resultant material is subsequently subjected to a selection process in a similarly associative — almost automated — manner. 'Yes/No/Maybe' sessions were held with all who visited, where it was intuitively decided whether the work was finished, rejected, or as a 'maybe' to be placed back into rotation.

On the one hand, unforeseen and novel associative connections and compositions emerge during the process, which would not have been possible to conceive individually or rationally (this was in fact also vital for the artistic strategy of *assemblage*, which is not, coincidentally, a derivative of 'assembly'). On the other hand, in this method of free association latent structures also manifest themselves. Sigmund Freud viewed free association as a way to break away from the limits of rational thinking and the self-censorship that it engenders (the Surrealists explicitly relied on Freud's theories in strategies like *écriture automatique*). In the spontaneity of free association, the stable, conventional order of meaning is replaced by an open-ended structure of thinking and experience that can lay bare something intrinsic about the patient. Central to psychoanalysis is the idea that latent (i.e. repressed) patterns and pathologies determine the subject's external behaviours. The psychoanalyst could discover these in the dreams, associations and 'Freudian slips' of his or her patient. Put simply, a moment of 'freedom' takes shape (the lifting of self-censure) that reveals the patient's underlying and invisible conditioning. This is also how we can understand the A4s of Stokkermans, Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk. Not only does the work realise a moment of free creation or the total abolition of authorship, it also exhibits the residues of individual style or taste and the unmistakable influence of the history of modern art that impacts the formal language and conceptual order in which the work can be understood.

2A. *and this assembly is no longer necessarily ceremonial*

In 'Zonder Richtlijn' ('Ohne Leitbild', 1967), German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno suggests a similar dynamic in art. Adorno was firmly opposed to the idea of normative guidelines. The longing for a *Leitbild*, literally a 'guiding image' — i.e. a desire for universal norms and values — is symptomatic of the modern, post-war experience of chaos and disintegration. 'The demand for aesthetic norms and guidelines arises when that which is allowed or forbidden is no longer more or less indisputable'.³ As such, the attempt to develop universal norms or guidelines is by itself regressive, representing the desire to reach back to an idealised past rather than trying to understand one's own historical moment. Norms and values — both in aesthetics and ethics — are always linked to a specific historical, social and political situation. In order to gain

acceptance, they are presented as universally true. But once specific norms and values no longer suit the spirit of the times, they become abstract conventions that only have an oppressive effect. The phrase 'This assembly is no longer necessarily ceremonial' carries the same contradiction that was central for Adorno. A ceremony is conventional; it is an artificial, constructed ritual that simultaneously appeals to an often religious or mythical 'higher' form of truth, seemingly predicated on an endless history. Ceremonies remain unchanged, after all, because 'this is how it has always been done'. Once something is no longer 'ceremonial', no longer part of the conventional circuit, one could say, its constructed nature becomes all the more visible. Walter Benjamin, Adorno's mentor and lifelong interlocutor, argued that precisely in the obsolete or in the ruin, in the things that have lost their functional self-evidence, we can recognize the lost myths and promises that these objects once embodied.

For Adorno, the main point is to identify which naturalised rules and conventions, which *Leitbilder*, determine how we think and act. Instead of pursuing guidelines, art should seek to reveal and disrupt them. Art that only produces an act of recognition, for example in standardised, harmonious melodies based on established conventions, seemingly may provide pleasure or satisfaction. However, according to Adorno, this kind of art effectively allows the viewer to conform to established conventions, inattentive to variations or unclassifiable elements. It is only in that which seems 'out of place' (the dissonant), in the unexpected and experimental, – in that which we are unable to interpret or conceptualize – that a moment of truth can appear: an instance in which the repressive, false semblance of harmony, of naturalised or universally proposed guidelines, is laid bare. Put in another way, an aesthetic moment of spontaneity or 'freedom' can demonstrate something about our lack of freedom.

Adorno's essay took on a significant role during the artists' residency.

The dialectical tension Adorno expresses between autonomy and heteronomy is a central aspect of the work of each of the artists. Midway through their working period, the idea of guidelines unexpectedly received a new impetus when De Fabriek, along with all the other arts organisations, was forced to close its doors on account of the coronavirus. Suddenly, society was quite literally defined by guidelines. Guidelines that impeded precisely the ability to join one another and collaborate.

2B. *no longer ceremonial*

Stokkermans' works is characterized by the performative dissection, interrogation and deconstruction of social conventions. By establishing explicit, artificial living regimes and conditions for himself, Stokkermans prompts situations in which the customs and categorisations that we are normally unaware of are exaggerated and displayed. Stokkermans transforms his life into form to such an extent that he becomes a mirror for the formalities of everyday life. The large stone blocks that he brought to De Fabriek from a prior work appear to allegorically allude to the paradoxical inversion between consolidation and fluidity that Stokkermans time and again manifests in his work. Stone symbolizes immutability: things that are 'fixed' are 'solid as a rock' or 'carved in

stone'. But in the work of Stokkermans, the stone blocks continuously change *form* and function to adapt to the needs of the situation and the artist. While Stokkermans moulds his life and activities into concrete forms, the contours of his environment gradually fluidify so as to shape themselves around the artist. Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk focus on modernist-inspired research into the conventions and boundaries of the visual arts, specifically photography (Van Laarhoven) and painting (Van den Hurk) and how the visual arts relate to theatre. In ongoing collaborations with theatre collective Lars Doberman, elements from sets, scenery and costumes are transformed into visual installations. On the other hand, silk-screened sheets are put together into suits that, caressed by the wind, seem to float through the space as actors. In the reciprocal exploration and intermingling of theatre and the visual arts, we can see the different perspectives and ways of looking that both forms require. For instance, the large space of De Fabriek, where objects and drawings are spread out, invites one to adopt a more dispersed gaze and spurs the visitor to wander at will through the spatial installation without gaining a complete overview. It is a gaze that slowly forms a path through the material. This changes substantially when works are held up vertically, one by one, as they were in the film shot by Stokkermans, Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk. In the film, the visual artworks almost act as characters, held aloft by an anonymous body. While the screen prints and drawings take on a life of their own, the body increasingly dissolves into the abstract composition of the image.

Van Laarhoven (who filmed the images) prefers to point the video camera downward. This disorienting, low perspective, in which feet are regularly filmed or photographed, mirrors the resistance to the bird's eye view that also characterizes the horizontal landscape of the installation. The big toe, George Bataille once wrote, anatomically speaking differentiates man from animals. The development of this tiny body part was the last evolutionary step that changed us from hominids, still part-time tree dwellers, to vertical bipeds. Despite this, the toe — the foot in general — is considered lowly and unclean, something that stands in the mud. The toe is literally the foundation for man's erect posture, yet it is hierarchically separated, being concealed and neglected, from the elevated head: the site of spiritual and intellectual exaltation.⁴ In *Part XVIII*, the foot makes its way through the material, while the work expands in a rhizomatic, horizontal fashion rather than taking on determinate forms. A silkscreened reproduction of a small image from *The Tears of Eros*, Bataille's final work, appears in various places. It is a primitive fertility figurine, an amorphous form in which, as one of the artist's remarks, you can also see a dog... or perhaps a face? The work produced during the De Fabriek residency refers to theoretically and aesthetically complex concepts, ideas and issues. However, as a chain of associative resonances, it refuses to culminate into a single, unambiguous perspective.

3. *It is Part XVIII*

A title, as I began this text, often has a delimiting function. A number, a mathematical unit, may well be exemplary of exact classification. But when

the number is part of a series, it annihilates its own delimiting function. That is to say that the number, in itself specific and defined, is a part of an endless chain. In other words, the part (in this case, *Part XVIII*) may refer to a specific constellation of time, place and material, but indirectly it also refers to a limitless future. In the case of this text, it is then perhaps not the title that *captures* the work, but rather, as an ensemble of words, forms the starting point for a multitude of paths that lead us through it.

1. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly*, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. xxi.

2 While a capitalist, industrial society produced alienated and fragmented subjects, Karl Marx argued, a communist society would be organized collectively. However, Marx' vision of communism must not be taken, as more simplistic readings something seem to suggest, as an ideology that neglects or subsumed the individual within the community. On the contrary: the community was to be the precondition for self-realisation.

3 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Zonder Richtlijnen', in Theodor W. Adorno, *Zonder richtlijnen: Parva aesthetica*, Octavo, 2010, pp 7-18, p. 8

4 Georges Bataille, 'The Big Toe' (1929), in Georges Bataille en Allan Stoekl (red.), *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, University of Minnesota Press, 1985, pp. 20-23.

Theodor W. Adorno
Zonder richtlijn



Zonder richtlijn
In plaats van een voorwoord

Toen ik indertijd door de RIAS-Funkuniversität werd uitgenodigd om over esthetische normen en richtlijnen te praten, verklaarde ik niet in staat te zijn een notie als ‘richtlijn’ over te nemen en positief te gebruiken. Het formuleren van een algemene, normatieve, onveranderlijke esthetiek van welke aard ook acht ik vandaag de dag onmogelijk. Slechts op voorwaarde dat ik dit standpunt te berde kon brengen, was het voor mij mogelijk het onderwerp te behandelen. De directie van de Funkuniversität was zo liberaal me dat toe te staan. Ik wil en kan dus niet als een sneltekenaar richtlijnen op het bord toveren, of volgens de nog altijd wijdverbreide ontologische mode meer of minder verbloemd iets leuteren over eeuwige artistieke waarden. Richtlijnen en normen kan ik alleen, hoe fragmentarisch ook, als *probleem* belichten. Ik bevind me in een vergelijkbare situatie als die welke in een beroemde tekst uit de geschiedenis van de filosofie is uitgesproken: ‘Wat er op een gegeven moment gedaan moet worden, onmiddellijk gedaan moet worden, hangt natuurlijk geheel en al af van de gegeven historische omstandigheden waarbinnen gehandeld moet worden. Maar die vraag rijst in de mist, rijst dus inderdaad als een schijnprobleem, waarop het enige antwoord – de kritiek op de vraag zelf moet zijn.’

Het woord *Leitbild*, richtlijn, met zijn licht militaristische klank, is in Duitsland waarschijnlijk pas na de Tweede Wereldoorlog populair geworden. Het hoort thuis in de sfeer van een conservatief-restauratieve cultuurkritiek aan deze en gene zijde van de grens met de DDR, die teert op motieven van de vroegere Duitse romantiek, vooral die van Novalis en Friedrich Schlegel. Doorgaans ligt hieraan een negatieve reactie op de hedendaagse kunst ten grondslag. Deze zou verscheurd zijn, beheerst door subjectieve willekeur, afstotelijk, onbegrijpelijk, opgesloten in een ivoren toren. Voor de gedaante die de moderne kunst

in al haar manifestaties als uitvloeisel van haar zakelijke ontwikkeling heeft aangenomen, worden de makers als schulden aangewezen – het zou komen door hun esoterische, volksvreemde en wellicht ontwortelde mentaliteit – in het beste geval wordt het aan hun beklagenswaardige lot toegeschreven. De affiniteit die zulke overwegingen hebben met die welke onder de twee soorten totalitaire systemen gangbaar zijn, kan ons niet ontgaan, ook niet als ze in het Westen onderhand van een humanere terminologie gebruikmaken. Ze opereren met een vulgaire sociologie. De vroegere maatschappij, de feodale en tot op zekere hoogte tevens de vroegburgerlijk-absolutistische, zou gesloten zijn geweest, de huidige open maatschappij moet het stellen zonder bindende wet. Geslotenheid wordt daarbij gelijkgesteld met het zinverlenende, positieve; ooit zou elk kunstwerk zijn plek, zijn functie, zijn legitimiteit hebben bezeten, terwijl het tegenwoordig tot willekeur gedoemd en daarom niets waard zou zijn. Wil kunst hoe dan ook als objectief geldige kunst mogelijk zijn, dan zou zij een vaste structuur behoeven, die haar de canon van goed en slecht zou leveren. Aangezien de maatschappij tegenwoordig niet meer in een dergelijke structuur voorziet, wordt verlangd, ervan uitgaande dat men zo iets niet zonder omhaal totalitair kan decreteren, dat men op zijn minst een geestelijke orde creëert, waarvan men overigens liefst beweert dat ze niet gecreëerd maar in het zijn zonder meer ontdekt dient te worden. Deze moet zorgen voor datgene waarvoor in een staat van gelukzalige naïviteit de toestand van de maatschappij en van de geest garant zouden hebben gestaan. De vraag naar esthetische normen en richtlijnen komt op wanneer het toegestane en verbodene niet langer min of meer onbetwifelbaar zijn, terwijl men het toch zonder deze bij voorbaat gegeven richtlijnen, oftewel, zoals men in Amerika pleegt te zeggen, zonder *frame of reference* niet meer redt.

Ik heb dit type gedachtegang vereenvoudigd om de vraag toe te spitsen. Maar de structuur van de cultuurkritiek die zich van het begrip *Leitbild* bedient, staat in feite niet al te ver af van de simpelheid van deze overwegingen. Het is niet die van de grote eenvoud, van het oude ware, waarop ze zich laat voorstaan,

eerder die van de inmiddels zelf al te vaak van stal gehaalde ‘terrible simplificateur’. Hoe plausibel de redeneringen ook klinken, hoe effectief ze ook appelleren aan hen die zich door de nieuwe kunst buitengesloten voelen en woedend worden over wat deze uitspreekt en wat zij zichzelf niet kunnen toestaan, toch klopt er niets van. De sociale beslotenheid waarvan men het verdwijnen omwille van de kunst betreurt, was heteronoom, was de mensen verregaand opgedrongen. Zij ging niet te gronde in een historische zondeval; ook niet doordat het zogenaamde midden op noodlottige wijze verloren was gegaan. Integendeel, de dwang waar vandaag de dag zo veel mensen naar snakken was ondraaglijk geworden omdat het geestelijke gehalte waarmee hij zichzelf rechtvaardigde, en dat men vanwege zijn bindende kracht ophemelt, door het voortschrijdende inzicht onwaar was gebleken en niet meer bindend kon zijn. Schaamt men zich al om zoals honderdvijftig jaar geleden te dwepen met de middeleeuwen, omdat men zich bewust is van de onmacht van een dergelijke geestdrift en van de onmogelijkheid de tijd terug te draaien naar een preburgerlijk stadium, dan kan men al helemaal geen geestelijke toestand proclameren die zonder sociale structuur zoals die in de middeleeuwen of in de tijd van het gildewezen bestond zonder reële basis – dus echt ontworteld zou zijn.

Het argument dat de esthetische kwaliteit van kunstwerken uit de preburgerlijke tijd door rondheid, unanimité en onmiddellijke evidentie boven de moderne kunst verheven zou zijn, leidt tot het opwarmen van de zogenaamde eeuwigheidswaarden. De kwalitatieve voorrang van kunstwerken uit de zogenaamd zinrijke tijden is echter twijfelachtig. De aanleiding voor het opblazen van de bijbehorende orde was geen abstracte opeenvolging van tijdsgewrichten of ‘denkstijlen’, maar de kritische behoefte had een essentieel aandeel in de verandering. Bach verschilt niet alleen van voorgangers als Schütz of Johann Kaspar Fischer vanwege de tijdgeest met zijn ontluikende subjectieve gestemdheid, maar ook door het stringente besef van de tekortkomingen van zijn voorgangers. Een fuga van Bach is als fuga in de eerste plaats gewoon beter, sterker van opbouw, verder uitgewerkt en consequenter dan de rudimentaire composities

uit de zeventiende eeuw; de schilderkunst heeft ruimtelijk perspectief met pijn en moeite moeten aanleren. In de verfoeide negentiende eeuw heeft men zulke dingen nog durven uitspreken, in plaats van als vanzelfsprekend ervan uit te gaan dat het naïevere, minder van zichzelf bewuste in de kunst een hogere waardigheid zou toekomen. De polemieken van Gottfried Keller tegen de anachronistische epische schrijver Jeremias Gotthelf is een grandioos document van een dergelijke intellectuele onbevangenheid en moed om voor zijn overtuiging uit te komen. Vandaag de dag oefent het historisme, dat allesbehalve naïeve vormingsideaal, echter een dusdanige terreur uit dat niemand het meer aandurft bekrompen en onvrije producten precies dat als insufficiëntie voor te houden, zonder meteen daarvoor vroegtijdigheid als excuus aan te voeren, omdat die iets heiligs zou hebben, dat niet zelden aan het lagere niveau van de productiekrachten en niet aan de ademtocht van de eerste scheppingsdag moet worden toegeschreven. Hoe minder naïef het esthetisch bewustzijn is, des te hoger staat naïviteit aangeschreven.

Vaak wordt daarbij de eenheid van de stijl waartoe de werken behoren, hun kanalisering binnen het kader van traditionele werkwijzen, met hun specifieke kwaliteit gelijkgesteld. Men ziet over het hoofd dat de esthetische kwaliteit de resultante is van de specifieke eis aan het afzonderlijke werk en de omvattende eenheid van de stijl waarvan het deel uitmaakt. De kanalisering door de stijl, de ingesleten paden die men zonder al te grote inspanning kan volgen, worden met de zaak zelf, de realisering van hun specifieke objectiviteit verward. Grote kunst beperkt zich zelden of nooit tot een een-op-een relatie tussen het afzonderlijke werk en zijn stijl. De stijl wordt evenzeer gecreëerd door het afzonderlijke werk als dit wordt geconstitueerd door voeling te hebben met die stijl. Er is alle reden om aan te nemen dat ook in het verleden de belangrijkste werken die zijn waarin het subject en zijn uitdrukking juist niet zo'n onbetwiste een-op-een relatie hebben met het geheel als de stijlvastheid suggereert. Alleen oppervlakkig gezien lijken de grote kunstwerken uit het verleden afgerond en simpelweg identiek met hun taal. In feite zijn zij krachtvelden waarin het conflict tussen de aanbevolen

norm en wat erin tot klinken wil komen, wordt uitgevochten. Hoe hoger in rang, des te energieker vechten ze dit conflict uit, vaak door af te zien van het affirmatief geslaagde waarvan men zo hoog opgeeft. Zelfs als het waar is dat de grote kunstwerken uit het verleden niet mogelijk waren zonder stijl, dan nog hebben ze zich tegelijkertijd ook steeds tegen de stijl gekeerd. Deze heeft de productiekrachten zowel gevoed als aan banden gelegd. Treedt in de hedendaagse muziek de dissonant vastberaden op de voorgrond, om uiteindelijk de consonant en daarmee ook het begrip dissonant zelf af te schaffen, dan kan tegelijk worden aangetoond dat componisten al eeuwenlang werden aangetrokken door de dissonant als mogelijkheid om onderdrukte subjectiviteit, lijden onder onvrijheid, de waarheid over heersende wantoestanden uit te spreken. De ultieme momenten waren die waarin het dissonante element doorbrak en zich niettemin oploste in het equilibrium van het geheel; innerlijke geschiedschrijving van de negativiteit en tevens anticiperend beeld van verzoening. – Ontdoet de hedendaagse schilderkunst zich van de laatste gelijkenis met de concrete werkelijkheid, dan kan tegelijk worden gesteld dat de belangrijke schilderijen en beeldhouwwerken uit het verleden alleen vanwege de conventie, de dwang van de opdrachtgever of van de markt, a priori genoodzaakt waren een onverbloemde gelijkenis met de wereld der dingen te tonen. Net zoals de musici zich voorbij de gelukzalige welluidendheid gedreven voelde, werden de schilders door de macht van het werk boven de conventie uitgetild: ik noem, op het gevaar af al te bekende dingen te herhalen, juist de namen van twee schilders die goed thuis waren op theologisch gebied, namelijk Grünewald en El Greco. De uitspraak van Valéry dat het beste aan het nieuwe in de kunst steeds beantwoordt aan een oude behoefte, is zo verstrekkend dat de betekenis ervan nog nauwelijks valt te overzien; zij verklaart niet alleen de uitgesproken aspiraties van het nieuwe, die men denigrerend als experimenten afdoet, als noodzakelijk antwoord op onopgeloste vragen, maar heft tegelijk de ideologische schijn op van een gelukzalige geborgenheid, die het verleden vaak alleen aanneemt

omdat het oude leed daarin niet meer direct is te lezen als *chiffre* van het leed van de huidige wereld.

Omdat de vooronderstellingen waarop ze berusten wegvielen, kunnen de normen uit het verleden niet opnieuw van stal worden gehaald; je op hen oriënteren zou niet minder willekeurig zijn dan die toestand die het cultuurconservatisme wat al te makkelijk voor anarchistisch uitmaakt. De normen, waarvan inmiddels zelfs de voormalige legitimatie in twijfel wordt getrokken, waren in het beste geval zinvol krachtens dat wat Hegel substantialiteit noemt – wat inhoudt dat ze niet simpelweg als van buitenaf opgelegd tegenover het leven en het bewustzijn stonden, maar ondanks alle twijfelachtigheid tot op zekere hoogte een eenheid vormden met het leven en de geest. Zonder een dergelijke substantialiteit, zonder dat de geest, die zich overeenkomstig die normen gedraagt, zich in die normen kan terugvinden, is het vergeefs normen en richtlijnen na te jagen. Dat men daarbij het verleden aftast, is geen toeval. Men voelt dat substantiële normen ontbreken, dat het verkondigen ervan een daad van willekeur zou betekenen en dubieus zou blijven. Aan het verleden schrijft men daarentegen substantialiteit toe. Men miskent alleen dat het proces dat deze substantialiteit tenietdeed, onomkeerbaar is. De geest is niet in staat om, zoals het bij Hegel heet, zich omwille van de kunst weer te verbinden met wereldbeschouwingen uit het verleden, deze zich substantieel toe te eigenen. Heel de kritische stroming van het nominalisme, die de abstracte prioriteit van het begrip boven het daaronder gevatte particuliere onderuithaalde, kan in het esthetische domein net zomin met een pennenstreek van tafel worden geveegd als in de metafysica en de kennisleer. Het verlangen daarnaar, als een verlangen naar houding en orde toch al verdacht, biedt geen enkele garantie voor de waarheid en objectiviteit van wat het beoogt. Vandaag de dag is Nietzsches inzicht dat de rechtvaardiging van een zeker gehalte vanuit de behoefte hieraan eerder een argument tegen dan vóór dat gehalte is, even treffend als tachtig jaar geleden.

Die behoefte is ontegenzeggelijk toegenomen; op zijn minst trachten degenen die zich positief noemen haar zonder

ophouden bij de mensen erin te hameren. De kritiek zou echter die behoefte evenzeer moeten doorlichten als de situatie waaruit ze oprijst en waartegen ze schijnbaar van leer trekt. Beide zijn eigenlijk hetzelfde, een verdinglijkt bewustzijn. De historische beweging heeft de heersende rede als doel op zich en datgene waarop ze afgaat als pure materie voor die rede, uit elkaar getrokken. Daarmee heeft ze tevens de idee van objectiviteit en waarheid, die ze eerst formuleerde, uitgehold. De ineenstorting hiervan is vervolgens het lijden van de reflectie geworden. De gestolde antithese van subject en object werkt evenwel door in een houding die zich abstract, los van elk verband, geobjectiveerd normen voorstelt, die als haringen aan de zoldering hangen en waar de hongerigen naar happen. Deze normen worden even uiterlijk, even vervreemd gecontrasteerd met het eigen bewustzijn, dat ze net zomin als zijn eigen zaak ervaart als de oppermachtige wereld der dingen in de huidige toestand, waarvan een dictaat uitgaat waar de mensen zich zonder protest, alsof ze machteloos waren, in schikken. Het woord waarden, dat sinds Nietzsche voor niet substantiële, door de mensen afgescheiden normen in zwang is geraakt en dat niet voor niets aan de sfeer van het dingachtige bij uitstek was ontleend, die van de economische ruilverhouding, benoemt beter dan elke kritiek wat er met de roep om richtlijnen aan de hand is. Schreeuwt men erom, dan zijn ze al niet meer mogelijk; verkondigt men ze vanuit een wanhopige wens, dan worden ze behekst, worden ze blinde en heteronome machten die de onmacht alleen maar versterken en in zoverre met de totalitaire mentaliteit overeenstemmen. In de normen en richtlijnen die de mensen aan een kant-en-klare oriëntatie voor hun geestelijke productie zouden moeten helpen, terwijl het meest wezenlijke principe daarvan toch vrijheid is, weerspiegelt zich alleen de zwakte van hun Ik tegenover omstandigheden waarover ze geen enkele zeggenschap menen te hebben en de blinde macht van wat nu eenmaal is zoals het is. Zij die de zogenaamde chaos van tegenwoordig bezwerend een kosmos van waarden voorhouden, tonen daarmee slechts aan hoezeer deze chaos al de leidraad is geworden van hun eigen handelen en hun eigen voorstellingen. Zij miskennen dat artistieke normen

en criteria, willen zij werkelijk meer zijn dan tekens van een reglementaire mentaliteit, juist niet als kant-en-klaar, als geldig voorbij het terrein van de levende ervaring gehypostaseerd kunnen worden. Voor de kunst bestaan er geen andere normen meer dan die welke binnen de logica van hun eigen beweging tot ontwikkeling komen en waaraan een bewustzijn dat ze eerbiedigt, produceert en ook weer verandert, invulling kan geven. Daartoe zijn echter maar heel weinig mensen in staat, nog afgezien van het feit dat dit met het oog op het verval van alle gegeven expressieve talen moeilijk tot onmogelijk is geworden, laat staan dat ze eraan willen werken. De compacte meerderheid, die hiertegenover met richtlijnen en normen schermt, heeft het zo makkelijk omdat ze moeiteloos de weg van de minste weerstand als die van het hogere ethos, van de verwortelde gebondenheid en zo mogelijk existentiële waardigheid kan propageren.

Verplichtende normen zouden vandaag de dag louter voorgeschreven en daarom niet verplichtend zijn, zelfs als ze gehoorzaamheid afdwingen. Het volgen van die normen zou niets anders dan volgzaamheid betekenen en op een pastiche of kopie neerkomen. Toch is het voor de meeste mensen moeilijk in te zien waar het op aankomt: dat het onverbloemd afwijzen van de statische en abstracte norm niet betekent dat de artistieke productie aan relativiteit ten prooi valt. Het is zo hachelijk dit staande te houden, omdat je daarmee dicht in de buurt komt van degenen die, om zich vooral niet onbemind te maken, op de kritiek die ze uitoefenen meteen de plechtige verzekering laten volgen dat het eigenlijk niet zo kwaad is bedoeld, en wat ze door de voorkeur naar buiten hebben gejaagd door de achterdeur stiekem weer naar binnen smokkelen. Ook wie tegen deze gewoonte een gezond wantrouwen koestert, kan niet ontkennen dat de kracht die uit het opstellen van richtlijnen spreekt, nu eenmaal erin bestaat zonder enige bedrieglijke ruggensteun, puur vanuit de zaak zelf, goed en fout, waar en onwaar te onderscheiden. Het afzien daarvan, waarmee de esthetische ernst wordt prijsgegeven en het procedé openlijk wordt overgeleverd aan de willekeur die stilzwijgend ook het opstellen van richtlijnen motiveert, is net zo zwak als omgekeerd de aan autoriteit gebonden mentaliteit in de

kunst. Het inzicht in de concrete, van het algemene voorschrift geëmancipeerde wetmatigheid van de kunstwerken mag echter niet alsnog tot een catalogus van vrijheden en verboden verstarren. Ik heb ooit de artistieke productie en het proces van kennisverwerving dat daarmee correspondeert vergeleken met een slecht aangeschreven mijnwerker zonder licht, die weliswaar niet ziet wat hij doet, maar wiens tastzin hem toch precies vertelt hoe het er met de mijngang voorstaat, hoe hard de weerstanden zijn waarop hij stuit, waar de glibberige plekken en gevaarlijke kanten zijn, en die met afgemeten stappen voortschrijdt, zonder dat dit ooit aan het toeval is overgeleverd. Als men daaruit zou willen concluderen dat het onoorbaar is meer inzicht te willen krijgen in wat er goed en fout is in de hedendaagse kunst, en dat men, letterlijk blind, alleen aan de samenhang van deze of gene afzonderlijke conceptie moet gehoorzamen, dan zou een resignatie van het denken met het oog op het duister van de esthetische gestalte al te voorbarig zijn. Doordat de aard van de zaken die nog moeten worden gerealiseerd, en die zich aan het sensorium van de kunstenaar meedelen, middels reflectie tot een zelfkritisch bewustzijn moeten worden verheven, wil hij tenminste iets menswaardigs tot stand brengen, is de productie, ondanks alle concrete immanentie in het specifieke object, toch ook op het begrip aangewezen. De verborgen rechtvaardiging daarvan is er mogelijk in gelegen dat zelfs in de individueelste, met geen van de van buitenaf aangedragen schemata corresponderende impulsen van het kunstwerk, een objectieve wetmatigheid overleeft zoals die eertijds de openbare, objectieve vormtaal van de kunst uitmaakte. Het enige mogelijke antwoord op de behoefte aan normen – voor zover dit niet louter zwakte is, maar als zwakte tevens wijst op een daadwerkelijke nood – zou zijn dat de productie, zonder te lonken naar welk extern criterium ook, zich overgeeft aan de dwang van haar hier en nu, in de hoop dat door het consequent vasthouden aan een dergelijke ongedekte individuatie deze alsnog objectiviteit blijkt te bezitten; dat het bijzondere, waaraan het kunstwerk in zijn zuiverheid recht laat wedervaren, zich als het algemene ontpopt.

Ondanks alle voorbehoud is het zaak dit iets algemener te verklaren. Elk kunstwerk zou vandaag de dag tot in detail uitgewerkt moeten zijn, het mag geen dood punt, geen heteronoom ontvangen vorm bevatten. Of dat beoogd wordt, of dat het werk de aanspraak op het absolute, die het door zijn pure bestaan al maakt, reeds in aanzet in het geheel niet meer respecteert, beslist over zijn vormniveau. In een situatie waarin geen stilistische taal meer voorhanden is die het gemiddelde optilt, ervan uitgaande dat zij dat ooit heeft gedaan, hebben vermoedelijk alleen werken van het hoogste vormniveau nog recht van bestaan; het middelmatige werk, dat de inspanning alles tot in het kleinste detail uit te werken schuwt, is met onmiddellijke ingang een slecht werk geworden. Maar hoe de kunst te werk moet gaan om aan zulke rigoureuze criteria te voldoen, hangt niet af van een toevallige, enkel zelf opgestelde regel, die men vervolgens navolgt. Zo nauwgezet als het advies van Hans Sachs aan Walther von Stolzing het verval aanduidt van wat men tegenwoordig voor normen en richtlijnen laat doorgaan, zo weinig geeft hij zich rekenschap van het objectieve gehalte van de subjectieve werkwijze. De binding die men vergeefs met behulp van citaten uit de wereldbeschouwing probeert te halen, schuilt in eerste instantie veeleer in het materiaal waarmee de kunstenaar moet werken. Het is de nauwelijks te overschatten verdienste van de stromingen die onder de namen nieuwe zakelijkheid en functionalisme bekend zijn geworden, dit te hebben onderkend. In het materiaal is evenwel geschiedenis gesedimenteerd. Alleen wie in staat is het historisch noodzakelijke en het onherroepelijk verouderde in het materiaal zelf te onderscheiden, zal materiaalconform produceren. Kunstenaars houden dat voor ogen wanneer ze kleuren, vormen, klanken vermijden die als natuurlijke materialen wel mogelijk zouden zijn, maar die vanwege historische associaties in strijd zijn met de specifieke betekenis van wat ze op dat moment en op die plek tot stand moeten brengen. Dat het materiaal niet uit abstracte, atomistische oerelementen bestaat, die op zichzelf genomen volstrekt richtingloos zouden zijn en waarvan de artistieke intenties zich naar willekeur meester zouden kunnen maken, maar zelf al intenties meebrengt voor het

werk, is slechts een andere manier om hetzelfde uit te drukken. Het werk kan die intenties alleen binnen zijn eigen samenhang opnemen doordat het ze begrijpt, zich ernaar voegt en ze daardoor modificeert. Er wordt niet met kleuren geschilderd, niet met klanken gecomponeerd, maar respectievelijk met kleur- en klankrelaties. Het artistieke begrip van materiaal zou verarmen en zijn objectiviteit verliezen indien het schoon schip zou maken en de bepalingen zou negeren van datgene waarmee het zich bezighoudt.

De sfeer waarin dwingend maar zonder een beroep te doen op bedrieglijke richtlijnen kan worden uitgemaakt wat goed en fout is, is echter de technische sfeer. Dit inzicht, dat in de esthetische geschriften van Valéry op onvergelykbare wijze onder woorden is gebracht, zou alle nieuwe kunst blijvend voor ogen moeten staan, wil ze niet daadwerkelijk tot blind toeval afglijden. Van de technische aanwijzingen van het kunstonderwijs, die nog op uiterlijke normen en werkwijzen gericht zijn, maar volgens die maatstaven heel goed onderscheid kunnen maken, moeten we opklimmen naar een begrip van techniek dat voorbij al dat soort schijnbaar gewaarborgde voorstellingen, puur vanuit de complexiteit van de zaak deze voorschrijft hoe ze moet zijn en hoe niet. Als daartegen wordt ingebracht dat techniek louter middel is en alleen het gehalte het doel, is dat een halve waarheid, zoals al het triviale. Want er is geen gehalte in de kunst aanwezig dat niet door bemiddeling van iets in verschijning treedt, en techniek is het omvattende begrip van een dergelijke bemiddeling. Over de vraag of een kunstwerk al dan niet zinvol is, kan enkel worden geoordeeld met het oog op de uitvoering van technische wetmatigheden; de betekenis ervan kan enkel worden begrepen binnen de centra van zijn configuratie, niet als iets wat alleen als bedoeling of uitdrukking erin is gelegd.

De meest belangwekkende vragen zouden evenwel die naar de waarheid van een dergelijke betekenis zijn, naar de waarheid van het gehalte, en ten slotte de vraag of het traditionele begrip van de zinvolle organisatie eigenlijk nog voldoet aan wat tegenwoordig van het kunstwerk wordt verlangd. De schaduw van relativiteit die daarmee uiteindelijk over het esthetische oordeel

valt, is geen andere dan die van een betrekkelijkheid die alles wat door de mens is gemaakt aankleeft. De te snelle gevolgtrekking uit een dergelijke radicale vraag, in de richting van een empathische filosofie van de kunst los van de bemiddeling van de techniek, zou er slechts toe leiden dat men op basis van abstracte redenering de specifieke beslissingen van de artistieke werkwijze saboteert. De onzekerheid van de kunst als product van een sterfelijk bewustzijn mag niet worden misbruikt als uitvlucht om de duidelijk herkenbare kwalitatieve verschillen te loochenen en de gladde kitsch gelijk te stellen met het grote werk, waarvan de grootheid nauwelijks kan worden gescheiden van de eigen breekbaarheid. Dus als de ongepolijste openheid van de vraag naar esthetische betekenis het vandaag de dag mogelijk maakt dat er werken verschijnen waarbij die betekenis twijfelachtig is, dan heeft degene die graag richtlijnen opstelt geen enkel recht ze met gekrijs weg te jagen. Wat hij voor geborgen houdt, is van meet af aan meer verloren dan wat hem verloren voorkomt. Alleen in de zone die het conformisme liefst als experimenteel zou verketteren, vindt de mogelijkheid van het artistiek ware nog haar toevlucht.

Annotaties

Zonder richtlijn

- 1 Het woord *Leitbild* is moeilijk te vertalen in het Nederlands, omdat geen enkel Nederlands woord alle connotaties omvat: voorbeeld, ideaal, leidraad, voorschrift. Adorno geeft zelf aan dat het woord een militaristische klank heeft, daarom is hier gekozen voor het woord richtlijn.
- 2 Deze ‘beroemde tekst’ is van Karl Marx en staat in een brief aan Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis van 22 februari 1881.
- 3 De term ‘terrible simplificateur’ is afkomstig van de Zwitserse cultuurhistoricus Jacob Burckhardt (1818 - 1897), die in een van zijn brieven schrijft: ‘Mijn denkbeeld van de “terrible simplificateurs” die ons oude Europa zullen overspoelen is allesbehalve aangenaam; en hier en daar zie ik in mijn fantasie zo’n kerel al in levenden lijve voor me.’ Deze term is onder meer gebruikt om Hitler te karakteriseren.
- 4 Personages uit *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868) van Richard Wagner. In deze komische opera draait het om de tegenstelling tussen enerzijds de formele regels voor een *Meisterlied* en anderzijds de vernieuwing, hier gepersonifieerd in Hans Sachs en Walther von Stolzing die de regels willen verruimen. Het advies van Hans Sachs aan Walther von Stolzing waarop Adorno doelt, houdt in dat deze goed het droombeeld voor de geest moet houden, de inspiratie zal dan vanzelf op het juiste tijdstip en de juiste plaats komen.

John Maus
Listening music



Today, when tradition no longer prescribes anything for music, its enigmatic character emerges, weak and needy, like a question mark—one that, admittedly, becomes blurred the moment anyone asks it to confess what it actually is.

 Jacques Attali writes, 'the only thing common to all music is that it gives structure to noise.'ⁱⁱ

When asking the question 'what is music,' perhaps it becomes that 'structured sound' is ~~not~~ the answer. Perhaps music can be listening structureless sound, silence, or what is neither sound nor silence.

Attali continues, 'music, the organization of noise, reflects the manufacture of society; it constitutes the ... that make up society.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Perhaps suppositions as Attali's – that music is 'the organization of noise' – 'reflect the manufacture of society' as much if not more than this supposed 'organization' itself.

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For the ancient poets, music, 'the art of the muses,' is magic. They write at length of Arion, Amphion, Timotheus, and especially, of Orpheus. They write of Hermes' gift of the lyre to Apollo, and of the divine muses themselves, born of Mnemosyne and Zeus, those touched by them sing.

In the Hebrew Bible, God orders his high priest, Aaron, to wear a ceremonial robe with *little* bells when he enters the Holy of Holies, trumpet blasts bring an entire city to ruin; David's enchanting harp impels restlessness from the heart of king Saul.

All the same, the 'gods cannot take fear away from man, for they bear its petrified sound within them as they bear their names.'⁴ And so, from the poets to the philosophers music becomes a science of harmony.

Though this becoming 'remains impotent to the extent that it develops from the cry of terror which is the duplication, the tautology, of terror itself.'⁵

The Pythagoreans are fascinated that a plucked-string stopped in half sounds an octave higher than the whole; stopped in third, a fifth higher than the whole; and so on, analogically for them is the harmony of

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everything, the world as a harmonious cosmos, and not only the harmony of the spheres, but also of the body and soul, and so on.

In his *Timaeus*, Plato writes that music is 'to correct any discord which may have arisen in the courses of the soul, and to be our ally in bringing her into harmony and agreement with herself,'⁶ against 'irrational pleasure, or the irregular and graceless ways which prevail among mankind generally.'⁷

In his *Republic* Plato banishes all music but the warlike and the pedantic, 'these two harmonies I ask you to leave; the strain of courage, and the strain of temperance; these, I say, leave.'⁸

If music must be a way of listening and not what it listens, if music must be listened with and not to so that what is listened with music is listened as music, then perhaps we ask what music is by asking how music is different from other ways of listening; listening the wind blowing through the grass, the birds singing in the trees, the sonorous star in the night sky, and so on.

Perhaps music is different from other ways of listening in that the wind, the birds, the star, and so on, can be listened with music. Though perhaps not, as perhaps anything can be listen-

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ed with anything; the birds with the wind, the wind with the star, the star with the birds, and so on. Perhaps no thing demands to be listened with the way we call music, as perhaps no thing demands to be listened with the birds, the wind, the star, and so on.

Perhaps music is different from other ways of listening in that it affects. Though perhaps not, as any listening the wind, the birds, the star, and so on, perhaps make sure.

Perhaps music is different from other ways of listening in that it is a disinterested listening. Though perhaps not, as any listening the wind, the birds, the star, and so on, perhaps make sure.

Perhaps music is different from other ways of listening in that the world it is listened is special. Though perhaps not, as perhaps listening is always a special world; the world of the grass, the world of the trees, the world of the night sky, and so on. Besides, the question 'where is music' may not be the question 'what is music?' If a question about the listening situation in a concert hall is not a question about the listening situation in an automobile, then perhaps neither is a question about the same way of listening in either.

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Perhaps music is different from other ways of listening in that it is the listening that is of concern for the State. Is there a grand architecture especially to listen the wind? Is there law concerning bird song? Is human being driven to frenzy by the stars? And so on.

Perhaps music is not the listening that is of concern for the State, but is only a concern of the State; the concern is for no thing but the concern. Though perhaps not, e.g., as Gilles Deleuze reminds us with color, the State may only allow knowledge of black and white, that being its instatement, but this instatement is not what color is, color is what allows this instatement. 'This is why we identify, in the last analysis, the domain of intuitions as immediate representations, the analytic predicates of existence, and the *descriptions* of mixtures or aggregates.'⁹

As long as predicates are brought to bear upon individuals, we must recognize in them equal immediacy which blends with their analytic character. To have a color is no more general than to be green, since it is only this color that is green, and this green that has this shade, that are related to the individual subject. This rose is not red without having the red color of this rose. This red is not a color without having the color of this red.¹⁰

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Do we find ourselves supposing here that some thing exceeds the State? Cannot knowledge change without necessitating an outside about which it changes? Perhaps knowledge is not knowledge of some thing rather it is in and of itself. If so, there is no music but what the State instates, and so the question 'what is music' has an answer, music is what the State states it is.

Debussy's music, like the poetry of Mallarmé, disrupts familiar meaning conventions .. it continually blocks rather than fulfills expectations. The result is a disruption of conventional musical intelligibility and, by implication, the production of a system of counter-intelligibility¹¹

Michael Shapiro reminds us that Attali's answer to the question 'what is music' is a Statist answer in that it falls short of questioning music's capacity to change the State. He reminds us Attali's suspicion that 'the entire history of tonal music involves an attempt to make people believe in a consensual representation of the world'¹² is itself already an attempt to make people believe in a consensual representation of the world: that music is this or that, where for Shapiro what is important is what it is not-yet

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The answer 'music is what the State states it is' does not concern the question 'what is music' anyways, for music, only in that the instatement of it changes, is not different from other ways of listening. Was not the wind known as the breath of God? Were not bird calls known as solemn omens? Were not the sonorous movements of the heavenly bodies known as music *par excellence*? And so on

Music no longer has the task of representing a reality that is preexisting for everyone in common, but rather of revealing, in its isolation, the very cracks that reality would like to cover over in order to exist in safety, and that, in so doing, it repels reality¹³

The Middle Ages inherit, from the Pythagoreans through Boethius, the instatement of music as 'a prompt to have us transport ourselves to eternal numbers, where God is more fully found than in the empirical qualities of the temporal world.'¹⁴ *Auctoritas*, the authority of the Fathers, couples this inheritance as music is instated against the 'sensual heathen cults.'

Clement of Alexandria writes of 'the new harmony which bears God's name, the Levitical song,'¹⁵ instating it against the 'raving, intoxicated artful sorcery'¹⁶ intent on 'corrupting human life, subjecting to the yoke of

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extremest bondage the truly noble freedom of those who live as free citizens under heaven.¹⁷

But not such is my song, which has come to loose, and that speedily, the bitter bondage of tyrannizing demons, and leading us back to the mild and loving yoke of piety, recalls to heaven those that had been cast prostrate to the earth. It alone has tamed men.¹⁸

Ephraem Syrus writes, 'where the chant of psalms resounds in deep contrition, there God is present with His angels. Where the playing of the cithara and dancing occurs, there is a feast of the Devil.'¹⁹

In his *De Institutione Musica*, Boethius stratifies music in three: uppermost, *musica mundana*, the music of the spheres; below that, *musica humana*, the harmony of body and soul; and bottommost, *musica instrumentalis*, or music as Attali imagines it, 'organized noise.'

Boethius also seems to have been the first to use the term *quadrivium*, coupling music, already a science, with the arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy.

Finally, Boethius stratifies the origins, or making of music in the *artes liberales* and the *artes mechanicae*, the first, an activity of the upper-classes, is held above the second, an

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activity of the lower-classes involved, moreover, in materiality and in the irrationality of the *instinctus naturalis*, something which is of the utmost contempt for Boethius and the Middle Ages. Now 'composers' are held over-and-above 'performers' and music is bound to the 'greater certainties of that intellect' so that:

None may enter into discourse on a specific subject unless he has satisfied certain conditions or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so. More exactly, not all areas of discourse are equally open and penetrable, some are forbidden territory, while others are virtually open to the winds and stand, without any prior restrictions, open to all.²⁰

Perhaps we can only think music's difference from other ways of listening through what it often listens. Perhaps the things that would seem, to this type of inquiry, to be mere epiphenomena, camouflaging additions, incidentals from which its essence should be extracted, are precisely its unfolded life, in which it has its truth and in which its essence may be, in fact, first determined.²¹

And so, are not three things most often listened with the way we call music: sound, silence, and everything-else?

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What is sound and why is it often listened with the way we call music?

Perhaps we should not think sound as anything that can be listened, as perhaps such thinking offers us no difference between these three things; sound, silence, and everything-else. Perhaps we should think sound as some thing that is sometimes there with listening, so that when it is there with listening, listening somehow both listens and is *at the same time as sound*.²²

Perhaps sound, rather than, e.g., everything-else, may be most often what is listened with the way we call music, so that many may even suppose the two inseparable, because it is some thing that must be there, open to all. Though perhaps different listenings listen it differently, sound is there, open to all, and so perhaps each listening there that can listen it may. Besides, is not that which is not there but listened with music, e.g., everything-else not there, often offered there, or sounded, to be listened as music, with what we call 'performance' or 'composition'?

To be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity, and as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, the margin—at least the sound that is musically listened to, that is

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gathered and scrutinized for itself, not, however, as an acoustic phenomenon but as a resonant meaning, a meaning whose *sense* is supposed to be found in resonance, and only in resonance.²³

Perhaps this 'edge' is why the verb 'listen' is usually intransitive and usually followed by the preposition 'to', this 'edge' being the some thing other than listening with which listening goes.

What is silence and why is it perhaps often listened with the way we call music?

While perhaps sound is open to all, perhaps silence is what is also open to all that offers the possibility to listen listenings, so that when listened with the way of listening we call music silence may be only listening the way of listening we call music, without having to listen sound or everything-else. And so it is that perhaps 'music that remains true to itself would rather not exist at all, it would rather—in the most literal sense, as it so often appears in Webern's work—be extinguished.'²⁴

Silence may offer the possibility to listen the way of listening we call music without having to listen sound or everything else, but does not that forbid us from using silence as way of thinking the specialty of music? Perhaps we

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can think music's difference from other ways of listening through thinking what is often listened with it, but with silence, perhaps we are not thinking what is listened, as silence, when listened as music, perhaps becomes listening this way of listening itself.

What is everything-else and why is it perhaps often listened with the way we call music?

When Robert Schumann writes of a 'gloriousness sounding more wonderful than one ever hears on earth'²⁵ he may writing be of everything-else, in this instance, the ghostly non-sounds 'in his head' that sound like sound. Perhaps everything-else is what is often listened with the way we call music that is neither sound nor silence. Perhaps everything-else, like sound, may be there: a color, a body, a movement, and so on, and may be not there, e.g., 'in his head,' a number, a memory, and so on. Perhaps neither sound nor silence, everything-else is everything else that can be listened even and especially with the way of listening we call music.

LaMonte Young, Alvin Lucier, Robert Ashley, and so on, all offer to be listened with music. what is everything else; gestures, thoughts, activities, and so on. Even Stockhausen, in his *Aus den sieben Tagen*, offers, e.g., insomnia,

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starvation, paralysis, to be listened with music. While Olivier Messiaen, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Franz Liszt, and other synesthetes, remind that color, shapes, numbers, graphemes, and so on, can be listened with the way of listening we call music as well. 'The music hall is well lit' reminds George Brecht

Composition #5 1960 / Turn a butterfly. (or any number of butterflies) loose in the performance area. When the composition is over, be sure to allow the butterfly to fly away outside. The composition may be any length, but if an unlimited amount of time is available, the doors and windows may be opened before the butterfly is turned loose and the composition may be considered finished when the butterfly flies away²⁶

What could be gained by neglecting all these dimensions of music and how might that neglect 'reflect the manufacture of society'?

We are still a long way from asking this.

Toward the end of the Middle Ages, the burgeoning ideologies of individuality and originality necessitate a radical transformation in the instatement of music: from number to listening, from origin in discovery to origin in creation, and from value in fidelity to authority to value in ingenuity.

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This distinctively Renaissance instatement of music has the advantage over its Medieval counterpart in that soliciting individuality and originality, instead of forbidding them, negotiates their potential in perhaps a much more subtle manner, a negotiating moreover mastered by commercial capitalism.

Music, for the Middle Ages, as for the ancient philosophers, is the science of harmony. In the Renaissance, music is instated as an object of individual enjoyment, having more to do with listening than with number.

This is impossible to determine from what is listened itself; a rondeau by Machaut may 'be an object of individual enjoyment' just as easily as a motet by Josquin. The significant change then, is not so much what is listened, the music, but its instatement, what is said about it.

Tinctoris reinforces this instatement when, in one of his eight rules of counterpoint, he writes, *quod quidem penitus aurium iudicio relinquendum cen-seo*, 'this, however, is in my opinion to be left enti-rely to the judgment of the ears.'

The philologist and student of ancient music, Girolamo Mei, reinforces this instatement in a

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way altogether unthinkable in the Middle Ages when he writes:

The true end of science is altogether different from that of art [] The science of music goes about diligently investigating and considering all the qualities and properties of the existing constitution and ordering of musical tones, whether these are simple qualities or comparative, like the consonances, and this for no other aim than to come to know the truth itself, the perfect goal of all speculation, and as a by-product the false. It then lets art exploit as it sees fit, without any limitation, those tones about which science has learned the truth.²⁷

For the Middle Ages, to think that music has its origin in creation than in discovery is blasphemy. 'God alone creates,' writes Saint Thomas Aquinas; 'no mortal being can create.'²⁸ Saint Augustine agrees, the *creatura non potest creare*, the 'creature cannot create.'

Through the Renaissance, individuality and originality are reinforced so emphatically that the origin of music, categorically, becomes creation as opposed to discovery.

In both [the melodic inventor and the contrapuntist] this is to be ascribed more to the energies of genius, and to some natural and inborn talent than to craftsmanship. And this can be proved through those who never studied

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music, and nevertheless show a miraculous ability in inventing melodies, as is apparent in our vernacular [folk song], the Celtic [French] or the German, but also through those who are masters of counterpoint although they were often poorly taught—to say nothing of the other disciplines. From this it appears certain that neither is possible for a man unless he is born for it, or, as the people say, unless his mother gave it to him—which is just as true for the painters, the sculptors, and the preachers of the Divine Word (for about the poets there can be no doubt) and for all works dedicated to Minerva²⁹

Nothing demonstrates more the Renaissance emphasis on creator as origin than the theorist's new habit of referring to a specific work by a specific composer. Medieval theorists rarely name composers or refer to specific works.

Glareanus, who printed in his consummate *Dod-ekachordon* no fewer than 121 polyphonic compositions, lists each composer by name. The new emphasis on creation is emphasized in other ways as well. Tinctoris dedicated a treatise to the two composers he admired most, Ockeghem and Busnois,³⁰ going so far as to call the former *optimi ingenii compositor*, 'most ingenious composer.'³¹

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All this is reinforced as well by new talk of the 'creator's personal and psychological constitution.' So that, e.g., the poet Serafino dall'Aquila's sonnet '*Josquino suo compagno musico d'Ascani*' tells, not of the Master's music, but of his 'fits of melancholy and despair,' in that the 'heavens are cruel to him.'

Manlius too, writes not only of Josquin's outbursts of temper during rehearsals, but also of his unending search for perfection, his going over his compositions again and again, changing, polishing, refining.³²

Glareanus writes mere anecdotes of Josquin's witty musical responses to forgetful or demanding patrons.³³

Even musical performers, relegated by Boethius to the *artes mechanicae*, now receive appreciation. So that Tinctoris dedicates one of his writings to a singer of the Papal Chapel.³⁴

In his *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault may perhaps be after what is happening here when he writes that disciplinary power means the 'the reversal of the political access of individualization.'³⁵ Unlike perhaps, the Middle Ages, where 'individualization is greatest where sovereignty is exercised and in

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the higher echelons of power,³⁶ the Renaissance becomes where 'individualization is descending: as power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized'³⁷

Thus, Josquin, becomes not merely another scientist of sound, but 'the loner, the temperamental conductor, the ceaseless refiner of his works, writing when his inner voice compels him, a deep melancholic in life, and in his music a specialist in melancholy.'³⁸ Or Lasso, 'the sufferer of a mental collapse' and Gesualdo 'the murderer of his wife and her lover.'

We should distinguish this exercise of power as individualization from the Renaissance through Romanticism from the similar phenomenon of celebrity in commercial capitalism, as the former seems to be a means of controlling something potentially antagonistic to the dominant flows of power and the latter a means of reifying something that is part and parcel with the dominant flows themselves.

What is important is that all this chatter, this 'individualization,' circumscribes a kind-of void, something that always escapes it.

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[I]n every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its power and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality.

The Renaissance thinking of music's origin in creation, coupled as it is always with the emphasis upon the 'poet being born and not made,' works together with another of the Renaissance's significant transformations. The Middle Ages, dominated by *auctoritas*, think not only the origin, but the value of music as well, in fidelity to the authority of tradition, to rules, whether the rules of the Church or of the Cosmos, perhaps the distinction between them being was ambiguous as the distinction between the cosmos and positive science today.

Spataro, e.g., characteristically deploys the concept of 'natural and inborn talent,' the *instinto naturale*, not only as the reason the creator can create, but also as the justification for his breaking of the rules. Boethius and the Middle Ages, conceived the materiality and the irrationality of the *instinctus naturalis* as bad. Contrarily, Spataro and the Renaissance oppose *instinctus naturalis* to rationality as a higher, almost divine, form of awareness.

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Zarlino writes that 'poetic license' is allowed to the composer as well as to the poet,³⁹ 'There are as many kinds of poetic rules as there are kinds of poets.'⁴⁰

The written rules can well teach the first rudiments of counterpoint, but they will not make the good composer, inasmuch as good composers are born just as are the poets. Therefore, one needs almost more divine help than the written rule, and this is apparent every day, because the good composers (through natural instinct and a certain manner of grace which can hardly be taught) bring at times such turns and figures in counterpoint and harmony as are not demonstrated in any rule or percept of counterpoint.⁴¹

Baldassare Castiglione, in his *Il Cortegiano*, has the Count uphold the ingenuity of a great artist against Signor Federico's insistence on imitation of the great masters. The Count asks Federico, 'who should have been Homer's model, and whom did Boccaccio and Petrarch imitate?'⁴²

And the position of philosophy vis-à-vis musical objectivity, i e , the attempt to respond conceptually to the question of the enigmatic that music poses to its listeners, demands that these constellations be determined down to the most intimate details not only of the technical procedures but also of the musical characters

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themselves Only by means of such meditations, and not in the immediacy of the question of pure being, can thought even begin to come close to what music is ⁴³

Is not the sound music listens often at a pitch? Or only a very few of an infinitude of possible sonorities? And does not the pitch or sonority around which a relativity may be opened often modulate, and so on, in such a way that it is organized? In other words, regardless of everything that is not sound that might be listened with music, isn't sound always 'organized' in the way Attali mentioned?

What is sound at a pitch and why is it perhaps often listened with the way we call music?

Perhaps the sounds, and everything-else that sounds like sounds, often listened with the way we call music, are at a pitch. Perhaps this is because sound at a pitch may be more open than noise, it can enter into a relativity with itself, and/or other sound, especially other sound at a pitch, in almost all the ways noise can, and in many ways noise cannot.

Perhaps sound at a pitch is what makes into a semi-presence a whole system of pitched sounds, perhaps that is what primitively distinguishes sound at a pitch from noise.

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Perhaps noise gives ideas of the causes that produce it, dispositions of action, reflexes, but not a state of immanence to an intrinsic family of ...⁴⁴

Noise may be precisely a sound which lacks a distinct enough pitch to open the relativity offered in being so. Perhaps pitch may be a color within a chromatic field and noise may be its blur; gray-scale relative to full-color, the natural numbers relative to the real numbers. The distinctness of sound at a pitch, of color, may not be closing because it in no way forsakes the possibilities of the indistinctness of noise, of blur, except to allow for the opening offered in being so. Perhaps being at a pitch does not forsake being noise-like, and being noise forsakes being pitch-like. Even and especially if we think 'noise [as] a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission.'

Perhaps being at a pitch opens relativity.

The word 'relativity' comes from *relatus*: re-'to trace-back or restore' and -latus 'broad, wide, or extensive.' Relativity may be the tracing back or restoring of broadness, wideness, or extensiveness. Relativity may be a concurrent opening and closing, as it offers itself it does not offer what it may not be, yet it

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may be necessarily 'elaborated with the aim of making itself snap,'⁴⁵ it may be wrapped-up in un-wrapping itself. Movement may be always relative to some thing and what we are calling relativity may be the offering of this thing just to go from it: going away from, going towards, or going through.

Why are the sonorities often listened with the way we call music perhaps so few respecting the infinite possibilities?

Perhaps the few sonorities listened than the many possible are the few that open the opening to all that sound may be. Do music theories, from Pythagoras to Rameau to Schenker, found themselves upon this suspicion? That the timbre of any sound may be determined by the relative volume of the overtones that make up that sound we, that the commonest of these same overtones comprise the sonorities most often listened with the way we call music, e.g., 'major triad,' 'dominant seventh chord,' and some think 'minor triad.'

Already, Aristotle notes the octave above always within sound at a pitch. And with Mersenne is listened, in sound at a pitch, not only the octave, but the octave plus fifth, double octave, double octave plus major third, and the double octave plus major sixth.

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Perhaps this 'overtone series,' like pitch, may be a nominal approximation for some thing that has to do with sound as it may be there, open to all. Perhaps it opens this opening to all that sound at a pitch may be. Perhaps this 'harmonic series' may not be a structuring of sound as it may be there, but may be the approximate structure of sound as it may be there.

What concerns us is that perhaps the sonorities listeners often listen in the way we call music open the opening to all that sound at a pitch may be. Like the 'performers' of so-called 'minimalist music' who sound the psychoacoustical effects they listen arising anomalously within the drones and almost-endlessly-repeating sonorous figures surrounding them, perhaps the sonorities often listened with the way we call music open sound as it may be there.

Perhaps the pitch or sonority around which perhaps a relativity is opened, perhaps often listened with the way we call music, often modulate. What is modulation and why is it perhaps often listened with the way we call music? Perhaps a relation often centers on a sonority or a sound, its home, or tonic, the relative some thing it perhaps offers as a thing to go from, go to, or go through. Perhaps

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modulation is the movement wherein this some thing can become some thing other, a key change. Perhaps we even often temper sounds at a pitch listened with the way we call music to allow modulation.

In response to this heteronymous relation, the dehierarchisation of harmony – the elimination of functional referents such as the tonic and dominant that teleologically reduce all musical harmony to *relationships* – received its first shocking sounding in Western music in the ‘Tristan chord.’ Like Deleuze’s concept of internal difference itself, the Tristan chord forces us to abandon relational thinking. How can one single harmonic event be so many contradictory things at once, in other words, how can it be internally, and not relationally differentiated?⁴⁶

Some would have it that the relations often listened with the way we call music would be a kind-of fascist imposition upon things from without. As if one thing moving past another, movement, considered abstractly, is an imposition.

But this objectivism turns into its opposite. The force that imagines it is overcoming the arbitrary rule of the subject, that obvious element of the possibility of doing everything differently—the very thing that had been striking fear into composers ever since its emergence during the romantic era, which,

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nevertheless, encouraged it—is identical with complete reification the desire to be pure nature corresponds to the purely manufactured thing ⁴⁷

With commercial capitalism, music finds itself instated in ways previously unimaginable. One of these ways, is as pop.

R. Stevie Moore is an index, a diachronic subjection to music through the singular truth of pop music; such naked fidelity as his remains considerable. Ariel Pink is subject as well, to the *now* synchronic singular truth of pop; bringing-forth that it is infinite and always consequential. After the similarity of these chronologically discrete subjects of pop, perhaps thinking may place itself under the condition of truth they configure. This means, thinking that truth's wager on how to bring-forth the immediacy of the way of listening called music universally. It also means, partly at least, reckoning with the epoch in which they find themselves.

But we know already that the question of our time is about the 'world's night,'⁴⁸ that our time is the 'destitute time in which it would be that the ground has failed to come,'⁴⁹ the time of groundlessness where we 'with man-made stars flying over head, unsheltered even by the

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traditional tent of the sky, exposed in an unsuspected, terrifying way, carry [our] existence into language, racked by reality and in search of it,⁵⁰ insisting as we do, and sometimes even celebrating, that our destitute time would not even be able to experience its own destitution, as it would be without an abyss from which to experience it, and thus always ever more destitute

Our time is the 'time of the world's night,' yes, we know this already, but what does it mean that the night of the world would be a night without the abyss of its darkness? (This being is absolutely destitute character). It means that our time, the time of commercial capitalism, is precisely the time that is never its time enough. The insipid banalities, bullying in the bullying manner proper to our time, obscure the way that our time might fall into profundity, its absolute threat. Because our time is an endless regime of circulation, a surface brought-forth on the basis of instruments of consumption, communication, desire, and enjoyment; instruments which transform into an active power the passivity that is their essence, into a power of affirmation their neutrality, into a power of decision the impotence and indecision that is their relation to themselves, it is the time which settles and decides by way of a speech that does not decide and that does

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live in the intimacy of this absence, become responsible for it, assumes its risk, and endures its favor.'

From the would be abysslessness of our time, pop music reaches into an abyss, becomes a plenipotentiary of that which is not distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity, exactly through that which is distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity. It is where our time, in all of its untruth, becomes our time enough and thus more than its untruth.

Thinking this wager through its discrete subjects does not mean thinking it as such, it means thinking the particulars these subjects concurrently use and exceed in making it. These particulars include standardization, materialization, and multiplication.

Standardization, materialization, and multiplication are contingent particulars, they are contingent upon the situational state for which they are to concentrate surplus value and social meaning – commercial capitalism. Thus, contingently, concentration is commodification. In excess of contingency is universality, e.g., concentrating through subjection concentration itself into a universal as regards the way of listening called music.

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In the pop song 'Hobbies Galore,' R. Stevie uses the particulars of his musical situational state to exceed that situation, to concentrate neither surplus value nor social meaning, but an excess of all particularity as regards the way of listening called music.

The similarity of R. Stevie and Ariel, is above all, that they exceed the standardization of pop through excessive affirmation of this particular in all of its own particulars: standardization of form, standardized emotional intention, standardization of genre, and so on.

Standardization of form is the commodification of what is listened in the way called music, that it will meet particular standards: song form, tonality, periodic rhythm, and so on. In the pop song 'You Are True,' R. Stevie exceeds standardization of form through affirmation of it, this pop song is *too much* a pop song (c.f., 'She Don't Know What To Do With Herself'). This affirmation exceeds what there is. In it, the untruth of the situation becomes obvious not through negation, which commercial capitalism can always appropriate and thus even solicits, but through excessive affirmation, subjective *expression* of what there is. This is one definition of genius, 'to achieve the objective subjectively.'

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Standardized emotional intention is the commodification of catharsis, a provisional release through consumption that reconciles consumers to their contingency upon the State. In the pop song 'No Know,' R. Stevie exceeds standardized emotional intention through affirmation of it, this pop song brings-forth a subjectivity that is not reducible to what there is. In an R. Stevie or Ariel pop song, the emotional intent is obvious, *so much so* that this *intent* resists reconciling its listeners to their State, bringing-forth as it does something exceeding this state – supreme longing, suffering, despair, or joy, and so on.

Standardization of genre is the commodification of choice and the reification of consumable identity. All of the so-called genres of pop are in themselves almost meaningless, commercial capitalism uses them to dupe consumers into thinking they have choice – choice for this or that standardized identity.

'Hobbies Galore' is 'folk', 'You are True' is 'punk', 'No Know' is 'psychedelic,' and so on, though all these genres are chance. R. Stevie and Ariel exceed the standardization of genre in that they are not reducible to any of the genres they use. In an untrue situational state where everyone is 'self-evidently equal' and

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therefore 'replaceable,' such an affirmation of subjectivity is truthful. Moreover, this affirmation is the progressive purification of pop towards its truth through the subtraction of genre. Compare this with that pop music which, instead of taking-part in the progressive purification of itself towards its truth, synthesizes singular procedures of truth thus diminishing their transformative power.

Adorno writes, 'the positive tendency of consolidated technology to present objects themselves in as unadorned fashion as possible is, however, traversed by the ideological need of the ruling society, which demands subjective reconciliation with these objects' ⁵¹

Materialization of pop means, e.g., pop as consumable object, the pop record album's inextricability from the materials of its production, and so on. While the fact of pop as consumable object is outside the scope of this text, the pop record album's inextricability from its materials of production is not. R. Stevie and Ariel use production materials in all of their manifestations, not only those currently in fashion. As the situational state continues to 'improve' its means of production, i.e., through new products and planned obsolescence, the use of now obsolete materials speaks to something in excess of it.

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Moreover, R Stevie and Ariel foreground the materiality of these obsolete materials. On several of R. Stevie's pop songs ('Records,' 'Part of the Problem,' 'Goodbye Piano,' and so on) listener's may listen to the production materials (tape hiss, room resonance, DC offset, and so on), a whole dimension for listening in the way called music is opened singularly by pop – the sound of a whisper. Here intimacy and immediacy are related; R Stevie is so close to us we can hear him breathing

'Multiplicity' is the catchphrase of this situational state, and rightfully so. The radical multiplicity pop invokes, e g , of genre, of mood, of production materials, and so on, is another manifestation of the situational state's imperative towards expansion more markets for more identities. Moreover, through concentrating greater multiplicity into a lesser package, the situational state can concentrate the amount of products consumed. That the situational state so effortlessly appropriates multiplicity must mean that it is not really multiplicity, it is multiplicity turned-over to the oneness of commercial capital. The pop record albums of R Stevie and Ariel are an affirmation of multiplicity, a wresting of it from the oneness of commercial capital in the turning of it over to a subjective sameness in

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excess of that situational state and the immanent differences it maintains for its sustenance. The subjective sameness of R Stevie and Ariel unbounds the multiple as such because it is both and/or neither one and/(n)or multiple, it is a universal over which the situational state can have no dominion, a void around which it can only ever circle

Though the cruelest master music has ever known (think how unlike other musical truths the musical truth of this situational state is), is unable to prescribe entirely what we listen to in this way called music. Both discrete subjects of the singular truth examined show thinking what remains in excess of this prescription. Moreover, they show thinking that this excess is subjectively wrested through concentrating the contingent particulars of standardization, materialization, and multiplication. Finally, they show thinking that these particulars, though often dismissed, offer a universal way of bringing-forth the immediacy of this way of listening called music.

Neither intention nor expression is appropriate for thinking this violence, rather, we should choose attention, from *attendere* ad- 'to' and -tendere 'stretch'. Listening in the way we call music, as an attention, as a stretching towards,

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or *development* can never really territorialize, this is apparent by *Mille Plateaux*, at least where music is concerned.

Jen-Luc Nancy has already noted this 'stretching,' though for Nancy, the stretching is towards the 'self' ... 'To be listening will always, then, be straining toward or an approach towards the self (one should say, in a pathological manner, *a fit of self*: isn't sense first of all, every time, a *crisis of self*)?'⁵²

Though is a 'self' really what is being attended to by this attention? Can the listener be barred? And can we bar the listener without barring the listened? Perhaps, for not only does barring the listener not abolish the listening, but is necessary by our thinking of listening. Without this barring of the listener, the possibility of listening might be forbidden. Without this barring of the listener, who would otherwise remain, the listened might disappear as such.

As much as Deleuze and Guattari would like to suggest that there is such a thing as a 'territorial' *ritournelle* all their attempts to think it show that it is impossible, the relation is always wrapped-up in un-wrapping itself. Besides, development is an un-wrapping of this wrapped-up-ness in un-wrapping, listening in

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the way we call music is an attention that develops.

Considering very briefly all of what listeners listen in the way we call music that seems to want nothing to do with any kind-of development; we must ask ourselves, what is development if not the difference between a 'perfect fifth held for a really long time' and the same perfect fifth listened in the way we call music? What is the way of listening we call music, this violence, doing to that interval?

It is not that music can be a listening the un-structured, it is that music is only a listening the un-structured. Even when listening structure in the way we call music listeners are un-structuring it. If we can think anything through most of what listeners listen in the way we call music, i.e., why they listen it, it is that listening in this way is always an un-structuring.

Adorno thinks what he calls 'popular music' is some thing that listeners cannot listen in the way we call music because it listens for itself. 'Popular music' forbids an attention that develops because in it structure is absolute; it is never its un-structuring. As the listener always knows the relations of 'popular music'

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already, listening and structuring are the same. Other thinkers think some thing similar to 'popular music' when they think that listeners cannot listen, e.g., 'classical sonatas,' 'baroque fugues,' 'variations,' and so on, in the way we call music because in them listening and structuring correspond.

Adorno writes, 'it is perceived purely as background. If nobody can any longer speak, then certainly nobody can any longer listen.'⁵³ 'They cannot stand the strain of concentrated listening and surrender themselves resignedly to what befalls them, with which they come to terms only if they do not listen to it too closely.'⁵⁴ 'They suspend the critique in which the successful aesthetic totality exerts against the flawed one of society.'⁵⁵

Not only do the listening subjects lose, along with freedom of choice and responsibility, the capacity for conscious perception of music, which was from time immemorial confined to a narrow group, but the stubbornly reject the possibility of such a perception [..] They listen atomically and dissociate what they hear, but precisely in this dissociation they develop certain capacities which accord less with the concepts of traditional aesthetics than with those of football and motoring. [...] But they are childish; their primitivism is not that of the undeveloped, but that of the forcibly retarded⁵⁶

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Does this thinking even concern the question 'what is music'? Music, for us, is always an attention that develops and where listening and structuring are the same music is not at question. Our concern is that both Adorno and these thinkers think some thing that listeners cannot listen to in the way we call music, were we think anything could be.

Both Adorno and these other thinkers suppose the identical. They suppose identities that forbid any attentive development because they are always identical to what they are. If listeners may listen, e.g., the wind, the birds, the fountain, and so on, in the way we call music then they may listen, e.g., 'classical sonatas', 'baroque fugues', 'variations', and so on, in this way.

Adorno and these thinkers also suppose 'performance', 'composition', and 'improvisation' are different from each other and different from the way of listening we call music. Even if they are different, unstructuring becomes in listening and not in 'performance', 'composition', and 'improvisation'. Does the piano player sitting before the sheet music have any more chance to unstructure than the Sitar player does about to play a Raga? Does the third violin in a

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symphony orchestra have any more chance to un-structure than its conductor does?

If 'performance' and 'composition' mean anything, it is the bringing of what-is-neither-sound-nor-silence to the opening to all. The how and the where of the bringing of what-is-neither-sound-nor-silence to the opening to all are not what music is. Music is the listeners listening of these things as music. We can think about the State of this bringing but this is not a thinking about music.

In view of our thinking, Adorno's concept of 'popular music' cannot be. Listening in the way we call music is always an un-structuring, i.e., an attention that develops. Though, it is unthinking to dismiss Adorno. Adorno's thinking of 'popular music' is that it is the State's making impossible the way of listening we call music. Perhaps it is not that listeners cannot listen 'popular music' in the way of listening we call music; it is that listeners do not. Either way, the question 'what is popular music' is not the question 'what is music'.

Perhaps music is different from other ways of listening in that it is always an un-structuring, i.e., an attention that develops. Listening the wind blowing through the grass, the birds singing in the trees, the dripping fountain in

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the kitchen, and so on, is always only exactly that. When listeners listen the wind, the birds, the fountain, and so on, as music, the wind, the birds, the fountain, and so on, become some thing more.

Answering 'a listening that is some thing more than listening' or 'an attention that develops' to the question 'what is music' is exactly that, an answering, i.e., it is never an answer. Thinking cannot identify non-identity; it can only answer to it through questioning. This is the more to music that even the most flexible State cannot control. A thinking that begins by supposing music is this or that, e.g., 'structured sound', is not a thinking that answers to music.

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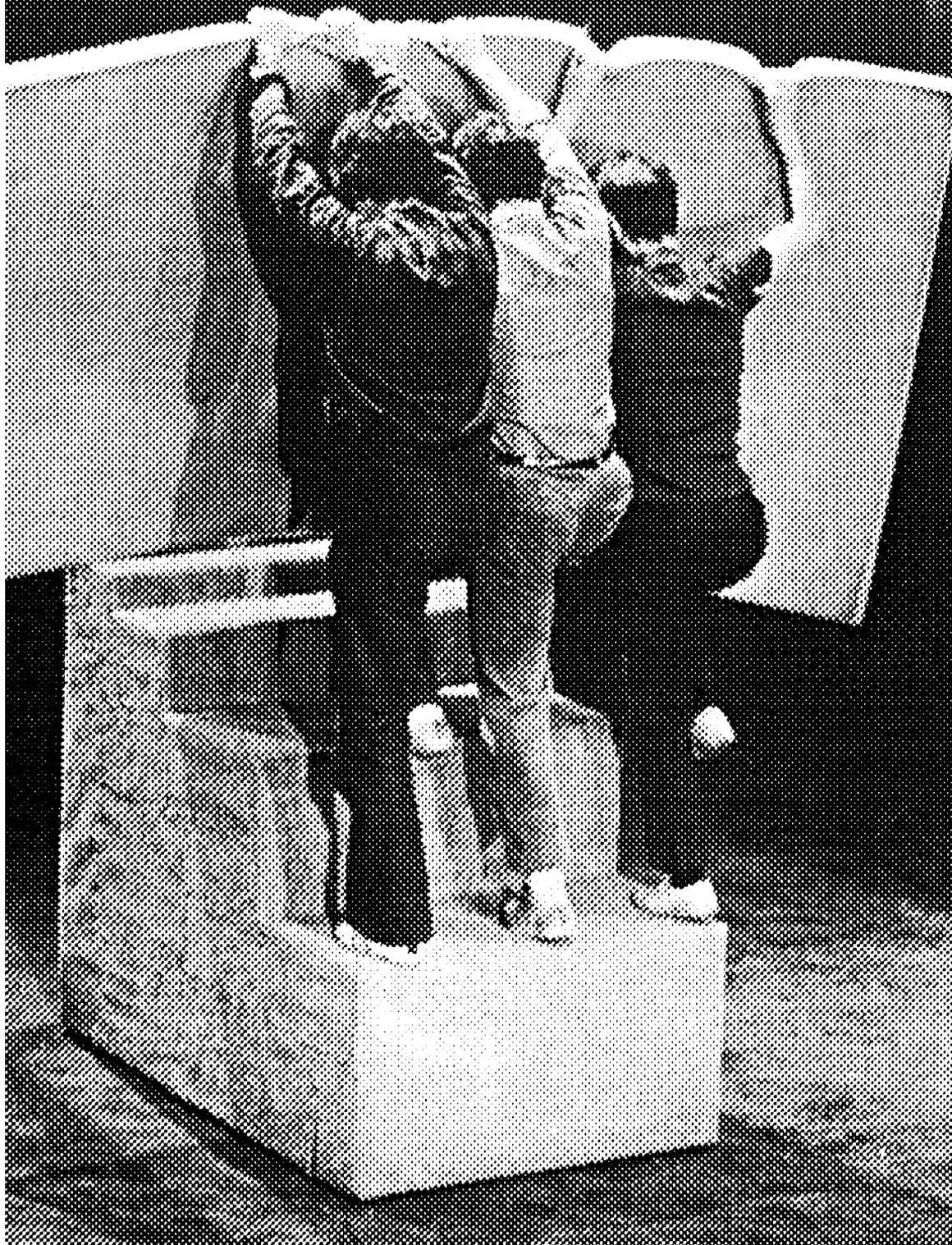
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Elena Filipovic
Sculpture Not to Be Seen

PB



It seems to me that there is as yet no adequate language to describe what it is that I want. Although I feel able to express it, other people have so far found it difficult to grasp and failed to see its relation to art... I'm not a painter, I'm not a sculptor, I don't stage happenings... A new term is required for what I do.

Franz Erhard Walther in a letter to
Jörg Immendorff (New York, September 1967)

Sewn, padded, pleated, folded and pocketed pieces of fabric, each in a signature hue and often evoking the crisp geometries and elementary forms of Minimalist sculpture: these are Franz Erhard Walther's ostensible materials. 'Ostensible', I say, because to limit our description to what the German artist's works look like, or what they're made from, is to miss the fact that they cannot be conceived as separate from the actions that activate them and the participatory activities they provoke. The viewer, in other words, is also in this case the 'content' of the artwork. He or she, perhaps as much as, if not more than the rest, is the artist's primary 'medium', and has been since the early 1960s. Nineteen sixty-three was a watershed year for the artist. Before that, while only eighteen in 1957, he had begun to make what he called his Wortbilder (Word Works): single words centred on a page in a coloured typeface of his design. He insisted they were artworks, not typographic studies, and were meant to prompt viewers to expand the signifying possibilities of words. His choice of rather simple words, beautiful but unspectacular in their treatment, paved the way for the austere elegance and direct address of his later works. So, too, did his fascination in the first years of the 1960s with making puffed enclosures of glued paper and air, such as Grosse Papierarbeit. 16 Luft einschlüsse (Large Paper Work: 16 Air Enclosures, 1962), the performance of determining the proportions of an area with his hands (Proportionsbestimmungen (Determination of Proportion, 1962), or folded cardboard corners adapted to the dimensions of a given space, which he called Vier Stellecken (Four Standing Corners, 1963). But nothing quite affected his work as much as the discovery in March 1963 of a sewn and padded form used for shaping and pressing the arms of jackets at a tailor shop. From it he intuited the possibility of artworks that would be material embodiments of the notions of participation and process that had become his main concerns. Walther's experimentation that year, while he was still in art school in Düsseldorf alongside the likes of Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Blinky Palermo, and where Joseph Beuys taught with Karl Otto Götz, would lead him to his first 'action' pieces and the beginning of what would be more than a half-century-long interest in the potential they implied. These included the 1963 works Zwei rotbraune Samtkissen (gefüllt und leer) (Two Reddish Brown Velvet Cushions [Filled and Empty]), pillow-like forms on which one could press one's hands; Zwei kleine Quader – Gewichtung (Two Small Blocks – Weighting), twin

weighted blocks to be held; 100m Schnur (100m Cord), 100 meters of cord to be stretched pell-mell across a space; and even Zwei Ovale mit Taschen (Two Ovals with Pockets), ovoid cushions with openings into which one could slip one's hands. In other words, simple forms inviting the simplest of actions. The immediate reception to them, by Beuys and his fellow art students, was a mix of ridicule and puzzled embrace. Still, with the help of the future Johanna Walther, daughter of the tailor shop's owner and a lifelong collaborator for the sewing of the artist's works, a pioneering oeuvre of sculpture that eschewed the obdurate materiality and conventional address of traditional bronze, marble or plaster was born. It was at around this same time that Ad Reinhardt famously defined sculpture as 'something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting.'¹ The American painter's impression of sculpture as not only ponderously in the way of 'real' art, but also fundamentally less interesting and intellectually engaging compared to painting, had been long-standing in the art world. Charles Baudelaire, after all, had already notoriously condemned the art form in his 1846 wrap-up of the Parisian Salon, one section of which was titled, 'Why Sculpture Is Boring.'² More than a century divided Baudelaire's quip from Reinhardt's. And yet, sculpture hadn't managed to distance itself from perceptions that shackled it to an inferior position in relation to painting. Gotthold Lessing's classic eighteenth-century aesthetic treatise *Laocoön* had, long before that, attempted to identify the particular experience and condition of sculpture, noting, for instance, that among the arts, sculpture (like painting) was distinct from poetry (and, although he didn't get to the comparison, theatre or dance), 'whose medium is time' because in contradistinction to 'a temporal event', sculpture is an undeniably 'static object.'³ But, unlike painting, which gave itself wholly and simultaneously to the viewer, to be perceived at once and from a single position, sculpture could be viewed from different angles, with no dominant—no evidently 'correct'—viewing position.⁴ For many, and well into the 1960s, this, precisely, was sculpture's specific and inexorable trait. It was also its fatal weakness. Shouldn't the artist be the ultimate form giver, able to control the perception of the work he or she creates? And wasn't there transcendental 'grace' in the instantaneous and total perception of the work without recourse to the perceptual implications of the viewer's (messy) body?⁵ The critical fate of sculpture had begun to shift in the early 1960s, when a new generation of artists started to champion precisely those elements that had been central to critiques

of the medium. It was then, too, that Walther had first touched on a practice for which he hardly had a name, as the letter to his friend and fellow artist Jörg Immendorff reveals.⁶ ‘Sculpture’, however, is what Walther most often settled on, even if his was a radical conception of sculpture in which objects are ‘instruments’ that have ‘little perceptual significance’ in themselves and are relevant, as he liked to say, ‘only through the possibilities originating from their use.’⁷

This notion of an art to be ‘used’ did not necessarily mean an art that was ‘useful’, at least not in the typical sense. Rather, Walther’s simple, direct titles often tell you exactly what the objects are and what they do (or what can be done with them): *Stirnstück* (1963), literally, ‘Forehead Piece’, is something on which to lean your forehead; *Vier Körperformen* (Four Body Shapes, 1963) are organic forms to be nestled against the body; and *Weste* (Vest, 1965) is a plump padded vest which, once worn, gives the body the feeling of expanded breadth. None of these examples incite particularly ‘useful’ tasks. ‘The sculpture is not to be seen’, one of his drawings from 1967 says, implying that it had other means of being apprehended as sculpture and should rather be touched, unfurled, worn, taken for a walk. *Der Körper entscheidet* (The body decides) says another from 1969, suggesting that the viewer’s body, not the artist’s mind, has a primary role in determining the form, purpose and perception of the artwork. Simple as these declarations might sound, they called for a breakdown of artistic control that was tantamount to a sabotage of sculpture’s integrity by insisting on an art of ‘instruments’ that was neither stable, autonomous, nor even, properly speaking, medium-specific. Not only was Walther overturning the very definition that supposedly distinguished sculpture from poetry or theatre by implying a durational experience for his art. He also pressed the idea that there is no ‘disinterested’ instantaneous perception or total apprehension of his sculpture by exacerbating this claim, making works that function as incitations to action that put the viewer’s body and haptic senses squarely at the centre.

If the resulting works were understood by critics as being ‘remote from art’ at the time of their first showing in the artist’s provincial Catholic hometown of Fulda, it was no doubt partly due to the fact that Walther’s elementary sewn forms looked and operated little like the more widely known art forms of the time.⁸ The artist’s insistence that his was a object to be acted with and upon and through by its public (sometimes also in public space, far from the hallowed confines of art), refused both the

definition of sculpture as inert matter presented before a passive viewing subject, and also the placement of the genial artist at the epicentre of the artwork, best illustrated by the contemporaneous notion of the artist as messianic shaman that Beuys had so effectively promoted. And if Beuys had famously advanced the slogan 'everyone is an artist', even as he constructed vast mythologies that fortified his own artistic singularity, Walther's assertion was entirely different and more akin to the notion that the artist instead needed others to make the artwork because, as he said, 'the work is not brought about by the artist'; rather, it emerges 'in the course of processes of action in conjunction with vehicles he has made available... The emergence of a work is not dependent on the artist'.⁹ Neither illusionistic nor illustrative, and unconnected to the kinds of mystification in which felt and fat stood for specific personal allegories, Walther's works had an anti-authoritarian soberness to them that was at the opposite pole from the practice of Beuys.¹⁰ In the simple gestures of a group of people enveloped from their waists down in a single piece of fabric, *Kurz vor der Dämmerung* (Shortly Before Twilight, 1967), with their heads poking through two or four circular holes in a short stretch of fabric that unites them, *Für Zwei* (For Two) and *Kreuz Verbindungsform* (Cross Connecting Form, both 1967) or sharing a long double-hooded length of textile, *Sehkanal* (Channel of Sight, 1968), decisions about movement and action become shared, collective, communal. Walther thus proposes a possible social, relational transformation that orchestrates togetherness (or also, often, extreme intimacy), with potentially profound social implications. We should not underestimate their particular urgency in the context of Germany's postwar reconstruction and the discussions about *Öffentlichkeit* (the public sphere) initiated by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas in his 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.¹¹ In the wake of that groundbreaking study's publication and the discussion it incited at the time, Walther's reformulation of the sculptural enterprise in terms of a 'participatory esthetics' (to use the term the critic Hilton Kramer used to describe the work in 1970)¹² was a decided attempt to redefine an artwork's publicness. (The fact that the artist so insistently staged the first photographic documentation of the processes of deploying his works in the late 1960s in outdoor, public spaces -and indeed held some of the first large-scale demonstrations of his works there- is equally telling). It was also, inevitably, a reflection on how we are formed as subjects, and

what role sculpture can play in that process.¹³ Walther's notion of an art that is not so much material as conceptual, participatory, 'relational' even (to use a term that wouldn't come into use until some decades after he began but which is nevertheless relevant here) anticipated and extended so many tendencies of art at the time, some of which he was exposed to firsthand once he moved to New York in 1967. Walther relocated there a few years into what was a period of prolific production, and stayed until 1973. There, he was surrounded by a bohemian art scene that was in the throes of its own radical experimentation: the celebration of the idea over the object had already begun to define a new art called 'Conceptual' in the early 1960s; Donald Judd had written his seminal essay, 'Specific Objects,' on an art that was neither painting nor sculpture in 1964; Yvonne Rainer first showed her landmark dance piece, *Trio A*, in 1966; the pared-down forms, systematic progressions, and new phenomenological concerns of the art called 'Minimalism' was burgeoning and had had its first institutional presentation in 1966 at the Primary Structures exhibition; Mel Bochner had just organised a show called *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art*, displaying four binders containing photocopies of preparatory studies for the projects of artists close to Minimalism and Conceptual art; Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood,' one of the most formative if antagonistic understandings of the implications of Minimal Art, was published on the pages of *Artforum* in June 1967; and Roland Barthes published the first English version of his path-breaking essay 'Death of the Author' in issue 5+6 of the avant-garde magazine *Aspen* in 1967. To name just a few era-defining events. Walther landed in the city in the wake of these and likely also because of them—because of the promise they held out to a young German artist of a more diverse context and better reception than his art academy, small hometown or even nearby art capitals of Düsseldorf or Cologne had afforded him. All of this made for a thrilling milieu in which to further develop his art, but also one in which the absolute singularity of his practice might have felt confirmed, too. He quickly befriended such artists as Carl Andre, Richard Artschwager, Walter De Maria, Claes Oldenburg, Richard Serra and Donald Judd. Artschwager, a carpenter by trade, made the wood parts Walther needed for a piece; with Oldenburg, he discussed the origins of their respective and near-simultaneous discovery of soft, sewn forms; Paul Thek, Robert Ryman, Judd and James Lee Byars all activated his objects in 1968 for the

photographs appearing in Walther's first manifesto-like book, OBJEKTE, benutzen (OBJECTS, to use).¹⁴ Their world was in the midst of becoming a different place during exactly those years: widespread student revolts, political unrest and an ongoing, bloody American-Vietnam war loomed, leaving deep traces in the period's development of a new, anti-authoritarian art. It was in this context that Walther continued his conception of process-inducing objects and began, for the first time, to understand their coherence as a group and idea. By 1969, he decided that fifty-eight of the individual pieces that he had made up to that point, in fact, should constitute a single larger artwork that he entitled, simply and programmatically, 1. Werksatz (First Work Set, 1963 - 69).

The prototypes for the elements for the First Work Set had started several years before the artist was exposed to the heady inspiration of the New York art scene, but its final consolidation in 1969 testifies to his continued thinking about the form and implications of his objects in light of his new context. It was there as well that he developed the idea that they could be shown in any number of ways, presented at arm's reach and as if ready for action or encased in their individual fabric envelopes and stacked on shelves, in what the artist called their Lagerform (storage form). The latter possibility, whereby the elements might have seemed far removed from their potential deployment, was no less 'valid' for the artist: these were 'instruments' that could be acted with or on but didn't have to be in order to still be potent, expressive. And, almost immediately, the artist set upon having them made in an edition of eight. This was not so much a financial as a conceptual operation: rejecting the museum's culture of autonomous objects and the aura of the unique thing, the multiple copies of the First Work Set were meant to go in the hands of many (even if the actual production and material labour of the carefully sewn elements was so time-consuming that creating more than an edition of eight at the time was unimaginable). Still, Walther must have known that these might one day become museum objects, thus slipping out of the hands of users and finding themselves placed behind stanchions or under Plexiglas. But, the artist would tell you, this fate would not be entirely a contradiction. His forms are made for and imply their own use, they signal it in their forms, call for an imagination of it in their address, and their titles often name this use in a way that does not actually require it. No doubt Walther's single most important work, the First Work Set, contains the template of his entire practice and encapsulates well the radical implications of his

thinking. Upon seeing it, Harald Szeemann invited him to take part in his legendary *When Attitudes Become Form* exhibition in 1969 (where Walther showed ten elements and related drawings) and *documenta 5* in 1972 (where the artist showed the entire *First Work Set* and staged demonstrations of its elements on weekends). So, too, did the curator Jennifer Licht propose to show it in her groundbreaking exhibition *Spaces* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1970 (there, Walther was present every day during the run of the exhibition to demonstrate his *First Work Set* and accompany visitors in their experience of it).¹⁵ In each of these contexts, Walther's works sat alongside some of the most experimental art of his time, most often, in fact, positioned closest to the artists who were developing Minimal and Conceptual Art. Formally, Walther's sculptures echoed the pared-down aesthetic, Platonic forms and propensity for the repetition of modular elements of the Minimalist Art that was crystalizing in exactly the same years. Thus on the surface, his work may have appeared simply like malleable Donald Judds or Carl Andres. But, rather than lead or steel, or any other of the muscular, industrial materials so much in currency in the 1960s when he began (think: Serra's one-ton sheets of lead, Andre's firebricks and Judd's highly polished metal surfaces), Walther had turned to something at once soft, slight, and inescapably linked to women's work. Moreover, against the cool authority and rigid, mathematical precision of so much Minimalist work, there was something by turns pliant, aleatory and homespun about the infinitely changing formal aspects of Walther's work (which was different as well from the 'Process Art' of the time, which used chance means to inform the appearance of the work, which was often stabilized for the duration of an exhibition or, if not, changed only by the artist him- or herself). By enclosing them in individual cases, Walther was also making an artwork that could easily be packed up and carried, deployed and carried away again with ease (out of the 'white cube', their little baggies implied), something that the Minimalist (not to say Modernist) artwork could rarely do.

Beyond their formal similitudes, Walther's work did share what was perhaps the single most distinctive feature of Minimalism: its abiding interest in a mode of address that implicated the viewer's body.¹⁶ Minimalism radically insisted that the artwork was no longer a discrete thing, but instead 'part of the situation,' including the room it was in and the viewer who was looking at it. Michael Fried, Minimalism's most vociferous critic and astute reader, understood this immediately:

‘Whereas in previous art, “what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it]”, the experience of literalist art [his derogatory name for Minimalism] is... one which, virtually by definition, includes the beholder.’¹⁷ Fried comprehended well that, with Minimalism, the object itself was not as significant as the experience of it, a state of affairs he condemned as ‘theatrical’. Like Minimalism’s phenomenological address, Walther, too, sought out the perceptual implications of the body and the redefinition of the experience of the artwork. Still, Minimalist sculpture was on the whole not—decidedly not—meant to be touched or moved or actually ‘activated’ as such: the body was implied in its reflective surfaces and human proportions, but not meant to be literally participatory. Yet it was precisely in the tension of bodies stretching, pulling, standing and walking with Walther’s sculptures that his latent forms in cloth were transformed into new sets of Platonic geometries that at times might have connected most closely to Minimalism. And if Walther’s work was thus both like and unlike Minimalism, it arguably also remained distinct from an alternative strain of forms burgeoning in the mid-1960s as a specific riposte to Minimalism, such as Robert Morris’s flaccid felt sculptures or Eva Hesse’s evocative latex forms, each of which injected what Morris called ‘anti-form’ into the clean lines of Minimalism. One should not forget as well that Walther’s time in New York roughly corresponded to Lucy Lippard’s famous ‘six years’, from 1966 to 1972, when artists were, according to the critic and curator, ‘dematerializing’ the object of art.¹⁸ Against this tendency, his works might at first glance seem almost anachronistically material and formal (colourful, sensuous, effusively thingly). From the Bordeaux red velvet of his early Hand Pieces to the shocking orange, red and yellow textiles of some of his later Body Shapes and Wall Formations, there is something undeniably visual and tactile about Walther’s works. And yet, in his own words, their materiality is ultimately negligible, unimportant: each is ‘a set of conditions rather than a finite object’.¹⁹ The implications of the notion of an art of conditions are not insignificant. After all, where is the locus of the artwork when the artist himself has said that it need not have any perceptual significance and is instead a matter of conditional possibility? You could say that his works function almost like a conceptual artwork in which the document or score is a mere means to an end and the idea is the artwork. Perhaps for precisely that reason, Lippard included Walther among the entries in her seminal publication *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966 - 1972*.²⁰ So, too, a several-page

spread in the spring 1972 issue of the art journal *Avalanche* positioned Walther on the pages of its 'Conceptual Art' issue alongside such artists as Lawrence Weiner and Sol LeWitt.²¹ There, Walther's action-oriented fabric sculptures, photographed in black and white as they were being unfurled, positioned and used on the grass, called to mind so many shared concerns of artists at that time. Yet to have understood his works as 'Conceptual Art' is perhaps to overlook the important ways in which they are not merely material or wholly immaterial, but instead provocatively engaging both states at the same time. In contrast to so many so-called 'dematerialized' projects, notably the conceptual documents, event scores or instruction pieces to which his work might usefully be compared, Walther's sculptures act neither as props nor traces, recordings nor scripts. And they hold on fiercely to their own materiality—however pliable, conditional and unheroic it may be.²² Nor are Walther's sculpture's imperative or rule-bound in any way: 'I never give instructions for the user. I've never done that... How it is to be used is determined by the instrument, not by me.'²³ His works' incitation to 'doing' thus remains largely undefined even if unsparingly simple and intuitive. From 1963 to 1975, the artist created diagrams and what he called *Werkzeichnungen* (Work Drawings) that testified alternately to his experiences with the works and illustrated some ways in which they had been or could be used. But these were never meant as authoritative protocols. They were neither legislative, like a conceptual certificate, nor scripted, along the lines of a Sol LeWitt wall drawing or a Fluxus score. Moreover, in their sheer numbers (several thousands of these drawings were made) and in the necessarily contradictory and 'open' messages they provide, they suggest the multiple possibilities for each element. This decision was deliberate and far from anodyne. It shows his awareness, already then, that, as Mark Sperlinger has argued, no matter how seemingly whimsical the instruction piece, 'instructions are inherently political; they imply a hierarchy, whether of authority or knowledge.'²⁴ This hierarchical mode of address, which Lawrence Weiner called nothing less than 'aesthetic fascism', was decidedly not a part of Walther's practice.²⁵

One might then ask: what models of action or performativity existed at the time, and how was Walther's work related, or not, to them? Far from Fluxus actions, for instance, with their ironic or comical aspects, and decidedly not an art to be 'performed'—theatrically, spectacularly—Walther's elementary works could also not be further from the shock

tactics, sexual innuendo or exhibitionism present in much Body Art, Happenings and Performance Art tendencies of the time, whether Carolee Schneemann's 1964 *Meat Joy* or Chris Burden's 1971 *Shoot*. So, too, was Walther's work quite unlike that of those artists who had taken Minimalism's pared-down aesthetic and inserted the (mediated) body explicitly in them, as in Bruce Nauman's 1970 *Live-Taped Video Corridor* or Vito Acconci's 1972 *Seedbed*. Walther's work might instead more productively be compared to Hélio Oiticica's development of *Parangolés* in 1964, multilayered swaths of fabric in the form of painted capes, tents and banners that were meant to be worn and inspire free interpretation of their use. In Oiticica's case, that use was often akin to play and dancing, emerging as the works did from the influence of Rio de Janeiro's shantytowns and their inhabitants' love of samba.²⁶ The ideas for these are shared in the parallel work of fellow Brazilian artists Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape involving the body, such as Clark's *Caminhando* (*Walking*) of 1964, a spiralling paper form meant to be worn, walked with, thus entangling the viewer in the act, or Pape's *Divisor* (*Divider*) of 1968, a massive, thirty-by-thirty square metre piece of textile with hundreds of openings through which participants might press their heads so as to collectively move with the object and each other.²⁷ Each of these works was inseparable from the increasingly policed society in the dictatorial Brazil where they were created and from the possibility that each collective action they promoted might be considered politically subversive. Yet, however distinct their origins and immediate contexts, there is a shared sense of the radical revision of traditional sculptural materiality and interest in the participatory possibilities of the artwork in their and Walther's works. Whether one walks, stands, leans, pulls, lays, holds or dances, the fact that these works simultaneously developed ideas for how to empower and activate viewers through the use of malleable, wearable materials is striking. One might also see in the elementary forms and the almost mundane 'uses' of Walther's works an echo of the modern dance being developed at around the same time by choreographers such as Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton and Simone Forti, among others, around the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, known as Judson Dance Theatre. Theirs was a dance made from ordinary 'task-like' gestures and motions—talking, walking, reaching, running—'found' in the realm of life, not that of art or dance.²⁸ The choreographies that Rainer, for instance, so emblematically developed aimed for no psychological

expansiveness, no dramatic or athletic display - in short, no spectacle (as her 1965 declaration 'No to spectacle' contended).²⁹ Importantly, Rainer also rejected, as the critic Annette Michelson understood early on, the metaphysical 'synthetic time' of traditional dance in favour of 'a time that is operational, the time of experience, of our actions in the world'.³⁰ Rainer herself saw connections between this new dance and the simultaneous developments of Minimal art and, indeed, of Judd's idea of 'Specific Objects', which were meant to hold visitors in a real-time experience of both the object's materiality and the spectator's own physical location as he or she viewed them.³¹ Exactly these 'task-like' gestures and notion of 'real-time' engagement with a viewer lay at the heart of Walther's own practice.

Layered with traits that connect it to some of the most radical practices of the era as well as features that also utterly distinguish it from them, it is hard to know where to place Walther's practice. Besides Lippard's *Six Years* and the spring 1972 issue of *Avalanche*, the perception of Walther's work as an example of Conceptual Art never quite stuck, perhaps understandably. And, for being neither exactly Conceptual Art nor Minimal Art, neither Performance Art nor Process Art, neither Installation Art nor 'Anti-Form,' neither Land Art nor Arte Povera, Walther largely fell in the gaps of a wider art history that didn't quite know how to categorize him, then or now.³² And yet, the influence of his conception of the object and the possible action that emerges from it is far-reaching, and not only in those most evident examples, which range from Franz West's *Passtück* (Adaptive) sculptures made between the 1970s and 1990s and Erwin Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures* (one noddingly titled *Make Your Own Franz Erhard Walther*) developed since the 1980s, to the various artworks of what came to be called 'Relational Aesthetics' in the 1990s. Moreover, this influence has, it seems, been so prevalent because, beyond Walther's 1960s works, the artist has continued to build on and reconfigure his early postulates to create, for instance, ever-larger structures for collective action in the 1970s, as well as works that stretched to architectural dimensions (his *Wandformationen* [Wall Formations] and *Formabnahmen* [Space-Skinings] in the 1980s), or that combine performativity and language (*Das Neue Alphabet* [The New Alphabet] in the 1990s), or that return to the phenomenological implications of organic forms (*Körperformen* [Body Shapes] in the 2000s). And throughout his more than half a century of practice, the question of publicness—of how art and the

exhibition might be means for constructing notions of “public” and “public space” and for investing these with critical agency—is traced in his exact renderings of the exhibition floor plans for each show in which his work was presented, from 1962 to the present. They tell the story of an artist who never once stopped believing that the public presentation of an art that encouraged action mattered, and was urgent. It may consequently make little sense to tie Walther to movements or categories. One must speak, instead, of how his art functions and what it says about the work of art as such. In their destabilization of the conventional idea of the art object, their transformation of the spectator into an active creator and their dissipation of the traditional notion of author, Walther’s uncompromising works could be understood as ‘performative,’ like saying ‘I do’ at the altar or, conversely, the spouting of an obscenity: the effectiveness and meaning of these utterances is in the act of saying them. For my part, I would prefer to describe them as ‘operational,’ for they stage a situation in which the artwork is an incentive to an action that, thenceforward, inheres in the work itself. Indeed, like Wittgenstein’s famous explanation of words—‘their meaning is their use’—so, too, Walther’s sculptures’ ‘meaning’ lies in their use.³³ His is a ‘use’ that so revises the traditional subjecthood and objecthood of art that it has, from the 1960s to the present, served as a relentless inquiry into what art, in its most fundamental sense, is, and what it can do - of how, through its very material reality, it can create the conditions through which both the artwork and a potential (unknown and unknowable) public might simultaneously be challenged and made complete.

1 Cited in Lucy Lippard, 'As Painting Is to Sculpture: A Changing Ratio', *American Sculpture in the Sixties*, ed. Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967), 31.

2 Charles Baudelaire, 'Salon of 1846', *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 47-107.

3 The citations here are from Rosalind Krauss's seminal discussion of Lessing's Laocöon in relation to the developments of Modernist sculpture. See Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 3.

4 The legacy of Baudelairean thought on sculpture held extraordinary sway: 'Brutal and positive like nature, [sculpture] is at the same time vague and elusive, because it presents too many faces at once'. Or: 'the spectator, who turns around the figure, can choose a hundred points of views, except the correct one'. See Baudelaire, 'Salon of 1846', 47-107.

5 The state of aesthetic 'grace' that critic Michael Fried champions in his landmark 1967 essay 'Art and Objecthood' (and in which he condemns Minimalism as lacking) is described as follows: 'a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it'. See Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum* V, 10 (June 1967): 22.

6 Letter cited in Susanne Richardt, *Stirn statt Auge. Das Sprachwerk* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 1997), 123.

7 Walther, statement from 1968, which appeared in German in *OBJEKTE, benutzen*, and was translated and cited in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966-1972* (London: Studio Vista, 1973), 36.

8 Excerpts of press reviews, included in Franz Erhard Walther: *Arbeiten 1954-1963 aus der Sammlung Seng* (Fulda: Stadtschloss Fulda, 1978), cited in Luisa Pauline Fink, 'Franz Erhard Walther in the Collection of the Hamburger Kunsthalle', *Franz Erhard Walther* (Hamburg: Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2013), 119.

9 Franz Erhard Walther, cited in Michael Lingner, ed., *Romanticism Revisited. Runge heute. Konstruierte Empfindung—Beobachtbare Zeit* (Hamburg: Kunsthaus Hamburg, 2011), 150.

10 Benjamin Buchloh perhaps describes this practice best when he claims that Beuys reintegrated the object 'into the most traditional context of literary and referential representation: this object stands for that idea, and that idea is represented in this object'. Buchloh, 'Beuys: Twilight of the Idol, Preliminary Notes for a Critique', originally published in *Artforum* 18, no. 5 (1980): 35-43; cited here from Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955-1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 52.

11 So influential was this study that it was extended by sociologist Oskar Negt and writer-filmmaker Alexander Kluge in their 1972 book *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung. Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit* (*Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public*) (Frankfurt: Edition Suhrkamp, 1972).

12 Hilton Kramer, 'Participatory Esthetics', *New York Times* (January 11, 1971).

13 Artist Peter Halley, who has written extensively and eloquently about Walther's work, suggests a connection between it and Michel Foucault's writings on the body disciplined through the modern regulation of institutions and spaces (schools, factories, hospitals, prisons) for the purposes of both commerce and social control. Halley sees Walther's work as a 'powerful evocative enactment' of the kind of autonomous movement, even chaos, which Foucault saw as absent from modern life.

Halley, Franz Erhard Walther/*Work Needs the Body—A Strong Misreading* (Fulda: Vonderau Museum Fulda, 2003), 8-9.

14 *OBJEKTE, benutzen* (*OBJECTS, to use*) was made in collaboration with Kasper König (Cologne/New York: Verlag Gebr. König, 1968) and was the curator's first publication.

15 See the Tagebuch Museum of Modern Art, New York, December 28, 1969 – March 1, 1970, a diary-like report of observations, reactions and reflections written during Walther's participation in Spaces. It was not only the case that Walther activated the work every day during the exhibition but, in recording daily reactions to it, he was also documenting the work, an idiosyncratic method that he would use throughout his life, in his vast series of Planzeichnungen (Plan Drawings, 1962–ongoing), Sternenstaub Zeichnungen (Dust of Stars Drawings, 2007–09), and numerous other drawn copies of photographs. Throughout his life, many photographs of Walther's works and life would, in turn, get replicated by being drawn so that the indexical quality of the photograph would get rubbed against memory, time and handwork.

16 Perhaps one of the best early readings of these works remains Rosalind Krauss's in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 243-88.

17 Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', 12-23.

18 Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966-1972*, op. cit.

19 Walther speaking via Hilton Kramer in Kramer's 1970 *New York Times* article called 'Participatory Esthetics' (January 11, 1970).

20 Ibid.

21 The spring 1972 issue of *Avalanche* featuring Walther was published between the 'Post-Studio Sculptures' issue, featuring the likes of Robert Morris and Barry Le Va, and the 'Performance' issue, featuring the likes of Philip Glass and Yvonne Rainer,

22 Rejecting Lippard's application of the term 'dematerialization' for much art of the period, Michael Newman compellingly argues instead that we should speak of the 'displacements and rethinkings of materiality' advanced by artists in the 1960s. These 'rethinkings' constitute, according to Newman, one of the most significant shifts in the art of the epoch. See Newman, 'The Material Turn in the Art of Western Europe and North American in the 1960s', in Milena Kalinovska, ed., *Beyond*

Preconceptions: The Sixties Experiment (New York: Independent Curators International, 2000), 73.

23 Walther, cited in Lingner, ed., *Romanticism Revisited*, 150.

24 Mark Sperlinger, 'Orders! Conceptual Art's Imperatives', in Mark Sperlinger, ed., *Afterthought: New Writing on Conceptual Art* (London: Rachmaninoff's, 2005), 7

25 Lawrence Weiner, interview with Patricia Norvell (June 3, 1969) in Alexander Alberro and Norvell, eds., *Recording Conceptual Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 105. Cited in Sperlinger, 'Orders!', 7.

26 See Anna Dezeuze, 'Tactile Dematerialization, Sensory Politics: Hélio Oiticica's Parangolés', *Art Journal* (summer 2004): 59 - 71.

27 See Guy Brett, 'Lygia Clark: In Search of the Body', *Art in America* (July 1994): 57-108 and Anna Dezeuze, 'The 1960s: A Decade Out of Bounds', in Amelia Jones, ed., *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2006), 38-59.

28 On Rainer, see Carrie Lambert's excellent article 'Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer's Trio A' October 89 (summer, 1999): 87-112.

29 In 1965 Rainer wrote: 'No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe no to glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved.' See Rainer, 'No manifesto', *Tulane Drama Review* (1965) 10, 2: 178. See also Yvonne Rainer: *Work 1961-73* (Halifax and New York: Presses of Nova Scotia College of Art & Design and New York University, 1974).

30 Annette Michelson, 'Yvonne Rainer – Part I: The Dancer and the Dance', *Artforum* 12, no. 5 (January 1974): 57-63.

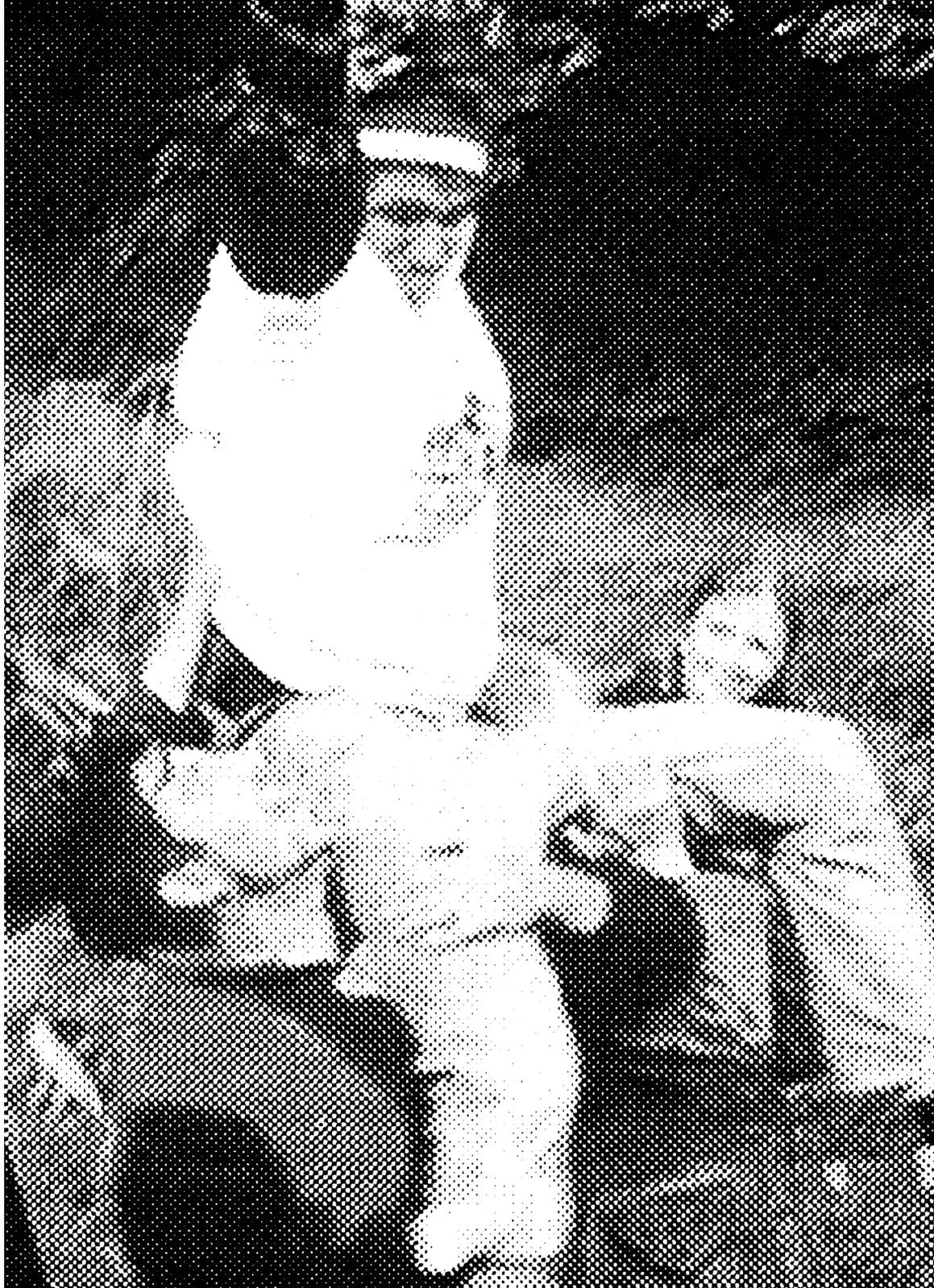
31 See Yvonne Rainer, 'A Quasi-Survey of Some

Minimalist Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A, in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), 270.

32 One must wonder if the ‘unclassifiability’ of Walther’s practice might explain why his work is so glaringly absent from exactly those survey publications focused on defining the new art of the period, including Paul Wood, Francis Fracsine, Jonathan Harris, and Charles Harrison, eds., *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004); Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent 1955-1969* (London: Calmann and King, Ltd., 1996); or, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, et al., eds., *Art Since 1900* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003). Numerous others could be cited. Needless to say, he also remains almost wholly absent from publications devoted to any single one of the abovementioned movements—Minimal Art, Conceptual Art, Performance, etc.

33 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, eds., trans by Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), 43. The connection between Wittgenstein’s definition of words and Walther’s art of action is made in Alexander Koch, ‘Franz Erhard Walther’s Participatory Minimalism’, *KOW* issue 1, 2009.

Franco “Bifo” Berardi
Breathing - Chaos and Poetry



I CAN'T BREATHE

I suffer from asthma, so perhaps I was affected by a sense of asthmatic solidarity when I saw the video of Eric Garner's assassination. Garner was killed on July 17, 2014 in Staten Island, New York City, when a New York City Police Department officer put him in a chokehold for about fifteen to nineteen seconds while arresting him. The words "I can't breathe"—which Garner panted eight times, less and less audibly, before expiring—have been chanted by thousands of demonstrators all over the country in the months since.

In many ways, these words express the general sentiment of our times: physical and psychological breathlessness everywhere, in the megacities choked by pollution, in the precarious social condition of the majority of exploited workers, in the pervading fear of violence, war, and aggression. Trump is the perfect emperor for this baroque

empire of unchained vulgarity, glamorous hypocrisy, and silent, widespread suffering.

Respiration is a subject that will help me discuss our contemporary chaos and search for an escape from the corpse of capitalism. I'll start by reading Friedrich Hölderlin.

Hölderlin belongs to the tradition of German Romanticism, but his pathway diverges from idealism because he opposes an ironic interrogation of Reality to the assertive style of Hegelian dialectic rationalism. Hegel chose the path of bigotry, the modern bigotry of History conceived as the becoming real of Truth.

Hölderlin was not such a bigot, and he did not follow this pathway that leads to historical delusion. In "Mnemosyne," he writes, "A sign we are, without interpretation / Without pain we are and have nearly / Lost our language in foreign lands."¹

Hegel, who was a colleague of Hölderlin's during their college years in Tübingen, finds the unity of man in the concept, and in the historical "becoming true" of the concept. Hölderlin does not fall into the trapdoor of Hegel's *Aufhebung* (sublation). He does not buy idealism's faith in the historical realization of *Geist* (spirit). His ground for understanding reality is not *Geschichte* (History), but *Begeisterung* (inspiration). Hölderlin intuits that the intimate texture of being is breathing: poetical rhythm.

I intend to emphasize here the ontological meaning of “rhythm”: foundationally, “rhythm” refers not only to vocal emissions or to the sound of acoustic matter, but also to the vibration of the world. Rhythm is the inmost vibration of the cosmos. And poetry is an attempt to tune into this cosmic vibration, this temporal vibration that is coming and coming and coming.

Mystical Buddhist philosophy distinguishes between the Indian words *shabda* and *mantra*. *Shabda* is a word for ordinary speech sounds, used to denote objects and concepts in the normal exchange of operational signifieds. A *mantra*, on the other hand, is a vocal sound that triggers the creation of mental images and sensible meanings. While *shabda* acts on the level of the operational chains of functional daily communication, *mantra* acts on the rhythm of the body and its relation with the semio-sphere—which is the source of the human world. *Ātman*, in this philosophy, is the singular breathing of each sensitive and conscious organism; *prana* is the cosmic vibration that we perceive as rhythm.

In “Notes on Antigone,” Hölderlin opposes a poetical logic to the conceptual logic of the then-emerging idealism. Against Hegel’s panlogism, Hölderlin advocates a sort of panpoeticism. We should not dismiss this stance as merely Romantic patheticism, for there is a deep philosophical core to

Hölderlin's suggestion. Hölderlin means that poetry is the semiotic flow that emanates the perceptual and narrative forms that shape the common sphere of experience. Reality, in other words, is the sphere of human interaction and communication secreted by language and refined by poetry. Poetry builds and instills the strata of mythopoiesis: it is the inspiration of the social imagination and of political discourse. In Hölderlin's words, "poets establish what remains."² Respiration and semiosis: this is the conceptual couple that I want to consider in order to understand something of our contemporary chaos.

Chaos and rhythm are the main threads of this book, which roams about the apocalypse of our time: in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the mindscape and the social scene are flooded by flows of unhappiness and violence. In his poetry, Hölderlin foresees the forthcoming chaos of modernity and the coming breathlessness. It's a problem of measure, he says. There is no earthly measure, so our sense of measure (rhythm) is only a projection of our breathing: poetry. This is why man lives poetically, although he "deserves" differently. Hölderlin: "May a man look up / From the utter hardship of his life / And say: Let me also be / Like these [gods]? Yes. As long as kindness lasts, / Pure, within his heart, he may gladly measure himself / Against the divine."³

Poetry as Excess

What is poetry? Why do human beings deal poetically with words, sounds, and visual signs? Why do we slip away from the level of conventional semiosis? Why do we loosen signs from their established framework of exchange?

Hölderlin writes, "Full of merit, yet poetically / Man dwells on this earth."⁴ The poetical act is here opposed to the "deservingness," or merit, of man. What is merit? I think that merit is the quality of being worthy, of deserving praise or reward, the quality of measuring up to the (conventional) values of individuals in a given social scene.

Social beings are more or less full of merits. They deserve recognition as they exchange words and actions in a worthy way, and they receive mutual understanding as a sort of moral payment, a confirmation of their place in the theater of social exchange. Merits and moral payments and recognition are part of the conventional sphere. When humans exchange words in the social space, they presume that their words have established meanings and produce predictable effects. However, we are also able to utter words that break the established relation between signifier and signified, and open new possibilities of interpretation, new horizons of meaning.

In the last lines of the same poem, Hölderlin writes: "Is there measure on earth? There is /

None.”⁵ Measure is only a convention, an inter-subjective agreement which is the condition of merit (social recognizability). Poetry is the excess which breaks the limit and escapes measure. The ambiguousness of poetical words, indeed, may be defined as semantic overinclusiveness. Like the schizo, the poet does not respect the conventional limits of the relation between the signifier and signified, and reveals the infinitude of the process of meaning-making (signification). Exactness and compliance are the conditions of merit and exchange. Excessiveness is the condition of revelation, of emancipation from established meaning and of the disclosure of an unseen horizon of signification: the possible.

What we are accustomed to call “the world” is an effect of a process of semiotic organization of prelinguistic matter. Language organizes time, space, and matter in such a way that they become recognizable to human consciousness. This process of semiotic emanation does not reveal a natural given; rather, it unfolds as a perpetual reshuffling of material contents, a continuous reframing of our environment. Poetry can be defined as the act of experimenting with the world by reshuffling semiotic patterns.

Did I say: poetry can be defined? Well actually the act of definition that I have just performed is arbitrary and illicit, because the question “What is

poetry?” cannot be answered. I cannot say what poetry “is,” because, actually, poetry “is” nothing. I can only try to say what poetry *does*.

The act of composing signs (visual, linguistic, musical, and so on) may disclose a space of meaning that is neither preexistent in nature nor based on a social convention. The poetical act is the emanation of a semiotic flow that sheds a light of nonconventional meaning on the existing world. The poetical act is a semiotic excess hinting beyond the limit of conventional meaning, and simultaneously it is a revelation of a possible sphere of experience not yet experienced (that is to say, the experienceable). It acts on the limit between the conscious and the unconscious in such a way that this limit is displaced and parts of the unconscious landscape—of what Freud called the “inner foreign country”—are illuminated (or distorted) and resignified.⁶

That said, I have so far said nothing, or nearly nothing. Very little. Actually, poetry is *the* act of language that cannot be defined, as “to define” means to limit, and poetry is precisely the excess that goes beyond the limits of language, which is to say beyond the limits of the world itself. Only a phenomenology of poetical events can give us a map of poetical possibilities.

“Is there measure on earth? There is / None,” Hölderlin writes. He continues, “No created world

ever hindered / The course of thunder.”⁷ Let’s forget measure, let’s forget technical capability social competence and functional proficiency. These measurable entities have invaded the modern mindscape and accelerated the rhythm of the info-sphere up to the point of the current psychocollapse and techno-fascism. Let’s try to think outside the sphere of measurability and of measure. Let’s find a way to rhythmically evolve with the cosmos. Let’s go out of this century of measure, let’s go out to breathe together.

Félix Guattari speaks of “chaosmosis”: the process of rebalancing the osmosis between the mind and chaos.⁸ Hölderlin speaks of poetry as linguistic vibration, oscillation, and quest, of a rhythm tuned to the chaosmotic evolution that simultaneously involves mind and world.

VOICE SOUND NOISE

Chaos as Spasm

Chaosmosis is the title of Félix Guattari's final book.¹ The concept of chaosmosis emerged from Guattari's previous work, particularly from his and Gilles Deleuze's concept of the refrain (*ritournelle*). The term "chaosmosis" alludes to the incumbency of chaos, and the prospect of chaos's osmotic evolution itself. The groundwork of chaosmosis is the ceaseless interplay between cosmic respiration and refrains of singularity.

The established order—social, political, economic, and sexual—aims to enforce a concatenation that stiffens and stifles the vibrational oscillation of singularities. This stiffening of vibrant bodies results in what Guattari calls "spasms."² Guattari did not have time to further elaborate his concept of the chaotic spasm, as he died a few months

after the publication of *Chaosmosis*, but I think that this concept is crucial for an understanding of subjectivity under today's conditions of info-neural acceleration.

The spasm provokes suffering and breathlessness in the nervous system and the consciousness of the social organism. But the spasm is "chaosmic," in Guattari's terms, inasmuch as it invites the organism to remodulate its vibration and to create, *ex nihilo*, a harmonic order by way of resingularization. Music is the vibrational search for a possible conspiracy beyond the limits of the noise of the environment, and the recomposition of fragments of noise in a sound that embodies a conscious vibrational intention. In the spasm sound collapses into noise, a tangle of inaudible voices.

Thinking with Guattari's chaosmosis, we may reframe the concepts of history and of historical time. When we speak of "history," when we view events from a historical perspective, we are imposing a certain modulation of our perception and projection of time. Historical perception is the effect of a mental organization of time within a teleological frame. Historical perception shapes time into an all-encompassing dimension that forces individuals and groups to share their temporalities according to a uniform meter and a teleological (or economic) frame. People enter the historical domain when they all hear more or less

the same music in their ears. Time is captured by a certain rhythmic refrain, so people march at the same pace. This shared pace of time's temporality, perception, and projection is called "history." Only thanks to the harmonization of different temporalities can history frame time's myriad events within a common projectual narrative structure.

Time and Spasm

For Henri Bergson, time is defined from the point of view of our consciousness of duration. Time is the objectivation of a biological organism's act of breathing, which is sensitive and conscious. Singular respiration is concatenated with others' breathing, and this corespiration we name "society." Society is the dimension in which singular durations are rearranged in a shared time-frame.

Consciousness is located in time, but time is located in consciousness, as it can only be perceived and projected by consciousness. "Time" means the duration of the stream of consciousness, the projection of that dimension in which consciousness flows. The stream of consciousness, however, is not homogeneous: on the contrary, it is perceived and projected according to different rhythms and singular refrains, and sometimes it is codified and arranged into a regular, rhythmic repetition.

In the industrial age, when a dominant rhythm was imposed over the spontaneous rhythms of social subjects, power could be described as a code aligning different temporalities, an all-encompassing rhythm framing and entangling the singularity of individuals' refrains. We could speak of Political sovereignty when the sound of law was silencing the noise emitted from the social environment. In our contemporary connective postindustrial society, the opposite is true: power is no longer constructed by silencing the crowd (for example, through censorship, broadcast media, or the solemnity of political discourse), but is based on the boundless intensification of noise. Today, social signification is no longer a system of the exchange and decoding of signifiers, but a saturation of the listening mind—a neural hyperstimulation. While political order used to be effected by a voice proclaiming law amid the silence of the crowd, contemporary postpolitical power is a statistical function that emerges from the noise of the crowd.

Referring to the swarm-like behavior of networked culture, Byung-Chul Han summarizes the transformation that has occurred in the relation between power and information: "Shitstorms occur for many reasons. They arise in a culture where respect is lacking and indiscretion prevails. The shitstorm represents an authentic phenomenon of digital communication . . . *Sovereign is he who*

commands the shitstorms of the Net.”³ This is a good way to explain the ascent of the Emperor of Chaos to the highest political office in the world, the presidency of the United States of America. Modern power was based on the ability to forcibly impose one’s own voice and to silence others: “Without the loudspeaker, we would never have conquered Germany,” Hitler wrote in 1938 in the *Manual of German Radio*.⁴ Now, power emerges from the storm of inaudible voices. Power no longer consists in eavesdropping and censoring. On the contrary, it stimulates expression and draws rules of control from the statistical elaboration of data emerging from the noise of the world. Social sound is turned into white noise and white noise becomes social order.

In Deleuze and Guattari’s parlance, the “refrain” is a concatenation of signs, particularly phonetic sounds and phonetic vibrations; the refrain is a semiotic concatenation (*agencément sémiotique*) that enables the organism to enter its singular cosmos into a wider concatenation. Time is the projection of a singularity (*durée*, in Bergson) and is simultaneously the frame of interindividual conjunction, the grid where uncountable refrains interweave.

Music is a peculiar mode of chaosmosis: the osmotic process of transforming chaos into harmony. Music’s process of signification is based on directly shaping the listener’s body-mind: music is psychedelic (meaning, etymologically, “mind-manifesting”).

Music deploys in time, yet the reverse is also true: making music is the act of projecting time, of interknitting perceptions in time. Rhythm is the mental elaboration of time, the common code that links time perception and time projection. The emanation of sound is part of the overall creation of a social cosmos: Steve Goodman speaks of “sonic warfare” in order to describe the invasion of society’s acoustic sphere by sonic hypermachines that besiege acoustic attention, imposing a rhythm in which singularity is cancelled.⁵

Code, Debt, and the Future

Code is “speaking” us. Code is a tool for the submission of the future to language, enabled by the inscription of algorithms into the flux of language. The future is now being written by the algorithmic chain inscribed in techno-linguistic automatisms.

Prescriptions, prophecies, and injunctions are ways of inscribing the future in language, and, more pointedly, of actually producing the future by means of language. Like prescriptions, prophecies, and injunctions, code has the power to prescribe the future, by formatting linguistic relations and the pragmatic development of algorithmic signs. Financial code, for instance, triggers a series of linguistic automatisms which perform social activity, consumption patterns, and lifestyles.

“Money makes things happen. It is the source of action in the world and perhaps the only power we invest in,” writes Robert J. Sordello in *Money and the Soul of the World*.⁶ Money and language have something in common: they are nothing and yet affect everything. They are nothing but symbols, conventions, *flatus vocis*, yet they have the power to persuade human beings to act, to work, and to transform physical things. Language, like money, is nothing. Yet like money, language can do anything. Language and money are shaping our future in many ways. They are prophetic.

Prophecy is a form of prediction that acts on the development of the future by way of persuasion and emotion. Thanks to the social effects of psychological reactions to language, prophecy can be self-fulfilling. The financial economy, for instance, is marked by self-fulfilling prophecies. When ratings agencies downgrade the value of an enterprise or the value of a nation’s economy, they make a prediction about the future performance of that enterprise or economy. But this prediction so heavily influences actors in the economic game that the downgrading results in an actual loss of reliability and an actual loss of economic value—thus fulfilling the prophecy. How can we escape the effects of prophecy? How can we escape the effects of code? These are two different problems, of course, but they share something in common.

Poetry as Semiotic Insolvency

In his preface to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein writes, “in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).”⁷ Later, he posits:

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits.

So we cannot say in logic, ‘The world has this in it, and this, but not that.’

[. . .]

We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot *say* either.

[. . .]

The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world.⁸

The potency and extension of language depend on the consistency of the subject: on its vision, on its situation. And the extension of my world depends on the potency of my language. The process of going beyond the limits of the world is what Guattari calls “chaosmosis.” He speaks of chaosmosis “rekindling processes of semiotisation”: i.e., redefining the semiotic grid.⁹ The semiotic grid is

a tangle that limits the possibilities of experience, and therefore limits the experienceable world itself.

“Chaosmosis” means breathing with chaos—“osmosis” implies breathing together—but in this osmosis with chaos a new harmony emerges, a new sympathy, a new syntony. This “emergence” is an effect of autopoietic morphogenesis: a new form emerges and takes shape when logical-linguistic conditions make it possible to see it and to name it. Only an act of language escaping the technical automatisms of financial capitalism will enable the emergence of a new life form. Only the reactivation of the body of the general intellect—the organic, existential, historical finitude that harbors the potency of the general intellect—will enable the imagination of new infinities.

Language has infinite potency, but the exercise of language happens in finite conditions of history and existence. Thanks to the establishment of a limit, the world comes to exist as a world of language. Grammar, logic, and ethics are all based on the imposition of a limit. Code is a limited exercise of language and, simultaneously, it is the imposition of a performing and productive limit. Limits can be productive, but outside of the space of limitation, infinite possibilities of language persist immeasurably.

Code implies syntactic exactness of linguistic signs: connection. Compatibility and consistency

and syntactic exactness are the conditions of code's operational functionality. Code is language in debt. Only by exacting the necessary syntactic consistency can language perform its connective purpose. The leftover excess is the *remise en question* of language's infinity, the breakdown of consistency, the reopening of the horizon of possibility. Excess plays the game of conjunction (the game of bodies looking to make meaning out of *any* syntax), not the preformatted game of connection.

Poetry reopens the indefinite, through the ironic act of exceeding the established meaning of words. In every sphere of human activity, grammar establishes limits in order to define a space of communication. In the age of capitalism, the economy has taken the place of the universal grammar traversing the different levels of human activity: language, too, is defined and limited by its economic exchangeability. However, while social communication is a limited process, language is boundless: its potentiality is not limited by the limits of the signified. Poetry is the excess of language, the signifier disentangled from the limits of the signified. Irony, the ethical form of the excessive power of language, is the infinite game that words play to create and to skip and to shuffle meanings. Poetry and irony are tools for semiotic insolvency, for the disentanglement of language from the limits of symbolic debt.

CHAOS AND THE BAROQUE

The modern age blossomed with a breathtaking expansion of the sphere of experience: the discovery of the new world and the diffusion of printed texts paved the way for the expansion of experience and the enrichment of the imagination. This, in turn, led to the bewildering phantasmagoria called “the baroque.” The humanist Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had been founded on an assertion of the centrality of the human viewpoint in the vision of the landscape, in the projection of space, and in the construction of the world. The explosive Age of Discovery that followed multiplied prospective viewpoints.

In the sixteenth century, Spanish culture was the theater of a sort of vertiginous proliferation of viewpoints that José Antonio Maravall has called “baroque cosmovision.”¹ Crowds of people coming from the countryside took hold of urban spaces,

and the ensuing whirlwind of urban experience provoked an inflation of meaning and a sort of explosion of identity. In the same year that Columbus disembarked onto American soil, Spanish rulers ordered the expulsion of infidels. The country was just emerging from three centuries of religious war: religious identity, ethnic identity, and social identity now entered into the turmoil of modernity. The basic interrogation had to do with religious faith and ethnic belonging: in a word, with identity, a nonsense concept and a psychological trap. In the Spanish situation of the late fifteenth century, "Who are you?" was a twofold question. It meant, what is your origin? Are you a pure Christian or have your ancestors mingled with the infidels? Simultaneously it meant, what social place do you have?

The problematics and the adventures of the picaresque novel (that literary genre that was emerging from the urban condition and from the conflict between the bourgeoisie and urban proletarians) are grounded here. A *picaro* is someone who has nothing: no property, no job, not even the certainty of his origin. Therefore, the *picaro* is someone who is searching. The *picaro*, in fact, is a *buscón*, a searcher. What is the *picaro* searching for? He is searching for everything, and first of all for himself—for his origin, his identity. The bewilderment that Góngora calls "madness" (*locura*) and

Quevedo perceives as “disillusion” (*desengano*) was an effect of this deterritorialization of viewpoints and proliferation of stimuli. The baroque is a transition, according to Deleuze. A transition from what to what? A gigantic fluctuation happened in the European semio-sphere when, thanks to the technology of print, written text spread among a large urban population, while geographic explorations enormously expanded the limits of the known world. This fluctuation led the collective mind to peer beyond the borders of the anthropocentric order asserted by Renaissance culture. That order was scrambled by the man-made disorder of baroque modernity: artifice replaced nature, *locura* replaced reason, and appearance replaced being. Lost in the urban labyrinth, in the unremitting battle for survival and accumulation, reason turned into shrewdness and measure was replaced by force. The *buscòn*—the searcher—became the symbol of the new condition.

The fold, the fractal: these are the figures of the baroque imagination. The baroque originated from a vertiginous fractalization of the humanist order. For the first time, inflation appeared as an economic and a semiotic phenomenon. Catapulted to a planetary dimension, the Spanish economy was shaken by social turmoil and by inflation, while the Spanish psycho-sphere was frenzied with a proliferation of signs: inflation of meaning,

locura. Economic inflation happens when more and more money is needed to buy fewer and fewer goods, and semiotic inflation happens when more and more signs buy less and less meaning. Chaos loomed in the frantic acceleration of the info-sphere during the Spanish Golden Age, and it is in this conjuncture that the baroque imagination is rooted.

Then, in the age of scientific revolution, of industrialization and of nation-states, bourgeois rationalism prevailed, and the baroque sensibility retreated to linger around the margins of modern art and philosophy. But at the end of modernity rationalism faded, and in the twilight of humanism that we are living through today, a new gigantic fluctuation is perceptible. Reason has been submitted to financial rule, such that the culture of belonging has replaced universal reason and identitarian resentment has replaced social solidarity. The legacies of humanism and the Enlightenment are nullified along with the legacy of socialism. Socialism, however, has returned under the shape of national socialism: the discourse and the political agenda of Trump, Putin, Salvini, Erdogan, and Modi. The promise of recovering the economic security destroyed by neoliberal globalism is tied to the promise of empowering the nation (the identitarian particularity) against those who do not belong.

In the folds of the contractual sensibility that results from the digital kingdom of abstraction and from the aggressive return of identity, we are baroquely searching for a new rhythm.

Indeterminacy and Chaos

In the wake of Newton and Galileo, modern mechanistic physics was based on the idea of a unifying language—the language of mathematics—which was supposed to be apt to semiotize the whole of creation. Later on, the development of biology and biogenetics thrived on the assumption of a deterministic code that ruled the organism's development. In the 1950s, a fusion of physics and biology led to the discovery of DNA. The body was then viewed as a deployment and actualization of code, of an implied order which accounted for the unfolding of life. This mechanical vision of nature coincided with an economic practice based on the measurability of all things: labor time as the source of economic value, and value measured as a product of working time. In industrial society, the determinability of economic value was based on the fact that labor time was definable as an average term. One could determine the economic value of an object by calculating the time which was socially necessary in order to produce it.

But at the end of modern industrialism, the deterministic relationship between labor, time, and value is now dissolving in the chaotic dimension of semio-capitalism. When the measurability of value dissolves, when time becomes aleatory and singular, the very idea of determination starts to fade. This affects the realm of the natural sciences too, where the discourse of determinism is abandoned and replaced by the principle of indeterminacy.

In the nineteenth century, Pierre-Simon de Laplace envisioned a universal intelligence able to know every state and every possible evolution of beings:

An intelligence that, at a given instant, could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings that make it up, if moreover it were vast enough to submit these data to analysis, would encompass in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atoms. For such an intelligence nothing would be uncertain, and the future, like the past, would be open to its eyes. The human mind affords, in the perfection that it has been able to give to astronomy, a feeble likeness of this intelligence.²

This universal intelligence would be able to encompass with a single formula the movements of the largest bodies and the movements of the slightest atoms, and therefore, as a consequence of ruling out any uncertainty, it would be able to foretell the future. This intelligence would be determinist in a double sense: it would be the cause of the inmost determination and simultaneously it would be the consciousness presiding over any deterministic relationship occurring in nature.

But Laplace's deterministic rationalism did not survive the unfolding of a new epistemology: the concept of chaos entered into the scientific realm when the progressive order of modernity started to crumble and when the destabilizing force of the financial market started to jeopardize the economic order of industrialism. The concept of indeterminacy obliged to rethink the relation between the mind and world in terms of undecidability, and at this point chaos entered the fray.

In science, just as in life, sometimes a sequence of events may reach such a level of complexity that a small perturbation will have huge, unpredictable effects. We speak of "chaos" when such indeterminacy becomes widespread. "Chaos" stands for an environment that is too complex to be decoded by our available explanatory frames, an environment in which fluxes circulate too quickly for our minds to elaborate. The notion of chaos denotes a

complexity which is too dense and too fast for our brains to decipher. Chaos takes a special place today in the sphere of the social sciences, as the order of modern civilization is falling apart.

Modern civilization may be described as a process of the colonization of reality by the force of the law, in a double sense. Scientific law wanted to reduce the becoming of physical matter to the repetition of a model, while political law was a linguistic act that asserted a conventional norm and then aimed to oblige social activity to conform to it. The subjugation of natural chaos by the humanistic order of measurement (recall that "ratio," in Latin, means measure) was the crucial feature of the cultural colonization of the world by the Europeans. Civilization was—or better, was conceived as—the transformation of Chaos into Order. That transformation implied an act of mathematizing the world that enabled a commensurabilization (a proportioning and submittal to measurement). Scientific knowledge implies a limitation of the space of what is relevant, an excision of the irrelevant. Similarly, the political mind cannot be decisive without delimiting the space of what is socially relevant. Only what is relevant from the viewpoints of knowledge and government is actually elaborated by the modern mind. Forget the irrational, forget mythology, forget craziness and delirium. Those multiple facets will

be segregated in the madhouse that psychiatry is building in order to protect the Enlightenment from the darkness.

Machiavelli distinguished the sphere of Fortune (*fortuna*) from the sphere of Will (*volere*). The prince is the (male) person who subdues Fortune (chance, which is feminine) to the masculine will—to measure, to order and predictability. Fortune is the chaos that is always hiding in the folds of the human mind, and if the Prince wants to govern, he has to preemptively carve a narrow chain of events from the infinite territory of Fortune. The dark infinity of unreducible chaos lies at the border of the established order. Rhythm is the key that enables the synchronization between Fortune and Will, between reality and reason. But only a tiny part of the sphere of reality can be synchronized with reason, and only a tiny part of Fortune can be synchronized with political will. This tiny part is what is called “relevant” by the ruling intellect of Order. Government is always an illusion, as political consciousness carves out a tiny chain of relevant social events and tries to protect this space—the space of civilization—from the surrounding ocean of ungovernable matter.

The digital intensification of the semiotic flow has broken the rhythm that we have inherited from the modern age. When the refrain of rationalism and political reason grows unable to process and govern

the flows of information proliferating in the networked info-sphere, the protective fence of relevancy breaks down, and we can no longer distinguish what is relevant from what is not. If cyberspace is the virtual intersection of infinite mental stimuli, and cybertime is the mental rhythm of processing these stimuli, how can cybertime be upgraded to the point of processing today's digital cyberspace? As far as I know, we cannot speed up our mental rhythm beyond a certain limit that is physical, emotional, and cultural.

When the acceleration of cyberspace breaks the rhythm of mental time, and we no longer know what is relevant and what is irrelevant in our surrounding environment, this is what we call "chaos": the inability to attribute meaning to the flow, the breakdown of our framework of relevance. A special vibration of the soul spreads out at this point, which we call "panic": the subjective recording of chaos.

CHAOS AND THE BRAIN

Here all is distance;
there it was breath.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “The Eighth Elegy”

The Apocalyptic Unconscious

Social psychomancy is not a science, it’s just a game that I play from time to time in order to survey the ongoing history of humankind from the viewpoint of the social unconscious. So do not take me too seriously. Social psychomancy is a random methodology for the interpretation of a random sphere of events: mental events evoked by the flows of imagination that roam the social psychosphere and are organized by forces of attraction and repulsion. Fears, expectations, desires, and resentments dwell in the psychomantic sphere of

imagination, so I think of psychomancy as the art of mapping the collective mind. The history of the world cannot be fully grasped if we do not understand what happens in the social psycho-sphere: shared meaning, rational goals, and conscious motivations are continuously disrupted and reshaped by the immaterial substances that social psychomancy tries to survey.

The present may be considered the Age of the Dark Enlightenment: the age of the rejection of modernity's rationalistic Enlightenment by those who have been led to submit reason and life to the ferocity of financial mathematics. Rational categories have lost their grasp on our social becoming, and we need a different approach in order to apprehend our contemporary postrational condition. Our time is traversed by an apocalyptic sentiment of a sort. The institution most credited for interpreting the famous text ascribed to John of Patmos—the Catholic Church, whose expertise is long established—has lately been shaken by astounding, unheard-of events.

In 2005 Karol Wojtyła, the pope who triumphed in the long fight against the Soviet Union's Empire of Evil, performed a worldwide broadcasted spectacle of extreme physical suffering and fortitude. After his death, a new pope, of German origin, came to Rome proclaiming the unquestionable uniqueness of Truth and condemning

relativism. Then, on a dark night in February 2013, while the black sky of Rome was ripped by lightning, Pope Benedict bent his head and acknowledged his own fragility and the fragility of the human mind. Chaos was spreading around the world, and the word of Truth was imperceptible amidst the fury and fog of the uncountable wars that were destroying the lives of people all over the planet.

At that point, the Holy Spirit chose a new pope, an Argentinean who introduced himself to a crowd of the faithful with the words “Good evening, I am a man who comes from the end of the world.” What he meant was “I come from a country where people like me have experienced the apocalypse provoked by financial capitalism.” He was the first pope in church history to name himself Francis: a defiant declaration of affinity with the poor, with the exploited, with those who have been oppressed by the economic powers of the world. This defiance was not unconnected to a daring rethinking of theological grounding. In the first interview that Pope Francis released, to Monsignor Santoro for the magazine *Civiltà Cattolica* in October 2013, he spoke of theological virtues, inviting Christians to emphasize charity rather than faith and hope. The church, he said, is like a military hospital in wartime: our mission is not to judge nor convert, but to heal the wounds of human persons regardless

of their religious faith, ethnic origin, or nationality.¹ A glimpse of internationalism shone in his words, and in subsequent years Francis has emerged as the main actor of human resistance and dignity in an age of spreading barbarity.

Beyond the political meaning of his actions, I think that Francis is speaking to the apocalyptic unconscious of our time, while trying to translate this into an ethical soteriology, or soteriological ethics. Only in the embrace of the other, only in social solidarity, can we find any shelter. God's silence resounds in the background, and in different ways the contemporary artistic sensibility is speaking the same language. Nanni Moretti (in *Habemus Papam*), Martin Scorsese (in the not so convincing *Silence*), and Paolo Sorrentino (in the enigmatic *The Young Pope*) in different ways elaborate on the same subject. The silence of God resounds as chaos, as we have grown unable to breathe at the rhythm of our own respiration, which has been captured by the apocalyptic force of the algorithm of financial capitalism.

Chaos and Concepts

In the last chapter of *What Is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari reflect on aging. They refer to senescence in terms of the relation between order and chaos:

We require just a little order to protect us from chaos. Nothing is more distressing than a thought that escapes itself, than ideas that fly off, that disappear hardly formed, already eroded by forgetfulness or precipitated into others that we no longer master. These are infinite *variabilities*, the appearing and disappearing of which coincide. They are infinite speeds that blend into the immobility of the colorless and silent nothingness they traverse, without nature or thought. This is the instant of which we do not know whether it is too long or too short for time. We receive sudden jolts that beat like arteries. We constantly lose our ideas. That is why we want to hang on to fixed opinions so much. We ask only that our ideas are linked together according to a minimum of constant rules.²

“Chaos” is defined here in terms of speed, of acceleration of the info-sphere relative to the slow rhythms of reason and of the emotional mind. When things start to flow so fast that the human brain grows unable to elaborate the meaning of information, we enter into the condition of chaos.

What has to be done in such a situation? My suggestion is that you should not focus on the flow, but on your breath. Don't follow the external rhythm, but breathe normally. Deleuze and

Guattari: “the *struggle against chaos* does not take place without an affinity with the enemy, because another struggle develops and takes on more importance—the struggle *against opinion*, which claims to protect us from chaos itself.”³ Those who wage war against chaos will be defeated, as chaos feeds on war. When chaos is swallowing the mind (including the social mind), we should not be afraid of it, we should not strive to subjugate chaos to order. That will not work, because chaos is stronger than order. So, we should make friends with chaos, and in the whirlwind we should look for the superior order that chaos brings in itself.

In the same place, Deleuze and Guattari describe the relation of poetry to such chaos: “In a violently poetic text, Lawrence describes what produces poetry: people are constantly putting up an umbrella that shelters them and on the underside of which they draw a firmament and write their conventions and opinions. But poets, artists, make a slit in the umbrella, they tear open the firmament itself, to let in a bit of free and windy chaos and to frame in a sudden light a vision.”⁴ Reading these lines, I cannot help but recall Wittgenstein’s famous sentence in the *Tractatus*: “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*”⁵ People are constantly sheltering themselves under the umbrellas of their limited languages, and their worlds are written on the undersides of these

umbrellas. Poets cut the fabric of the umbrella and their incision discloses the unbearable vision of the true firmament. The poet's action is literally apocalyptic, and it begins the unchaining (or disentanglement) of the hidden possibilities lying there since the beginning, since the cosmic primeval origins of human history.

Poetry opens multiple ambiguous pathways to meaning, and concepts act in a similar way. Concepts are created to frame our cognition: a concept, etymologically speaking, is a captor of different entities, material and purely intellectual ("concept" comes from the Latin *concupere*, which literally means "taking together"). As Deleuze and Guattari write, "A concept is therefore a chaoid state par excellence; it refers back to a chaos rendered consistent, become Thought, mental chaosmos. And what would *thinking* be if it did not constantly confront chaos? Reason shows us its true face only when it 'thunders in its crater.'"⁶

The cosmos is the background of the process of recomposition that happens at the existential and at the historical level. "Cosmos," in fact, means order and simultaneously the all-encompassing dimension that exceeds human history and individual existence. Chaosmosis is the opening of the ordered system to chaotic flows and the osmotic vibration of the organism that looks for a rhythm tuned to the cosmos. I consider *Chaosmosis* and *What Is*

Philosophy? to be the books that philosophically predict the new millennium: philosophy now has to posit itself on the threshold of chaos without fearing the swirl, and without worshipping its vertigo and surrendering to its fascination.

In *What Is Philosophy?*, the two old boys speak of a struggle against chaos, but they also suggest that chaos may be a friend, a new condition of thought. The modern order wanted to protect us against chaos. We have accepted that deal, and we have implicitly accepted an order based on exploitation and misery. In order to avoid being killed by hunger or by barbarians, we have accepted the salaried labor and the daily war of competition. But now that the order based on salaried labor order is crumbling and the universal framework of modern rationality is dissolving, the protectors are turning into predators. So order turns into chaos, but in the chaos we should detect the outlines of an implicit new harmony for the challenge we now face is this: we must make visible an order where now we see only incomprehensible darkness. The word "order," actually, is misleading: we are not speaking of order, we are in fact speaking of rhythm. A new rhythm is what humankind needs.

Chaos has the potency to make creation possible. Can the collective brain consciously master and attune to the evolution of the collective brain itself?

Chaos and Aging

“We require just a little order to protect us from chaos,” Deleuze and Guattari write.⁷ The aging philosophers wanted to be protected. Protected from what? From the chaotic features of the world? I don’t think so. They didn’t want protection from the chaotic world, but from the brain’s chaos.

The aging brain is an agent of chaos, because the brain grows slower and less precise. Neuronal geometry loses its definition and projects this loss of definition onto the surrounding world. In the senescent decay of the psycho-sphere we can find an explanation of the current explosion of chaos. The average age of the human brain is growing older, while the amount of nervous info-stimuli is exploding. In past centuries, senility was such a rare experience that the old person was automatically considered a wise man (or an idiot). But now the pyramid of age is almost squared, and old people are so common that it’s getting more and more difficult to care for them, and to tend to the expanding sphere of dementia, memory loss, Alzheimer disease, and . . . chaos. Aging is a distinctive mark of the postmodern era: loss of energy, loss of speed, mental confusion.

Chaos is essentially a problem of tempo. When we call it “chaos,” we mean that our surrounding environment (particularly the information that

invades our attention sphere) is too fast to decipher, too fast for us to possibly decode and remember. History can no longer be understood in terms of a narrative, and instead takes the shape of a semiotic hurricane, an unchaining of uninterpretable flows of neurostimuli. No one has better expressed the sentiment of being overwhelmed by chaos than Shakespeare:

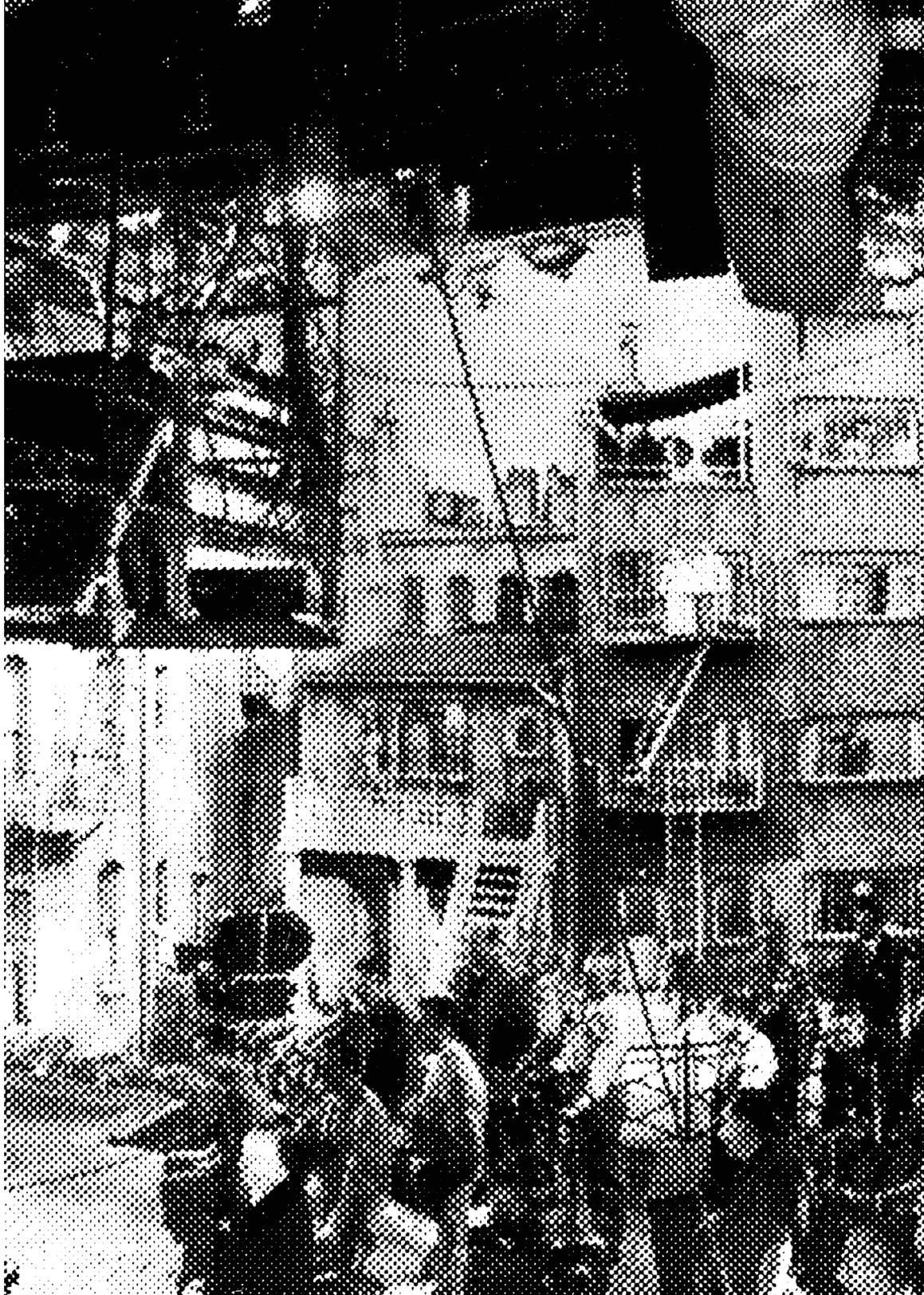
Out, out, brief candle,
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.⁸

Chaos implies sound and fury, but it also implies a special relation with signification.

While globalization has linked the daily lives and activities of all people living on the planet, the imagination of the planet's masses is less and less retraceable to a common frame of historical narration. In a paradoxical reversal, economic globalization has broken the universality of reason and the political sentiment of internationalism: nationalism, racism, and religious fundamentalism are the cultural identity markers claimed by the globalized masses of the world. So history turns into idiocy, a tale told by an idiot.

But we should see the other side of this idiotization of history: Might this idiot be trying to speak of something that is untranslatable into our known language? Might the idiot be saying something that exceeds our understanding, because his noise and his fury require a different system of interpretation, a different language, a different rhythm? Certainly now, in the second decade of the first century of the third millennium, the human brain as a whole and all the individual brains of humans seem to be overwhelmed by the accelerating pace of the surrounding universe: the human brain has become outpaced by the rhythm of its surrounding environment. When we say "chaos," then, we mean two different, complementary movements. We refer to the swirling of our surrounding semiotic flows, which we receive as if they were "sound and fury." But we also refer to attempts to reconcile this encompassing environmental rhythm with our own intimate, internal rhythm of interpretation.

Peter Sloterdijk
Spheres III - Foam



PROLOGUE

Foam-Bornness

And even to me, as one who is fond of life, it seems that butterflies and soap-bubbles, and whatever is like them among humans, know the most about happiness.

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,
“On Reading and Writing”¹

Air in Unexpected Places

Almost nothing, yet not nothing. A something, if only a delicate web of cavities and subtle walls. An actual thing, but a construct fearful of contact that yields and bursts at the slightest touch. That is foam as encountered in everyday experience. Through the addition of air, a liquid or solid loses its density; what had seemed autonomous, homogeneous and solid is transformed into loosened structures. What is happening there? It is the miscibility of the most opposed elements that becomes a phenomenon in foam. The light element evidently has a cunning ability to penetrate the heavier ones and combine with them, at least ephemerally, though in some cases even for a longer time. “Earth,” combined with air,

results in stable and dry foam like volcanic rock or cellular glass—phenomena that only came to be termed foam in modern times, once the introduction of air chambers into materials of any hardness or elasticity had become industrial routine. “Water,” on the other hand, connected to air, produces damp-fluid and fleeting foam such as sea spray or the scum on fermenting tubs. This short-term combination of gases and liquids provides the model for the established idea of foam. It suggests that, under as yet unclarified circumstances, that which is dense, continuous and massive is subject to an invasion by the hollow. Air, the misunderstood element, finds ways and means of advancing to places where no one reckons with its presence; and, more significantly, it makes space on its own strength for strange places where there were previously none. What, then, would a first definition of foam have to be? Air in unexpected places?

Foam, in its fleeting form, gives us opportunity to observe the subversion of substance with our own eyes. At the same time, one gains the experience that the revenge of the solid is not usually long in coming. As soon as the mixing agitation that ensures the introduction of air comes to a halt, the foam’s glory quickly collapses. An unease remains: the thing that dares to hollow out substance, even if only for a short while—does it not have a part in what must be considered bad and suspicious, perhaps even antagonistic? That is how tradition usually viewed this precarious something, distrusting it as if it were a perversion. As an unstable fabric of gas-filled cavities that gained the upper hand over the solid as if in some nocturnal coup, foam presents itself as a mischievous inversion of the natural order in the very midst of nature. It is as if matter had gone astray and embraced the hopeless at a physical saturnalia. It is no coincidence that for an entire

age, foam was assigned the flaw of having to act as a metaphor for the essenceless and untenable. Humans give credence to phantoms at night and to utopias at twilight, but once the waking world and the morning sun return, they “dissolve like mere foam.”² It is the blown and light, the illusory and trumped-up, the unreliable and shimmering—a bastard of matter, born of an illegitimate connection between elements, an opalescent surface, a charlatanry made of air and something or other. Upsurging forces are expressed in foam that are inevitably disconcerting to friends of solid states. If dense substance willingly undergoes foaming, it can only become an illusion of itself. Matter, the fertile matron that leads a respectable life at the side of the logos, suffers a hysterical crisis and leaps into the arms of the first available illusion. The evil pearls of air perform the most dubious tricks on it. There is seething, inflation, quaking and bursting. What remains? Foam air returns home to the general atmosphere while more solid substance disintegrates into drops of dust. What is almost nothing becomes what is almost not. If solid substance gains nothing from embracing the null but phantom pregnancies, who could call that an unexpected result?

Disappointment is thus guaranteed wherever foam swells up. Just as dreams once seemed to represent no more than an empty supplement to the real which could safely be forgotten—indeed, which should be avoided at all costs—so too, if one wished to remain in the sphere of the categorical, substantial and public, foams lacked everything that could permissibly be associated with the awe-inspiring spheres of the lastingly valid. For an entire epoch, Heraclitus’ warning to follow the shared (*koínon*) was perceived as a call to avoid the nocturnal and solely private, the dreamlike and foamlike, these agents of the

non-shared, non-public and non-worldly.³ Ally yourself with daylight and you will be in the right. Where the shared is experienced soberly, being behaves officially. The saying “dreams are foams”⁴ equates two forms of nullity. Foam and dream—here one essencelessness rhymes with another. Even the Leipzig student Goethe still precociously scolded the “empty head that foams on its stool / Dreaming oracular sayings like Pythia.” Foam is actually existing deception—the non-entity as an entity nonetheless, or a feigner of being, a symbol of the First False, an emblem for the undermining of the solid by the untenable—a ghost light, a superfluity, a mood, a swamp gas, inhabited by a dubious subjectivity.

It was not only the academics, the fundamentalists of the essential following Plato, who thought these things. A popular moral rectitude sought to give the foamy, that which was light, all-too-light, the cold shoulder. There had always been agreement between classical metaphysics and popular-ontological everyday life, despite their profound differences, that one would know the serious, responsible spirit by its contempt for foam. The verbal outpourings of the unserious: foam and buildings made of air; the mode of existence of the depraved: scum;⁵ the yearning figments of romantic spirits: sickly-sweet fermentations of a hollow subjectivity within itself; the angry and empty demands of the dissatisfied from politics, or better still from the whole: speech bubbles, produced by stirring the container of collective illusions. One is no stranger to such things: wherever manifestations of hollowness come to power, they leave behind a trail of burst platitudes. Foam, like the house of cards, is where the dreamers and agitators are at home; one will never find the adults, the serious and those with measured behavior there. Who is an adult?

Someone who refuses to seek stability in the unstable. Only the seducers and impostors, biased towards the impossible, want to draw their victims into their own fathomless excitement. Foam is the going-out uniform of that *nihil* from which nothing can come, if one can still trust the words of Lucretius; it is the untenable, the “one-aged,” which betrays itself through infertility and lack of action. The foamy, one hears from informed parties, exists only in empty self-reference, achieving no more than episodes and remaining eternally trapped in self-inflation and collapse. Something whose only future is disintegration is malign bloatedness, an anecdote that has come to power. Foam begets nothing, it has no consequences. With no life expectancy or next generation, all it knows is running ahead into its own bursting. Among the chaos of odd sons, therefore, foam, though not the first-born, is certainly the most contemptible.⁶

And yet: when thought broke through to polyvalence in Hegel’s new logic, a positivization of the negative came into view, and with it a possible rehabilitation of foam: “Out of the ferment of finitude, before its transformation into foam, spirit rises up fragrantly.”⁷ Does spirit itself, the medium in which substance develops into the subject, even now owe something to foam? Does this bastard that could not be trusted transpire as the long-sought middle element in which the spiritual and the material join to form that concreteness which we call existence? Is it the third factor through which binary idiocy could be overcome? Did Aristotle foresee such amalgams when, in *Problemata physica*, he classed the illness of brilliant men—melancholy—among the “air-filled ailments,” whose features include an affinity for foamable substances: black gall, which the doctors of antiquity believed to appear as an aerated mixture? If ordinary

mortals wish to feel the states of the brilliant, they are helped by foamy, warm, dark wine, which puts them in a condition “in which the air-filled melancholics have always been.”⁸ So then the study of melancholy would be the unexpected link between anthropology and the theory of foams? Such men long for wine if it makes them as amorous as it is foamy and aerated. According to Aristotle, even male ejaculation, like erection, is a pneumatic effect—so once again we have air in unexpected places, for the “expulsion (of sperm) evidently also takes place because air pushes it from behind.”⁹

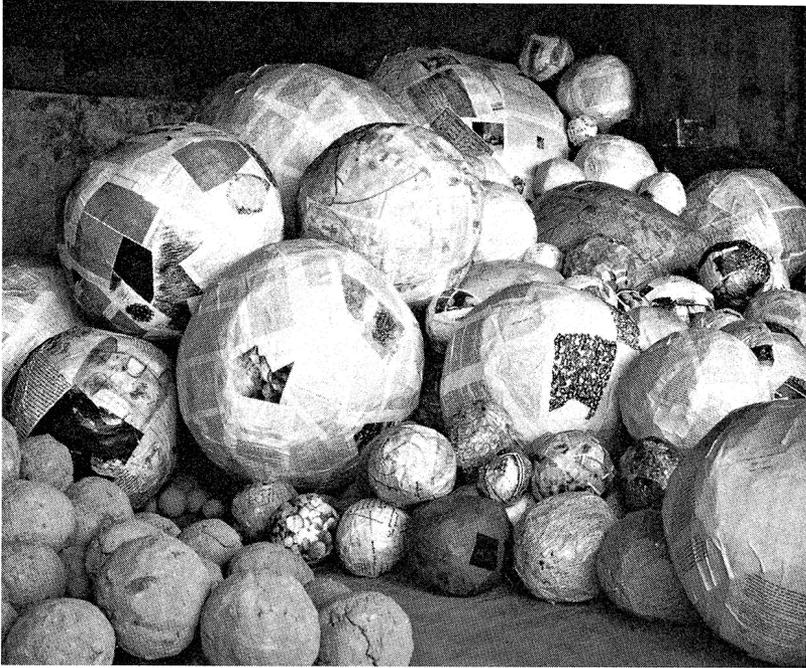
Interpretation of Foam

With the change of world picture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, neither dreams nor foams could keep their positions in the old cosmos of essences; this—alongside numerous other reversals of conditions and surprising redeployments of powers—was one of the intimate signatures of the world form that we now, in a calmer tone of voice, call the modern one. If one rightly considers Viennese psychoanalysis one of the motors of mental modernization, despite its conservative aspects, it is primarily because it practiced a new mode of dealing with the seemingly marginal, the once-secondary and previously unremarkable. By being situated in the epistemological place where the confluence of late idealistic-Romantic philosophies of the unconscious with scientific-technological concepts of mechanisms was supposed to take place, the psychoanalytical avant-garde succeeded in formulating a concept of the sign that opened up a new perspective on the inconspicuous. By making

psychological symptoms as legible as texts, Freud was able to become a “Galilei of the inner world of facts,” as Arnold Gehlen put it. What had been a *quantité négligeable* became a focus of attention and something capable of gaining significance. Freud’s early decision to distinguish dreams as the royal road to the unconscious displayed the “revolutionary” exchange of emphasis between the central and the peripheral. But the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, as was recently evident in retrospectives of the last century, not only marked the epistemic-propagandist founding act of the psychoanalytical movement, for it was also one of the starting points for the subversion of the traditional system of seriousness and for the consciousness of the weighty as such. Something that shifts seriousness and revises decorum changes culture as a whole. Through its participation in the rehabilitation of the dream dimension, for which Romanticism had paved the way, Viennese psychoanalysis entered a context in which no less was at stake than a redistribution of emphases in the field of the primary, the validating and the meaning-giving—a process of culturally revolutionary scope: here the shockwaves from Nietzsche’s intervention in metaphysical idealism came together with the confusions resulting from both the Marxist and positivist critiques of superstructure. The new art of reading for barely noticed signs of intimate and public contexts of meaning integrated the most private thoughts, tics, rashes and slips of the tongue in subversively expanded suppositions of significance. By re-drawing the boundaries between meaning and non-meaning, the serious and the unserious, this revision decisively altered the formatting of the cultural space. Now the insignificant could settle old scores with the significant. Since then, dreams have no longer been

foams—at most, they indicate an endogenous foaming of mental systems and encourage the formulation of hypotheses about the laws determining the development of symptoms and the bubbling-up of inner images.

If modernity is distinguished by its shifts of seriousness, what about the other side of the equation of dreams and foams? How seriously did the twentieth century know to take foam? What status did it assign to that “air in unusual places?” In what way did it work on the rehabilitation of this fleeting phenomenon dedicated to disintegration? By what means did it attempt to do justice to the self-referential spaces, the internal spheres filled with intrinsic values, the breathable interiors and the climatic facts? The adequate response to these questions, assuming it is already possible in our time, would consist in a synopsis of modernization. It would describe a wide-range admission procedure for the coincidental, the momentary, the vague, the transient and the atmospheric—a procedure in which the arts, theories and experimental life forms are involved with their own respective stakes. The procedure’s results include a fundamentally new, post-heroic formulation of decorum—the set of rules used to calibrate cultures as a whole.¹⁰ Anyone hoping to undertake a comprehensive retelling of these processes would have to speak of a non-misrepresented Nietzsche’s intentions as well as the development of Husserl’s impulse; of perspectivism around 1900 as well as chaos theory around 2000; of the promotion of the surreal to a self-willed section of the real as well as the elevation of the atmospheric to theory-worthiness;¹¹ of the mathematization of the unfocused¹² as well as the conceptual analysis of striated structures and irregular quantities.¹³ One would have to discuss a revolt of the inconspicuous whereby the small and fleeting



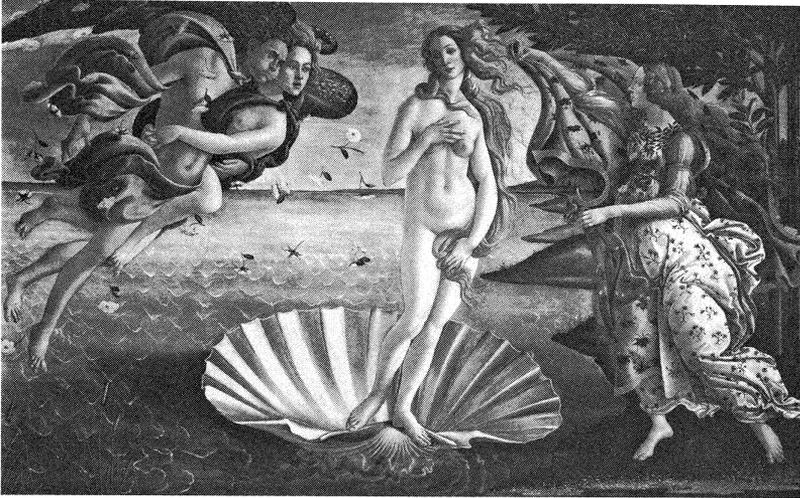
Jean-Luc Parant, *Livres de Jean-Luc Parant mis en boules*

secured a share in the eyesight of great theory—a science of traces that attempted to read the signs of the world event’s tendencies in unassuming clues.¹⁴ Beyond the “micrological” turn, one would have to speak of a discovery of the indeterminate that has enabled—perhaps for the first time in the history of thought—the not-nothing,¹⁵ the almost-nothing,¹⁶ the coincidental and the formless¹⁷ to join the domain of theory-capable realities.

However broadly such an overview of the redistribution of seriousness to neglected, unnoticed and marginalized signs and facts might be conceived, it would confirm the finding that there had never been a convincing collection of these innovations within a shared context. The long shadow of substance-oriented

thought, which has so little interest in the accidental, still covers modern theories and theories of modernity. Even in recent times, contempt for the insubstantial has characterized the thematic choices of an academicized philosophy in which the oldest inertias remain in effect. This has not prevented freer spirits from, for some time now, campaigning on the frontlines of a hazardous currentness; so far, however, their efforts have not yet led to any coherent redefinition of the situation. Even if dreams have ceased to be viewed as foams, this remains only half an achievement as long as foams have not achieved their own emancipation. The overturnings of seriousness and revisions of decorum in modernity will only have definite consequences if the interpretation of dreams is assisted by an interpretation of foam.¹⁸ Its task would be to pay the “air in unexpected places” the tribute it deserves, at the risk of also producing theory in unexpected places—post-heroic theory that gives the fleeting, unimportant and secondary the attention reserved in heroic theory for the eternal, substantial and primary. Perhaps, in fact, the true meaning of the interpretation of dreams will only transpire after a parallel action in favor of foam. Just as Ernst Bloch, in his political ontology of the human capacity for anticipation—widely forgotten after initial successes—abandoned the bias of Freud’s interpretation of dreams towards nocturnal and regressive layers of meaning, giving the daydream dignity as a utopian potency and reality-positing projective power, so too the interpretation of foams would have to constitute itself as a political ontology of animated internal spaces. Here the most fragile would be viewed as the centerpiece of the real.

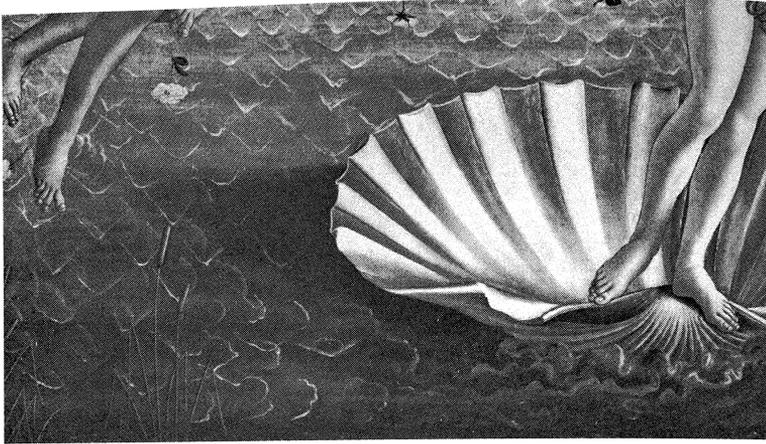
In the language of this attempt, the interpretation of foam will be examined under the names “polyspherology,” or “extended



Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (1477–78)

hothouse science.” It should be clear from the start that this “reading” in foams cannot remain mere hermeneutics, nor can it stop at the decoding of signs. Only as a technological theory of humanly inhabited, symbolically air-conditioned spaces can it get to the point, that is to say as a set of engineering-scientific and political instructions for the construction and preservation of civilizatory units—an area that was previously the domain of ethics and its offshoots in political and educational science. The closest discipline to this heterodox theory of culture and civilization is presently that of manned space travel: nowhere else is there such radical enquiry into the technical conditions of possibility of human existence in life-sustaining capsules.¹⁹

The new constellation, then, is this: the serious and the fragile, or—to take the change of seriousness conditions to the extreme, which is their current position—foam and fertility. Aphrology—from the Greek *áphros*, “foam”—is the theory of



Sandro Botticelli, detail

co-fragile systems. If one succeeded in proving that the foam-like can have future promise, and can even produce offspring under certain conditions, this would deprive substantialist prejudice of its foundation. The age-old despicable-artificial, the seemingly frivolous, which exists only towards its implosion, would regain its share in the definition of the real. Then one would understand: the suspended must be understood as a special kind of foundation, the hollow as a fullness in its own right, the fragile as the place and mode of the realest, and the unrepeatable as the higher phenomenon than the serial. Nonetheless: is the notion of an “essential” foam not a contradiction in terms, hardly less on the physical than the metaphorical level? Can a construct that cannot even guarantee it will stay in shape be considered a possible enabler of life sequences and creative long-distance effects?

Fertile Foams—Mythological Interlude

The figure of fertile foams has not always been an illegitimate fiction in the history of conceptual and pictorial motifs: to prove this hypothesis, one need only go back to a time before the age of popular-ontologically and substance-metaphysically motivated contempt for foam. Among the earliest mythological instances of foam in ancient European, Indian and Near Eastern traditions, there is a close connection between the imaginative complexes of the maritime-foamlike and the mutable-indestructible. The philosophizing rhapsodist Hesiod, who lived in Boeotia after 700 BC as a shepherd and free farmer, made the liaison of foam and generative potency unforgettable for the Western tradition with his account of the goddess Aphrodite's foamy birth as the result of a Titan's castration. Through this macabre and lyrical tale, a Presocratic poetry of foam managed to keep itself in memory alongside the transience-despising metaphysics that would subsequently come to power. The sparse documentation makes it impossible to say whether this association came from Hesiod's own imagination or points back to an older mythological pictoriality. All that seems certain is that Hesiod fell prey to a fortunate etymological deception when he attributed the name of the goddess—who had been imported to the Greek pantheon from the Near East—to *áphros*, namely foam. In so doing, he connected the Hellenic goddess of love and fertility with that insubstantial substance credited with erogenous functions. Hesiod's pseudo-etymology made the Greek corruption of the Phoenician-Syrian goddess's name Astarte (or the Babylonian Ishtar) to Aphrodite productive, using it to gain a genealogical

contextualization that helped foam to make a spectacular debut in the stories about the divine generations told and retold by the Greeks and their descendants.

Here the poet succeeded in creating—along with the myth of a coastal advent that enchanted Renaissance painters—the unprecedented thought-image of a foam which possesses not only power of form, but also a capacity for birth and a generative effectiveness to produce beautiful, attractive and perfect things. The foam under discussion here, admittedly, is no ordinary kind: released by the disastrous contact between the sea's waves and the genitals of the great father Uranus, cunningly severed by his son Cronos, it testifies to a far-reaching anomaly in the sequence of divine procreations:

The genitals, he threw them out into the surging main:
There on the waves they rose and fell and rose and fell again;
And round about the immortal flesh white foam arose, and from
That form a girl was born—the first to Kythera did come,
To sacred Kythera, and thence to sea-girt Kypris came,
And stepped upon the shore a lovely goddess with a claim
To reverence, and grass sprang up beneath her feet; her name
Is Aphrodite—gods and men both call her this (since from
The *aphros* she was nurtured—yes, within the frothy foam),
And also Kytherea, since from Kythera she was come,
And Kyprogenia, having been on sea-washed Kypris born,
And laughter loving, coming from the members that were torn.
Eros walked beside her; lovely longing close behind
Followed as soon as she was born and also when she joined
The gods' race [...] ²⁰

At the critical point in his song, the poet ventures an adjectival invention, *aphrogenéa*, to accompany *théa*, the goddess; from then on, it is evident that it has the potential to rise through the terminological ranks from an evocatively ornamental addition to a noun of its own. Through the description of the goddess as foam-born, aphrogenic, foam itself gains the ability to beget. By virtue of her foam-bornness—or, more precisely, her grownness-in-foam (*en aphro*)—Hesiod's Aphrodite becomes, within the horizon of Western tradition, the chief witness to the fact that foam is not entirely nothing, especially if it can be associated with the primordial god's member. Just as a later metaphysics of spirit sometimes gave the world-positing logos the attribute *spermatikós*, Presocratic poetry here already knew an *áphros spermatikós*, a foam capable of conceiving and bearing children with the properties of a matrix. What is telling about Hesiod's account is that it transposes the later Olympian goddess Aphrodite (who, in a different tradition, came from Zeus' intercourse with the oak goddess Dione) into a Titanoid context, a series of monstrous conceptions and elemental atrocities—undoubtedly influenced by the motive of embedding the mistress of lust in a cosmically very early context of primary processes, still entirely dominated by pre-rational elemental powers. Charging foam with generative potency and meanings of fertility was only possible in this context, and only with Titanic sperm was it plausible that it could transpire as erogenous, aphrogenic and theogenic. The *en aphro* fertilization of the goddess shows how foam—for one mythopoetically productive moment—could be envisaged as a uterine analogue and a matrix of far-reaching morphological formations.²¹

Similar and related things, heightened to the level of a transcendent Baroque novel, can be found in the ancient Indian



J. A. D. Ingres, *Venus Anadyomene* (1808)

myth in which the deities decide to stir up the ocean into foam to produce the nectar of immortality—a story that exists in different versions in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, among others.²² Common to both is the motif of how the gods, concerned about their uncertain immortality, are told by a divine adviser (Vishnu-Narayana in the *Mahabharata*) that they should churn the milky world ocean until it yields *amrita*, the elixir of deathlessness. The heavenly ones follow this advice, using the world mountain Mount Meru as a churning rod and the thousand-headed giant snake Vasuki as a churning rope. After churning the depths for a thousand years, the moment of success approaches:

First the mild moon rose from the milk sea; then the Lady Lakshmi, bearing good fortune to men; then the smooth jewel adorning Narayana's breast; then Indra's elephant Airavata, white as clouds; then Surabhi, the white cow who grants any wish; then Parikata the wishing-tree of fragrance; then Rambha the nymph, the first Apsaras; and at last Dhanwantari the physician, robed in white, bearing a cup filled with *amrita*, the essence of life.

Suddenly poison burst fuming from the sea, and the milk became salt water. Shiva, the Lord of Mountains and Songs swallowed the poison to save worlds. He held it in his throat and his neck turned blue, iridescent as a butterfly's wing.²³

In the *Ramayana*, attributed to the poet Valmiki (c. 200 AD), the thousand-year churning likewise brings forth a series of apparitions from the milky foam, albeit in a different order: here the divine physician Dhanwantari comes first of all, bearing his sublime nectar jug—containing the holy “ascetic water”—followed

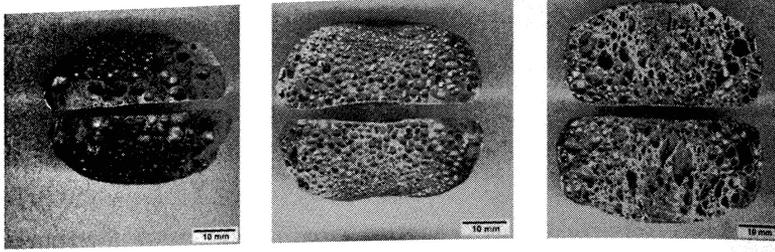
by an immeasurable throng of shining love maidens, the *apsaras*, sixty million in total, accompanied by countless servant girls, female beings that bring joy and “belong to everyone,” as neither humans nor gods are willing to wed them. These erotic emanations of the foaming ocean are followed by Varuni, daughter of the water god Varuna, and then the supreme white horse, the divine jewel and finally the desired elixir, the essence that brings immortality, which immediately causes a fierce war for its possession between the gods and demons.²⁴

What is noticeable about the Indian tales of foaming or churning the ocean is that they no longer present an anonymous elemental process, as in Hesiod, but rather an action that—in addition to alchemistic aspects—unmistakably exhibits production character. Not only has the milk foam become a matrix for the creation of further forms; the foam itself is created through a foam-forming, *aphrogenic* operation in a second sense of the word: production from foam is augmented by the production of foam. This lends the phenomenon of aphrogenia a technical element, enabling it to be read from two sides. It can rise to the conceptual level by combining formation from foam with the formation of foam in an overarching expression. However grotesque the tools—a mountain and a giant snake, joined to form a whisk beating away in the cosmic dairy—there is no doubt that we are dealing with a thought-image from the motivic context of craftsmanly observation. The parallel with the procedures of butter production is especially obvious—hardly surprising in a culture where libations of liquid butter at the sacrificial fire (*ajya*) were among the primary ritual gestures.²⁵ At the same time, stirring conjures up the primitive core procedure of alchemy, which has always seemed to revolve around acquiring

an effective essence through filtering and reduction. Beating air into the substance serves to precipitate the most substantial component from the substance until the utmost contraction of becoming power is obtained in a single vessel, a final seminal point. It is obvious that if, as in nascent First Theory, one presupposes the unity of original power and abundance of essence, it is a small step to the radicalization of the search; one will then dare to attempt magical access to the essence of the essence in order to filter the power out from the power. In this theurgical drama, whose aim was to elevate the gods to immortality once and for all, the production of foam acts as a prelude to absolute extraction.

We should not forget that even the Egyptian creation myth know the image of a cosmogonic salivary foam: here the mouth of the god Atum is described as the first animating center crucible or primal vessel, in which *Tefnut* (moisture) and Shu (*air*) are first of all produced and intertwined, until both exit the primal mouth as a totipotent mixture to bring forth all further creatures. What is particularly notable here is that what emanates from the god's mouth are not first distinctions and "Let there be" commands, as is customary in the logocratic schema, but a foamy bimaterial *prima materia* that, like a first couple, calls everything else into existence by propagation—a supreme spitting, as it were.

These myths indicate early alternatives to the prejudice that foams are sterile; hence they can at best offer the constellation of foam and fertility a poetic plausibility. From a distance, at least, they prepare a notion of aphrogenia that encourages us to ask not only about divine procreations, but also about the genesis of

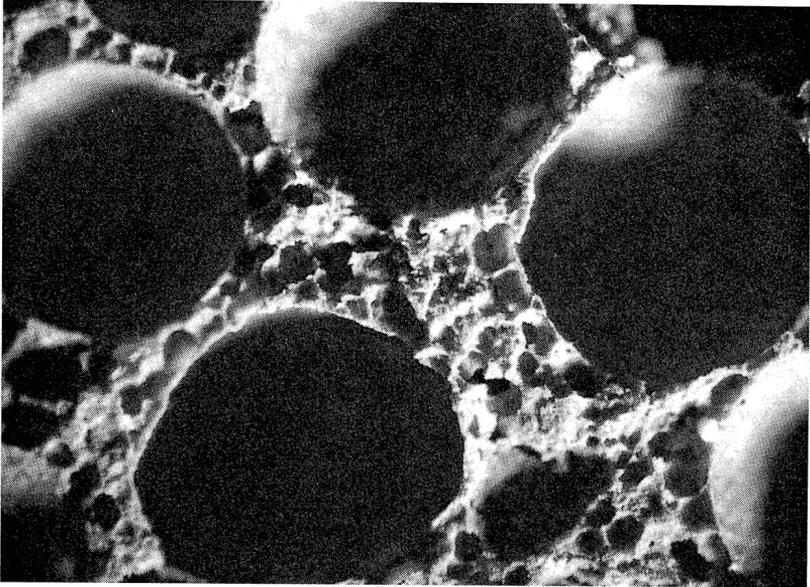


Porous iron-based materials

humans from the airy, the floating, the mixed and the inspired. In the following, it will be shown that foam—in a sense of the word that has yet to be consolidated—constitutes the matrix of human facts as a whole. *We are such stuff as foams are made on.* As we have seen, the first lesion of the interpretation of foam should turn out as a mythological excursus; the second will consist in letting the theogonic motifs rest and then, after a brief look at current scientific contributions to foam research, shifting to the anthropological register.

Natural Foams, Aphrospheres

In the physical context, foams are defined as multi-chambered systems of air pockets within solid and liquid materials whose cells are separated by film-like walls. All impulses for scientific research on foam structures stem from the Belgian physicist Joseph Antoine Ferdinand Plateau, who, around the middle of the nineteenth century, formulated one of the most important—and still valid—laws for the geometry of foams, laws that brought a minimum of order into the seeming chaos of foamy agglomerations of bubbles. Thanks to them, foams could be



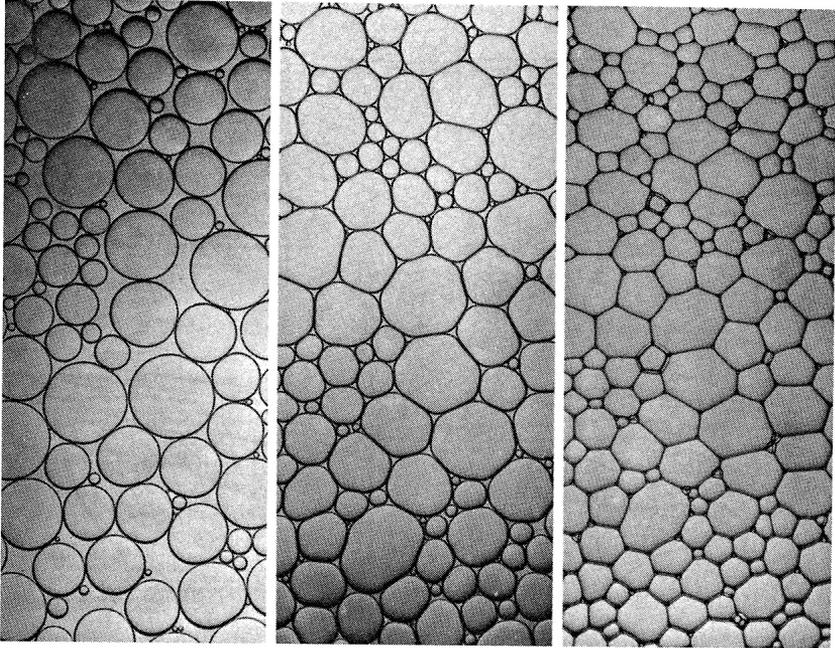
Photograph of a foam brick porosified with polystyrene and foam

precisely described as tension sculptures of film membranes. They state that the edges of a foam bubble, or rather a foam polyhedron, are formed by exactly three film walls; that two of these three walls always meet at an angle of 120 degrees; and that precisely four edges of foam cells converge on one point. The existence of soap membranes is based on the surface tension of water, which was already mentioned around 1508 by Leonardo da Vinci in his observations on the morphology of drops. The visual properties of wet and dry foams were laid out by the British physicist Charles Vernon Boys in 1890 in a popular treatise on the colors of soap bubbles.²⁶ As a result of his study, the marvels of the rainbow entered Victorian nurseries.

The twentieth century's most important innovation in the analysis of foam was the introduction of time. We learned that

foams are processes, and that there are constant leaps, redistributions and reformattings occurring inside the multi-celled chaos. This restlessness has a direction: it leads to greater stability and inclusivity. One can recognize old foam by the fact that its bubbles are larger than in young foam—because bursting young cells die into their neighbors, as it were, bequeathing their volume to them. The wetter and younger a foam is, the smaller, rounder, more mobile and more autonomous the bubbles concentrated inside it will be; the drier and older it is, on the other hand, the more individual bubbles will already have given up the ghost, the larger the surviving cells will become, the more strongly they will affect one another, and the more Plateau's laws of neighborhood geometry will be in evidence in the mutual deformation of the magnified bubbles. An aged foam embodies the ideal of a co-fragile system in which a maximum of interdependence has been achieved. In this framework of stable-unstable, large polyhedrons, it is potentially impossible for any one cell to burst without tearing the whole construct along with it into nothingness. The processual dynamic of the foam thus provides the empty form for all stories dealing with immanently growing spaces of inclusion. These tragic geometries contain such a high degree of internal tension, or tensegrity, between the remaining co-isolated spaces that their shared existential risk can be expressed in a co-fragility formula. The large cells of a mature foam act together to achieve an extension of their existence, and they likewise disappear together at the final implosion. Let us note that there are no central cells in foams, and that the notion of a single capital would be inherently absurd.

In more recent times, the multi-chamber motif has also made a career in spatial theories in the field of physics. As a result, the



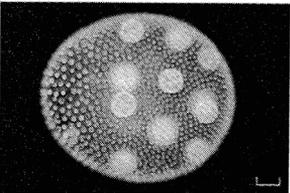
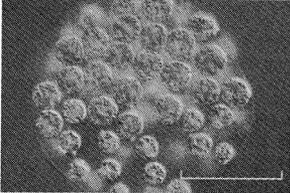
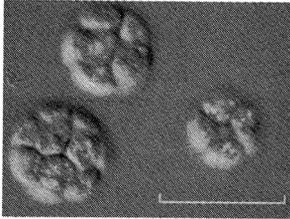
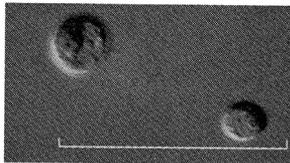
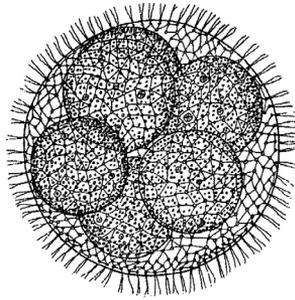
Transition from a bubble raft to a flat polyhedral network in a study by Frei Otto's group

foam metaphor is increasingly used to describe spontaneous spatial formations, both on the smallest scale and for middle-world phenomena, and finally also for processes of galactic, even cosmic proportions. The twenty-first century is virtually advertised as the “century of foam.” A significant part of recent astrophysics appears in an aphrophysical guise. Some of the cosmological models currently being discussed depict the universe as a fabric of inflationary bubbles, each of which embodies a big bang system analogous to the world context inhabited by present-day humanity.²⁷ Numerous microphysical realities are now also being presented in terms of foam and spontaneous microspheric spatial formation. None of the current sciences, however, ascribe

as large a role to the morphological potency of foam as cell biology. In the view of some biologists, the birth of life can only be explained by the spontaneous formation of foam from the murky waters of the primordial ocean:

cell-like membranous enclosures form as naturally as bubbles when oil is shaken with water. In the earliest days of the still lifeless Earth, such bubble enclosures separated inside from outside. [...] These lipidic bags grew and developed self-maintenance. [...] Probably solar energy at first moved through the droplets; controlled energy flow led to the selfhood that became cell life.²⁸

In this account of cellular genesis, the round form and energetic content supposedly affected each other in such a way that a first life form, the foam-born monad, could rise from the sea, swimming in the water and free in it, yet also already separate from it, full of inner and own things. On the path of self-inclusion, small form-protected primal interiors viewed as the precursors to life separated off from the primordial molecular soup. In the parlance of systemic biology, they form “semi-open systems” that process as self-sensitive and environmentally sensitive reaction spaces. The oldest fossils found on earth thus far, over 3.5 billion years old, are interpreted by paleobiologists as leftovers of primal bacteria; because of their shape and place of discovery, they are known as Swaziland microspheres. Their existence proves that the secret of life is inseparable from the secret of form, or more precisely from the formation of interiors according to spheric laws. Where unicellular organisms appear, the history of the organic begins as spheric compression and encapsulation: gathering

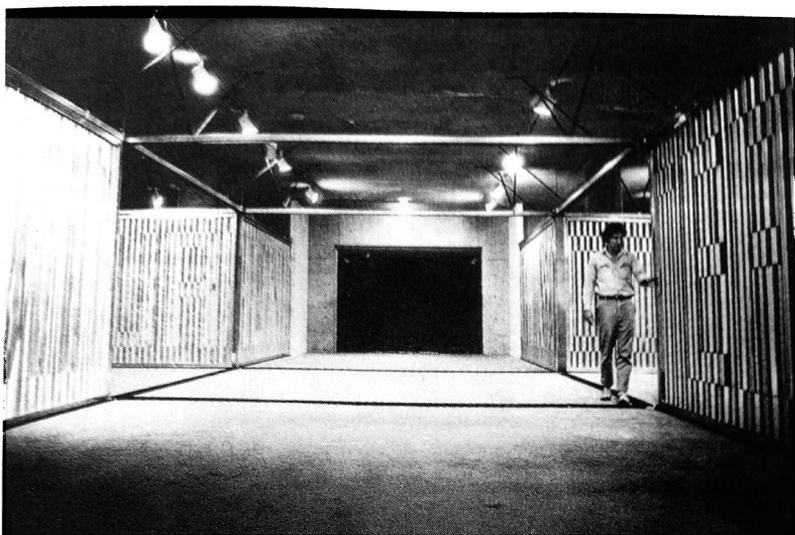


logical coenobium with daughter colonies: the Volvox alga as an evolution-
example of the transition from colony-forming unicellular organisms to the
cellular, globular and gender-distinct individual

under orb-shaped membranes is the *more* that will be called life. In the primitive organism, the space is on the way to the self. The first characteristic of the self is the ability to adopt a position through opposition to something external. Position, it would seem, results from folding into oneself—or from willfulness in unusual places. Should the mysterious path already lead inwards, even in the most primitive life forms?²⁹

Human Foams

As impressive as the connection between the morphology of foam and primitive zoogenesis in the light of the recent life sciences may be, I only see the adventure of spatial pluralities beginning with the entry into anthropological and culture-theoretical contexts. Via the concept of foam, I describe agglomerations of *bubbles* in the sense of my earlier microspherological investigations.³⁰ The term stands for systems or aggregates of spheric neighborhoods in which each individual “cell” constitutes a self-augmenting context (more colloquially: a world, a place), an intimate space of meaning whose tension is maintained by dyadic and pluripolar resonances, or a “household” that vibrates with its own individual animation, which can only be experienced by itself and within itself.³¹ Each one of these households, each one of these symbioses and alliances, is a hothouse of relationships *sui generis*. One could call such constructs “society in pairs”³² (assuming one did not, as I do, intend to show later on that the term “society” is always counterproductive in such matters). Where places of this type form, the existence-towards-one-another of the closely united acts as the true agent of spatial formation; the climatization



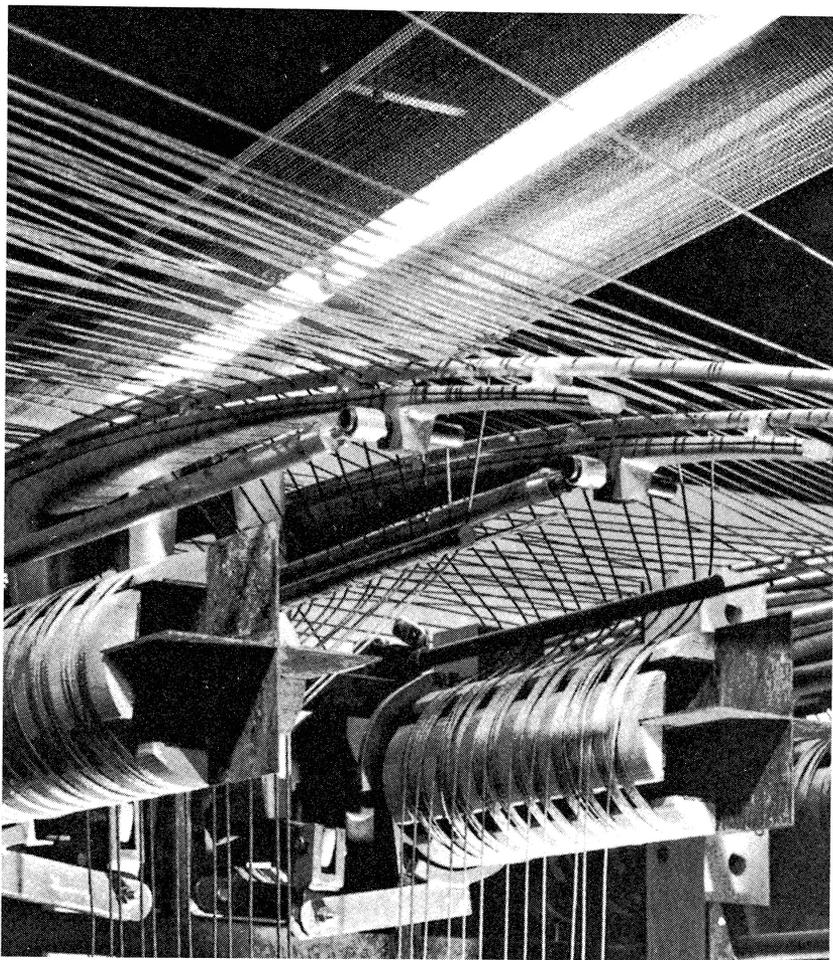
Vito Acconci, partition. “In its original position, the walls form a box-like closed space in the middle of the hall. If someone wants to enter it, they can push one wall aside. Then, however, there is a further wall in its place...”

of the coexistential interior follows through the reciprocal extraversion of the symbionts, which temper the shared interior like a hearth before the hearth.³³ Each microsphere constitutes its own axis of the intimate. It will be shown later how this axis can be bent individualistically.

The introversion of the individual households does not contradict its conglomeration in more close-knit associations, that is to say social foams: neighborly connection and separateness can be read as two sides of the same situation. In foam the principle of co-isolation applies, meaning that one and the same dividing wall serves as a boundary for two or more spheres. Such walls, appropriated from both sides, are the original interfaces. If the individual bubble in physically real foam borders on a majority

of neighboring orbs and is co-conditioned by them through partitioning, a thought-image for the interpretation of social associations can be derived from this: in the human field too, individual cells are stuck together through reciprocal isolations, separations and immunizations. One of the particularities of this region of objects is that the multiple co-isolation of the bubble households in their plural neighborhoods can be described equally aptly as a cutting-off or an openness to the world. Foam thus constitutes a paradoxical interior in which, from my position, the great majority of surrounding co-bubbles are simultaneously adjacent and inaccessible, both connected and removed.

In spherological terms, “societies” are foams in the sense of the word I have just delineated. This formulation is meant to block access as early as possible to the fantasy that was used by traditional groups to supply an imaginary interpretation of their being: the notion that the social field is an organic totality integrated into a universally shared, universally inclusive hypersphere. This is precisely what the autoplasmic propaganda of empires and kingdom-of-God fictions has promoted since time immemorial.³⁴ In reality, “societies” are only comprehensible as restless and asymmetrical associations of pluralities of space and processes whose cells can neither be truly united nor truly separate. Only as long as “societies” hypnotize themselves as homogeneous units, for example as genetically or theologically substantial national peoples, can they view themselves as monospheres united through their origins (or by an exceptional constitution). They present themselves as enchanted spaces that profit from an imaginary immunity and a magically comprehensive commonality of essence and election—this is the sense in which Slavoj Žižek recently adopted my concept of the “sphere”

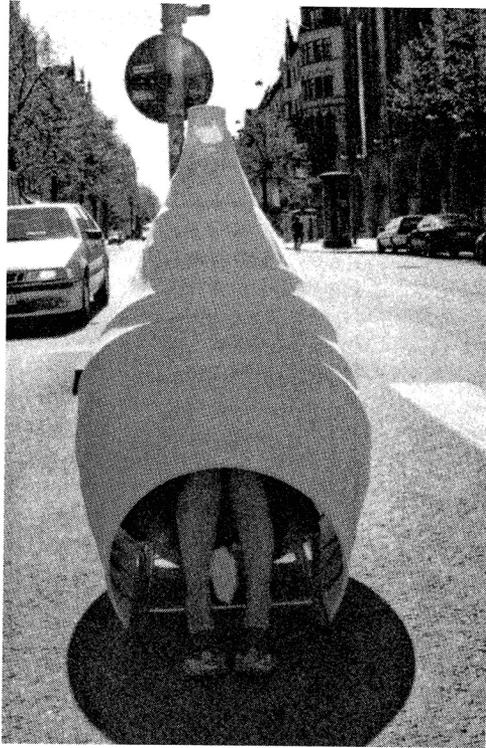


Morphosis (Thom Mayne/Michel Rotondi), Politix (retail store), Portland, Space modulator (1990)

and applied it critically to the mental state of the USA before the attacks on the World Trade Center.³⁵ Need it be explained why the beginning of knowledge lies in the collaboration of humans in the decision to leave the magic circle of mutual hypnosis? Anyone wishing to speak theoretically of “society” must operate

outside of the “we” stupor. Once this is achieved, one can observe that “societies” or peoples themselves are of a far more fluid, hybrid, permeable and promiscuous constitution than their homogeneous names suggest.

When I speak in the following of “society,” the term refers not (as in rampant nationalism) to a monospheric container that encloses a countable population of individuals and families under an essential political name or a constitutive phantasm, nor (as for some systems theorists) to a non-spatial communication process that “progressively differentiates” itself into subsystems.³⁶ “Society” is understood here as an aggregate of microspheres (couples, households, businesses, associations) of different formats that, like the individual bubbles in a mountain of foam, border on one another and are layered over and under one another, yet without truly being accessible or effectively separable from one another.³⁷ There are certainly, to quote Ernst Bloch’s evocative formulation, “many chambers in the world house”—but they have no doors, perhaps even nothing except false windows with outdoor scenes painted on them. The bubbles in foam, that is to say the couples and households, the teams and survival communities, are self-referentially constituted microcontinents. However much they might purport to be connected with other and outside things, they initially round themselves off purely in their respective selves. Each of the symbiotic units is world-forming in itself and for itself—alongside neighboring groups of world-formers who do the same in their own way, and with whom they are drawn into an interactive network based on the principle of co-isolation. Their similarities seem to permit the conclusion that they are in animated communication and wide open to one another; in reality, they are usually only similar because they arise in shared



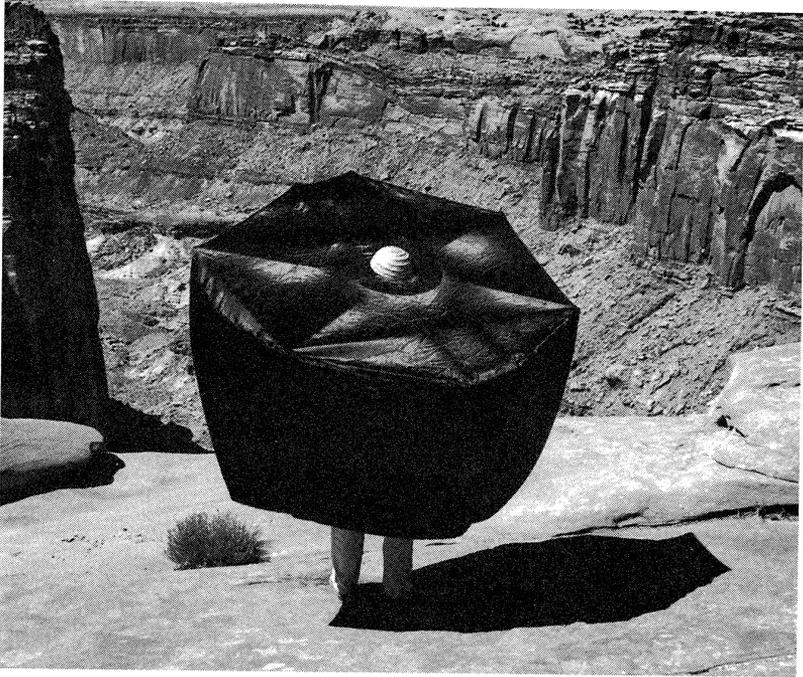
Jennie Pineus, *Cocoon Chair* (2000)

waves of imitation³⁸ and have analogous media facilities. Operatively, they usually have virtually nothing to do with one another. (Consider the passengers of automobiles driving behind one another in convoys: any driving group internally constitutes a resonant cell, yet the vehicles are mutually isolated—which is quite right, for communication would mean collision.) Their attunement occurs not in a direct exchange between the cells, but through the mimetic infiltration of each single one by similar patterns, agitations, contagious goods and symbols. In earlier times, the best model to demonstrate these assertions would have

been that of the nuclear family, for couples willing to procreate have always been (and will presumably continue to be) the most plausible example of growth-capable dyads. In the present day, these findings can be expanded to include childless couples, even people who live alone in their special forms of “cocooning” (for example Japanese *takotsubo* culture, the “octopus pot” autism scene).³⁹ I emphasize that a cell in foam is not an abstract individual, but rather a dyadic or multipolar structure.⁴⁰ Foam theory is unabashedly neo-monadological in its orientation; its monads, however, have the basic form of dyads or more complex soul-space, communal and team structures.

In media terms, foam cell “society” is a murky medium with a certain conductivity for information and a certain permeability for substances. It does not pass on outpourings of immediate truth; if Einstein lived next door, I would not know any more about the universe as a result. If the son of God and I had lived on the same floor for years, I would only learn afterwards—if at all—who my neighbor was. Every point in the foam offers glimpses of the bordering ones, but comprehensive views are not available—in the most advanced case, exaggerations are formulated inside one bubble and can be used in many neighboring ones. Messages are selectively transferable, and there are no exits into the whole. For theory that accepts being-in-foam as the primary definition of our situation, final super-visions of the One World are not only unattainable, but impossible—and, correctly understood, also undesirable.

Whoever speaks of foams in this tone has abandoned the central symbol of classical metaphysics, of the all-gathering monosphere, namely the orb-shaped One and its projection into panoptic central constructions. These would logically lead into



Alfons Schilling, *Darkroom Hat* (1984)

the encyclopedic system, politically into the imperial *urbi et orbi* space (whose fates were described in the third and seventh chapters of *Spheres II*), in police terms to the form of the surveillance panopticon, and militarily to a paranoid Pentagon ontology. Needless to say, such centralisms would now only be of historical interest. As systems of asymmetrical neighborhoods between intimacy hothouses and autonomous worlds of medium size, foams are semi-transparent and semi-opaque. Every location in the foam means a relative intertwining of circumspection and blindness that is focused on that individual bubble; every being-in-the-world, understood as being-in-foam, opens up a clearing in the impenetrable. The turn towards a pluralistic ontology was

prefigured by modern biology and metabiology after they arrived—thanks to the introduction of the environment concept—at a new view of their subject:

It was an error to think that the human world provided a shared stage for all life forms. Each life form has a special stage no less real than the special stage of humans. [...] Through this insight we gain an entirely new view of the universe: it consists not of a single soap bubble that we have blown up beyond our horizon into the infinite, but of countless millions of narrowly bounded soap bubbles that overlap and intersect everywhere.⁴¹

The collection of innumerable “soap bubbles” can thus no longer be envisaged as the monocosmos of metaphysics, where the abundance of existents was called together under a logos common to all. The philosophical super-soap bubble, the universal monad of the One World—whose shapes and forms I detailed primarily in the fourth and fifth chapters of *Spheres II*—is replaced by a polycosmic agglomeration. This can be described as a gathering of gatherers, a semi-opaque foam of world-forming spatial constructs. It is important to understand that these boundlessly manifold varieties of sentient existence in sense-structured environments is already developed at the level of animal intelligence—and, it would seem, there is no animal that catalogues all other animals and relates them to itself. Humans, for their part, after the end of the centric delirium (anthropo-, ethno-, ego- and logo-), will perhaps develop slightly more appropriate notions of their existence in a milieu of ontological foams. They will then understand why Herder was speaking more of the past than the future when he wrote: “Every nation

has *its own inner center* of happiness, as every sphere its own centre of gravity.”⁴² Some very foresighted formulations by contemporary cyberspace theorists give a first idea of the elastic mode of being found in decentered world concepts. Pierre Lévy, in his essay on the semiotic productivity of the developing “collective intelligence,” notes:

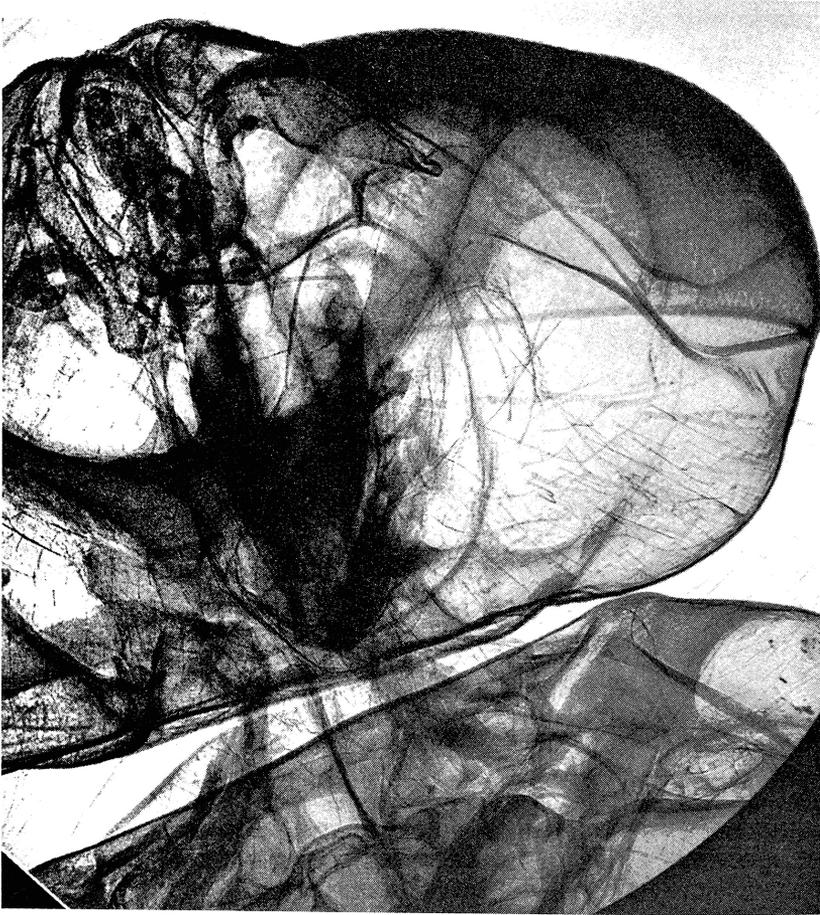
In the knowledge space active exhalations work together, not to bring about some hypothetical fusion of individual beings, but to collectively inflate the same bubble, thousands of rainbow-tinged bubbles, provisional universes, shared worlds of signification.⁴³

As world formations always also express themselves architecturally, or more precisely in the synergetic tension between movables and immovables, one must observe the spheropoeitic processes that materialize in the form of habitats, buildings and built agglomerations. According to a statement by Le Corbusier, a building is comparable to a soap bubble:

The bubble is perfectly harmonious if the breath is evenly applied, evenly regulated from the inside. The outside is the result of an inside.⁴⁴

Foams in the Time of Knowledge

Delicate things become object late on: that is what they have in common with numerous seemingly self-evident things that only mature to the point of conspicuity once they are lost; and they are usually lost from the moment in which they are used for

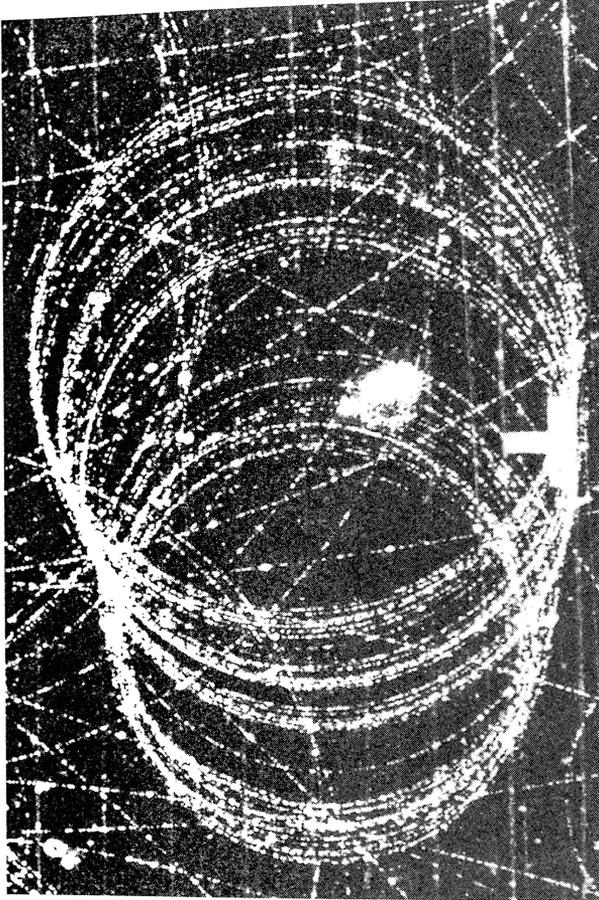


The inside of a fly's head viewed through an x-ray microscope

comparisons, which robs them of their naïve givenness. The air we thoughtlessly breathe; the mood-saturated situations in which we unknowingly exist contained and containing; the atmospheres, so obvious as to be imperceptible, in which we live, move and have our being—all of these constitute late arrivals in the thematic space because, before they could be given explicit attention, they seemed *a priori* to provide a mute background scenery

to our being-there and being-here, like eternal natures or consumer goods. They are abnormalities that appear late on, only called to thematic and technical careers through their recently proven manipulability in both the constructive and the destructive senses. Previously accepted as discreet concessions from being, they had to become objects of concern before turning into objects of theory. They had to be experienced as fragile, losable and destructible before they could advance to workable task fields for air and mood phenomenologists, relationship therapists, atmosphere engineers and interior designers, and finally for cultural theorists and media technologists. They had to become unbreathable for people to learn to recognize themselves as guardians, reconstructors and reinventors of what had merely been taken for granted.

The background only breaks its silence when foreground processes exceed its burdening capacity. How many real ecological and military disasters were needed before it could be said with juristic, physical and atmotechnic precision how one can set up humanly breathable air environments? How much obliviousness to the atmospheric premises of human existence had to accumulate in theory and practice before the attention of a radicalized thought was capable of immersing itself in the nature of attunements⁴⁵—and later extending its reach to the constitutions of being-in within encompassing milieus as such, and also to the modes of existential embeddedness in whole-based conditions⁴⁶ (for which we recently started using the term “immersion”)? How far did the pendulum have to swing towards individualistic misunderstandings and autistic atrophies before the autonomous value of resonance phenomena and interpsychological intertwinements in spaces of ensoulment could be mentioned in any



Electrons, made visible in a cloud chamber

remotely unabridged way? How much neglect, disguised as progressiveness, needed to devastate human closeness relationships before the constitutive meaning of sufficiently good couple and family relationships could be described with the respect afforded to basic concepts?⁴⁷

Anything very explicit becomes demonic. Whoever embarks on making background realities explicit, realities formerly

preserved in what was tacitly thought and known—and even more in the never-thought and never-known—embraces a situation in which the scarcity of the presupposable and silenceable is already advanced and continues inexorably. Woe to those who harbor deserts: now one must rebuild artificially what once seemed given as a natural resource. One is forced to articulate with burdensome caution and at provocative length what was formerly a tacitly understood connotation. At this turn towards the explicit, the modern function of cultural science becomes manifest. It commends itself as the agent of civilizatory explications in general. It must be shown that from now on, the science of culture must always also be a science of technology and a curatorial training for work in cultural hothouses. Now that cultures—and precisely cultures—have ceased to seem given, one must see to their survival and regeneration by cultivating, redescribing, filtering, clarifying and reforming: in the age of background explication, the culture of cultures becomes the criterion for civilization.

To be absolutely contemporary, we must presuppose that there is hardly anything left to presuppose. At this point, let us begin to articulate at disconcerting length what, according to the state of the art, we can say about our being-in-the-world; let us describe (with the phenomenologists) with circumspect explicitness which encompassing states or whole-based relationships we see ourselves placed in; finally, let us design and reconstruct (with the media technologists, the interior architects, the labor medics and atmo-designers) the facilities, atmospheres and encompassing situations in which, according to our own plans and assessments, we will reside: thus these constructive and reconstructive activities are still affected by the defamiliarizations that did away with all self-evident things before permitting their return to a second

givenness. When they return, they are products of explication or objects of conservational care. They are placed under the control of long-term sociopolitical concern or technical redesigning. Where there was “lifeworld,” there must now be air conditioning technology.

Revolution, Rotation, Invasion

The demonic nature of the explicit is the trace of civilization history; it grows to the extent that modernity progresses in its awareness of artificiality. When things previously in the background shift to the foreground; when things unmentioned in living memory suddenly have to be thematized; when the folding of the implicit is spread out and projected into the clear surface, where every detail that was inwardly concealed now stands in equally bright visibility and equally spread out—then these processes testify to a movement in which those who know radically change their stance towards the objects now known thus, which were once known differently or not at all. In the light of such a change of stance, the worn-out metaphor of revolution as a fundamental overturning of conditions between bodies and roles can gain epistemological honor one last time (before being deposited in the archive of obsolete concepts).

What a “revolution” means can best be explained with reference to the breakthroughs of sixteenth-century anatomists, who had resolved to open the human inner body with cuts and publish it using descriptively adequate depictions. It may be true that the Vesalian “revolution” was of far greater consequence for the self-relationships of Western people than the long over-cited and



Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica*, seventh muscle illustration

misunderstood Copernican one. By opposing the ordinary darkness of their own corporeality with their organ maps and building plans of the newly, precisely viewed inner world of machines—it is no coincidence that the *magnum opus* of Vesalius is entitled *De humani corporis fabrica*—the anatomists of the early Modern Age tore open the image-deficient inner somatic basis of perceived selfhood, involving the independent knowledge of the portrayed bodily subjects in a turn after which nothing would be found in the same place of being and knowledge as before. Now I must look at the anatomical cards and receive their message: that is you! That is what your inside looks like as soon as those in the know examine you with their scalpels! No anti-anatomical *mauvaise foi* can help to reinstate the naïveté of existence as a bodily being when faced with the ability to operate. Whether they wanted to or not, actors of the Modern Age took part in an almost auto-surgical shift. Even those who did not have to deal with cuts into organic tissue as professional dissection artists were, as cultural participants, placed virtually at a point of knowledge and operation where they had no choice but to join in their great turn away from the old inner bodily universe. Understanding one's own corporeal interior in terms of the possibility of its anatomical externalization: this was the primary cognitive “revolutionary” result of the Modern Age, comparable only to the world picture-changing power of the first circumnavigation of the earth by Magellan and del Cano.⁴⁸

In its cognitive habitus, cutting open the human body from all sides and graphically representing it from every perspective is the same as circumnavigating and mapping the earth. Both operations were part of the great rotation that altered the angle (*klima*) of knowledge about things and circumstances. “Making

it explicit”—from the start of the Modern Age onwards, this meant taking part in overturning the corporeal world through the operative skill of the anatomists and constituting oneself as a virtual self-operator from a radically altered angle of dealing with oneself—“for an object only becomes tangible for us at an angle smaller than 45 degrees.”⁴⁹ The Modern Age is the age of anatomists, the age of cuts, invasions, penetrations, implantations in the dark continent, the former Lethe.

In a much later phase, after academic abstractions had pushed the basic operative conditions of modern knowledge to an unrecognizably distant place, philosophers could find themselves thinking that making things explicit was a discursive operation, primarily a form of bookkeeping for a speaker’s opinion and conviction account.⁵⁰ Would not every person who speaks therefore be a speculator at the stock exchange of assertions, and philosophy would act as the supervisory authority? The true meaning of explication lies in another field; the strong hallmark of modern knowledge conditions is not the fact that “subjects” can mirror themselves in themselves or account for their opinions in front of an audience, but rather that they operate on themselves and have the cards of their own, partly illuminated dark regions before them, which show them the potential weak points for self-surgery. One must not be deceived by the division of labor between surgeons and non-surgeons: after Vesalius, anyone who is a “subject” lived in an auto-operatively curved space, whether they had agreed to or not. In the Modern Age, I can no longer be myself authentically, that is to say congruently with the overall cultural standard, as long as I abstract from my potential operator. When people of the Modern Age tell any deeper form of lie, it virtually always comes from consciously ignoring their

auto-operable constitution.⁵¹ The fundamental “no” to operating on one’s own findings and reserves is the core of bad Romanticism. Our inevitably imperfect, yet always expandable capacity to reach into our own somatic and psychosemantic inner basis characterizes the situation that we describe with the worn-out term “modern.” It is obvious why we hardly encounter so-called “reification” any more at this level.

When the Implicit Becomes Explicit: Phenomenology

The system of knowledge was set in motion by the incessant invasion of the hidden via intelligence: in its standard reading, this fact—which is constitutive of all higher civilization, especially modernity—was known as “research.” Where the interpretation of this restlessness became more advanced, it bore, for a distinctive period in intellectual history, the name “phenomenology”: the theory of “objects” stepping forwards into appearance, and the logical acknowledgement of their existence in connection with the rest of our knowledge. Not everything is revealed to humans at once, for the arrival of objects in our knowledge is subject to the laws of a sequence, an equally strict and opaque order of earlier and later: this was the original intuition, first formulated by Xenophanes, which was later developed by evolutionary and phenomenological thought into philosophical *Bildungsromane* or intellectual histories. The core of this intuition was the observation that the relationship between the later and the earlier is often like that between the explicit and the implicit. Explications transform facts and intimations into concepts—and these transformations can be both

communicated and justified. This enables the science of irreversible mental processes, which deals with invention-logically directed sequences of successive ideas (such as notions of God, concepts of soul and persons, ideas of society, construction forms and writing techniques). Phenomenology is the narrative theory of the explication of what can at first only be implicitly present. Being implicit here means: presupposed in a non-unfolded state, left in cognitive retirement, freed from the pressure of comprehensive mention and development and given in the mode of dark proximity—not already on the tip of one's tongue, not already available the next moment, not mobilized by the discursive regime and not incorporated into procedures. Becoming explicit, on the other hand, means: being swept along by the current flowing from the background to the foreground, from Lethe into the clearing, from enfolding into unfolding. The time's arrow of thought strives towards greater explicitness. Whatever can be said with a higher degree of extensive articulatedness brings about the mobilization of arguments—assuming the epistemic zeitgeist has called to action. Certainly implication is, among other things, a relationship between statements; it is traditionally understood as the containedness of the less general assertion in the more general, or as the embedding of texts in contexts; and as far as this applies, logical investigation can prove its worth as an explication procedure. Its true meaning, however, lies in the fact that the implicit indicates a place in the existent where the bud is located for the purpose of an unfolding, an articulation, an explication.⁵² That is why the form of the true history of knowledge is the becoming-phenomenon of the previously unmanifested—the transition from the unilluminated to the illuminated, or the rise of shadow givens to foreground themes. Actual knowledge: that

is what we call the discourses that have survived the long night of implication and now romp about in the daytime of the thematic and spread-out.

More than a few of Old Europe's most eminent minds have thought about the process of knowledge in terms of this schema—reason enough to examine the conditions of this theoretical vogue's success in the wake of its decline.⁵³ For almost two centuries, rigorous and edifying thinkers from different departments arrived at the conviction that everything which appears in knowledge, however heteronomous and novel it might seem, ultimately cannot be foreign to the self of those who know, and must consequently—after crises of whatever depth—enter our intimate education history (and the phrase “our history” has an air of higher cultural self, to avoid invoking the world spirit). Phenomenologists spread the good news that there is no outside without a corresponding inside; they suggest there is nothing foreign that cannot, through appropriation, be integrated into what is ours. Their belief in appropriation without boundaries rested on the claim that what later knowledge unfolds is nothing other than what was already present in the earliest implications.

The ontological foundation of this optimism was articulated in the fifteenth century by Nicolas of Cusa when he postulated the symmetry of maximum implicitness (God as contraction to an atomic point) and maximum explicitness (God as unfolding to the universal orb). Under Cusa's conditions, human thought would always be a cognitive going-along with divine expansion into the explicit, that is the realized and created, in so far as such a concurrence could succeed in the finite world. I discussed the culmination of occidental orb theology in the seemingly light-footed treatise *De ludo globi*, penned by the jovial cardinal, at

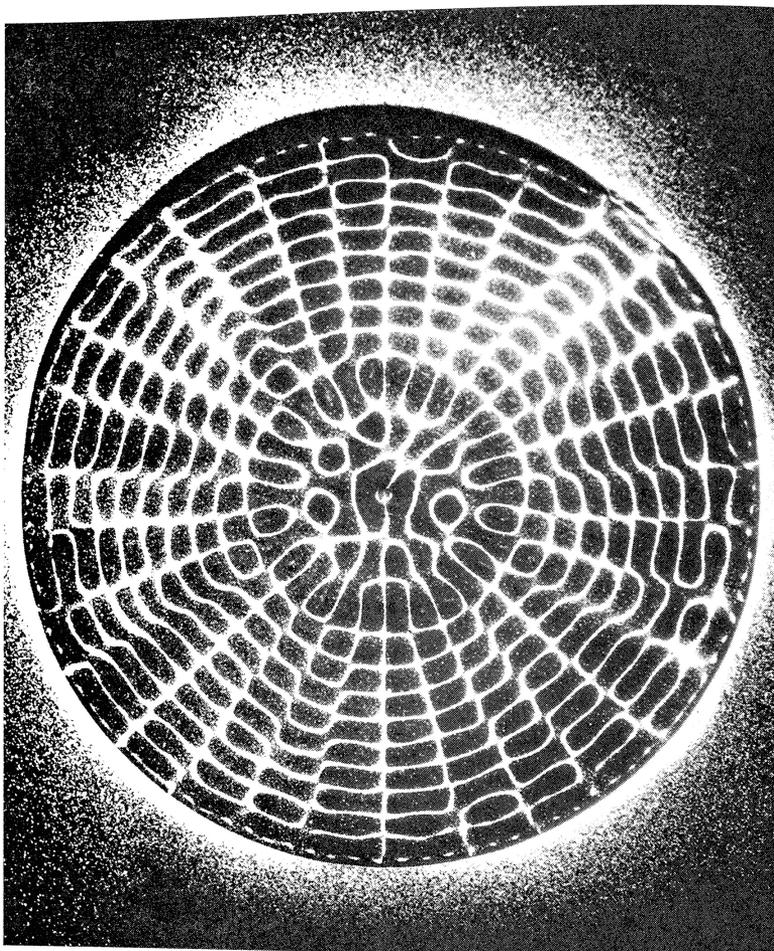
length in the *Deus sive sphaera* chapter of *Spheres II*. One encounters a related cognitive optimism in Spinoza's ethics, which constitutes a great call to unfold the potential of nature: we do not yet know everything of which the dark body is capable—learn more about it, and you will gain vision and ability. With Leibniz, cognitive optimism assumed more muted forms, as the author of *Monadology* had a precise idea of the unfathomability of implications, which extend to infinity.⁵⁴ Even Hegel's construct of a circle made of circles, however, still rests on the principle that the last is merely the first, fulfilled and brought epicentrically to itself in our comprehension.

Where optimism sets the tone, it dictates the question of how the inward could ultimately become fully outward. Viewed in a positive light, human practice is nothing other than the great rotation that brings what is concealed in the dark of the lived moment before our eyes in such a way that it can be incorporated into the human treasury as a clear notion. From the perspective of consistent optimism, the history of cognition and technology would end in a final picture where the parity between inwardness and outwardness had been achieved point by point. But how would this be possible if one could show that when the implicit becomes explicit, something completely willful, foreign, different, something never intended, never expected and never to be assimilated penetrates thought? If the research that advances into liminal regions makes known something previously unknown, of which it cannot be said that a subject comes "into itself" in it? If there are new things that elude the symmetry of the implicit and the explicit, and enter the structures of knowledge as something that remains foreign, external and monstrous to the end?

The Monstrous Appears

After the expiry of the optimistic trend, one can calmly state what phenomenology *de facto* meant in its usual application: it was a rescue service for phenomena at a time when most “manifestations” no longer approached the eye or the other senses of their own accord, but were rather brought to visibility through research, invasive explications and the accompanying measurements (which means “observations” via machines and artificial sensors). It invited its adepts to participate in the attempt to defend the metaphysical precedence of observational perception over measuring, calculating and operating.⁵⁵ It devoted itself to the task of fending off the disconcerting flooding of consciousness with unassimilable insights and outlooks into cut-open bodies and the innards of machines—not to reject the new, but to integrate it into the habitual perception of circumstances or nature, as if nothing had happened after the technological caesura. Heidegger rightly taught that technology was a “mode of unconcealing” [*Weise des Entbergens*]. This at once meant that what is technologically unconcealed and made public can only possess a derived phenomenality, a hybrid publicity and an impaired affiliation with perception.⁵⁶

Alongside the monstrous visibility of the anatomical facts that have accompanied us since the sixteenth century (and which no humanism can still integrate into a well-rounded picture of the literate human being), we are confronted with the sights enabled from the seventeenth century onwards by microscopes and telescopes, the two infernal machines for the eye. Magnification: this (alongside cartography) was the first strike capacity of explication that coerced the previously invisible



Sound waves made visible on a metal disc

world to become pictorial.⁵⁷ I am also thinking of the becoming-phenomenon of nuclear mushrooms, cell nuclei and interior views of humans, of X-ray images and CT scans, of galactic photographs—of a diffuse universe of complex, barely decipherable sights for whose emergence no human (more

carefully put: ancient human) eye could have been prepared. (Let us note that the discipline of design—as the artificial production of perceptual surfaces and user interfaces through invisible functions, or as an aesthetically intentional highlighting of otherwise unnoticed functional motifs—begins from a point that is one dimension more modern than its age-mate phenomenology, assuming it already operates at the level of second perceptibility, that is to say of observation via devices and sensors.)

The phenomenologically committed, then, are those who are determined to treat the artificially achieved visibility of once naturally concealed facts and latent mechanisms or functions as if the jovial old alliance of eye and light still applied to these new arrivals in the space of the observable. In this sense, phenomenology is a restoration in favor of perception after its overtaking by mechanical observation. It consciously distracts from the question of whether the human eye can compete with the Geiger counter. As long as the distraction is effective, the suggestion remains intact that knowledge can inhabit the world as the bourgeois inhabits his villa.

First of all, one cannot deny that even the sights and depictions of the disturbing things that became visible upon cutting open human and animal bodies from manifold angles, as well as the chemical disintegration of matter, extending to nuclear epiphanies over the American desert and atomic traces in cloud chambers, entered the human perception as if these new visibilities were simply continuing the unconcealed state of the first nature by more current means. They are not. All these neo-visibilitys, these penetrations of the phenomenal background, enabled by developed image-giving procedures: these unrelentingly



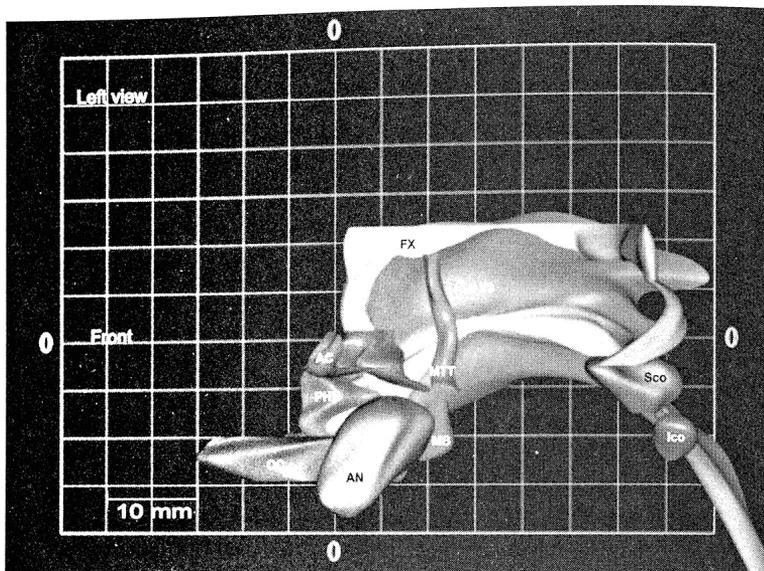
Leonid Rogozov, Novolazarevskaya Station, Antarctic, during a self-operation on the appendix in April 1961

explicit cuts through animate and inanimate bodies, these external views of naturally enclosed organs, these counterintuitive artificial views of the night and mechanical side of nature, these close-ups of exposed matter, produced with sound operational knowledge and seasoned eccentricity—they are all separated by an ontological divide from the primordial, circumspect and lenient cognitive willingness of human views in varyingly familiar horizon-immanent circumstances which, since time immemorial, have conventionally been termed “nature.” Only after the auto-operative rotation did recent knowledge find itself in the position where things become phenomenal that were in no way intended for the human perceptual apparatus, at least not in its first design. What was shifted to the surface by research had to be “brought to light”

or “unconcealed” in a form of cognitive mining. Modernity offers various names for the origin of these extractions: they come either from the “unconscious” or from latency, from ignorance, from concealment on the insides of the phenomenal folds or from some other framing of the cognitive not-yet.

Of no genre of “objects” is this truer than the heroic topics of the new “life sciences” that have recently advanced spectacularly into regions formerly withdrawn, non-appearing, and hence invisible. Thanks to these invasions, human brains, the human genome and human immune systems have been placed on the epistemological stage so theatrically that the public sphere of education and sensation is kept in constant suspense through their enactment and establishment, which are presented as “exploration” and “deciphering.”

All three object fields can be used to explain how absurd it would be to consider disciplines of this orientation expressions or products of human reflection on existence, or even manifestations of what idealistic philosophers have called self-reflection. The turn of knowledge towards brains—where, as far as we can tell, every knowledge, even this acute knowledge of knowledge, is processed—as well as genomes and immune systems, which undoubtedly also constitute the current biological premises for the existence of these geneticists and immunologists, was not of a “reflective” or mirroring character; it only performed the auto-operative rotation after which knowledge reached behind the mirror, or to the “reverse” of subjectivities. This required forced access to the concealed, for only after breaking through to the hidden and integrating it into the illuminated space can those things which naturally existed and still exist latently, aphenomenally and without necessary relation to a cognizant



Amygdala, fornix and periventricula of the brain, three-dimensional reconstruction

consciousness become noticeable as phenomena. For genes, brains and immune systems to come under pressure to appear, Lethe-breaking procedures and instruments are indispensable—the effective tools of that rotation which brings the non-present into the position of the present.⁵⁸

It should be emphasized that this making-present cannot retain the character of a domineering elevation over objects for ever—the new life sciences in particular allow us to predict how research is increasingly infused with insight into the advancing of the object. Whoever raises the question of what life is must begin by conceding that life has long since provided the answer. There is ever less cause to speak of an appropriation of the object by the researching subject. My brain, my genome, my immune system—in such combinations, the good old possessive

pronouns sound like presentations of grammatical folklore. The new possessions could never become our property, for nothing is more foreign to us—and will always remain so—than our “own” explicated biomechanics. That the long-term attack on concealment occurs by necessity, however, and is undertaken rightfully in every respect, is—accompanied by such catchphrases as “freedom of research” or “improvement of human living conditions”—one of the primary convictions of modern civilization, convictions that for their part flow from ancient sources, for example the Aristotelian doctrine that striving for insight is part of human nature.

I shall refrain from commenting on these postulations—except to note that every foregrounding of long-latent things has a price, especially when it is the atmospheric and climatic contingencies of cultures whose erosion, and even more their intentional destruction, pushes them to become manifest. Once wounded, they are concretely present and urge operative reconstruction. This applies especially to the knowledge about cultures that was brought into an external and technological position by the great rotation.⁵⁹ One can say all manner of bad things about the twentieth century—but not that it failed to pay the price for such defamiliarizations. No other epoch displayed such advanced expertise in the art of annihilating existence from its vital premises. On the other side of these destruction procedures, the constructive preconditions for the preservation of cultural spaces become visible. Their fate will depend on the reconstructive knowledge and skill that civilizations acquire about themselves.

We Have Never Been Revolutionary

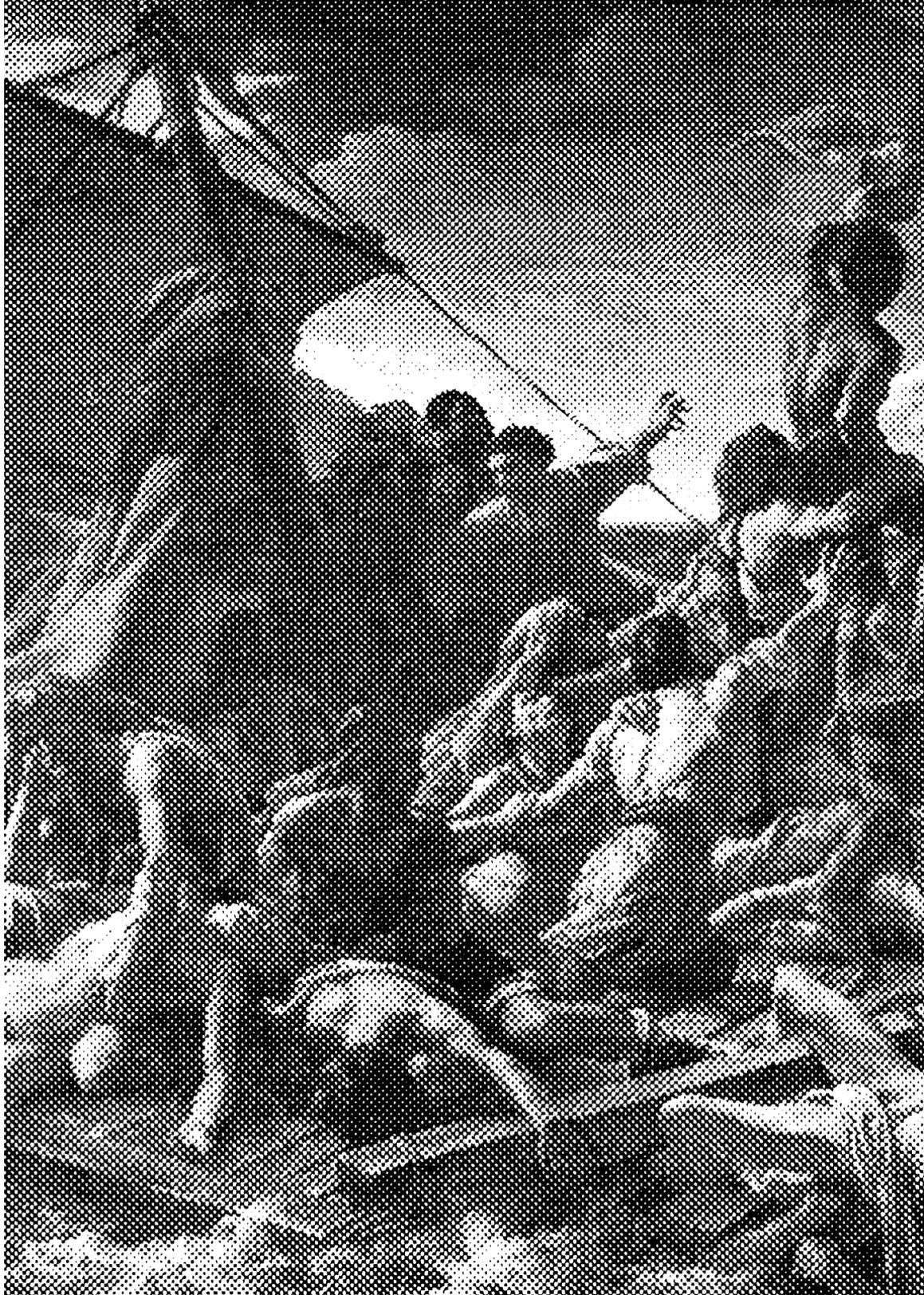
After the end of the twentieth century, it is dawning on people that it was a mistake to place the concept of revolution at the center of its interpretation—just as it was a mistake to understand the extremist ways of thinking from that time as mirroring “revolutionary” events in the social “base.” One still shows complicity by lending credence to the self-mystifications of the epoch’s actors. Whoever spoke of revolutions before and after 1917, whether political or cultural, almost always allowed an unclear metaphor of motion to make fools of them. At no time did the strength of the century lie in overturning. Nowhere did the top and the bottom change places; nothing that stood on its head was placed on its feet; it would be futile to search for evidence that the last became the first anywhere. Nothing was overturned, nothing circulated. On the other hand, background elements were foregrounded everywhere; things latent were brought to manifestation on countless fronts. Whatever could be uncovered through invasive hypotheses, interventions and deep drilling went into the tanks, the printed word and the business balances. The middle ground was broadened, representative functions multiplied, courts were restaffed, administrations expanded, the targets for actions, productions and publications proliferated, new positions sprouted up and the number of career chances was multiplied a thousandfold. There is a hint of all that in Paul Valéry’s malicious claim that the French, and *eo ipso* the moderns, had turned the “revolution” into a “routine.”

The true and real basic concept of modernity is not revolution but explication. Explication is the true name of becoming

for our time—and can be followed or accompanied by the conventional modes of becoming through drift, imitation, disaster and creative recombination. Deleuze was probably articulating a related thought when he attempted to shift the event type “revolution” to the molecular level to escape the ambivalences of action in the “mass”; what counts is not voluminous upheaval but flowing, a discreet progression into the next state, the sustained flight from the status quo. At the molecular level, only small and smallest maneuvers count; anything new that leads further is operative. The visibility of true innovation simply goes back to the explication effect—what is then declared a “revolution” is usually no more than the noise that follows once the event is over. The present age does not turn things, conditions or themes over; it rolls them out. It unfolds them, it pulls them forwards, it lays them flat and takes them apart, it coerces them into manifestation, it respells them analytically and incorporates them into synthetic routines. It turns suppositions into operations; it supplies muddled expressive tensions with exact methods; it translates dreams into instruction manuals; it arms *ressentiment* and lets love play on countless, often newly invented instruments. It wants to know everything about all things in the background, folded inwards, previously unavailable and withdrawn—enough, at least, to make it available for new foreground actions, unfolding and splitting, interventions and remoldings. It translates the monstrous into the commonplace. It invents procedures for integrating the unheard-of into the register of the real; it builds the keyboard that allows users easy access to things previously impossible. It tells its own: “There is no such thing as powerlessness; whatever you cannot do, you can learn.” It is rightfully called the technological age.

In the following, I will repeat a few chapters from the disaster history of the twentieth century in order to explain what struggles and traumas forced the human sojourn in breathable milieus to become an object of explicit cultivation. Once this has been understood, it only requires a small effort to show why every ethics of value, virtue and discourse remains hollow as long as it is not translated into climate ethics. Was Heraclitus exaggerating when he proclaimed that war is the father of all things? No contemporary philosopher, at any rate, would be going too far by describing terror as the father of the science of cultures.

Raqs Media Collective
Nautonomat Operating Manual



0. Nautonomy

Nautonomy is more than autonomy. It is nautical, voyaging and mobile. Nautonomy re-articulates and re-founds the 'self-organizing' principle inherent in what is generally understood when considering the idea of autonomy, while recognizing that the entity mistakenly called 'self' is actually more precisely an unbounded constellation of persons, organisms and energies that is defined by its capacity to be a voyager in contact with a moving world.

1. Nautonomat

A nautonomat is a craft of autonomy. It is a vehicle, a scenario, a loose, changing, evolving protocol of doing things together and sharing time, ideas and testing a few visions whenever necessary. One way of thinking about such an entity, which could be a space, or a method, is to conceive of it as a spaceship of the imagination. The nautonomat piloted by nautonomonauts is itinerant and can 'pop up' in different spaces, and occupy different lengths of time in concordance with the increasingly mobile working lives of people in the arts, and their friends. Its primary features can be replicated and adapted in different contexts and situations. It should be possible to 'find' all the physical objects necessary to make up a space for free, or for next to nothing by asking people to spare what they no longer use. Nautonomonauts may also act in response to invitations to produce situations and processes for specific educational, social and political contexts. Public Institutions may also be squatted, occupied or reconfigured openly or in stealth for a term to harbour an nautonomat. Books, computers, projectors and other equipment should also be sourced, as much as possible, from existing resources in a given location. Consumables should be sourced from within public institutions when possible, and by pooling resources otherwise. Every asset in a space for mobile autonomy must come from a commons constituted for it, and devolve back to that commons when the time comes to move on. And it must move on.

2. Location

Site the nautonomat within a context the primary purpose of which is not the hosting of gatherings and conversations; let the practice of conversation be equally a surprise to the uninvited, the invited, the bystander, and to the settled. This is sited epiphytically on the structure of a festival, biennale, university or institution, in the an-

nex of a museum, or in a clearing within or adjacent to a library, or any space that has been recently transformed or is in transition; say, a factory that has been de-occupied of its management, or a recently liberated detention facility. It can also be any place filled with promise.

3. Orientation

Find a location that can be seen (as far as possible) from different distances and vantage points, (from above and below, if possible, besides only from the sides). People should be able to stay at a distance, observing, without having to feel scrutinized, and then, if they so desire, find ways to get closer, and perhaps even enter and participate.

4. Exit / Entry

Choose an enclosure that has more than one point of entry and exit, so that everyone does not have to come in and leave through the same door. This makes it possible for people to accept different degrees and reasons of involvement in the nautonomat. Not everyone needs to come to this process with the same set of expectations and desires. Different routes and a flexible protocol of permissions for entry and exit make this seem natural. Emphasize corridors, vestibules and unexpected passages and doors that link the nautonomat to its wider surroundings. Make sure this happens in terms of the architecture as well as the dramaturgy of the nautonomat.

5. Time

Develop a flexible practice of how to share time in the nautonomat. Make sure that no person or group becomes the 'landlord' of the facility. Some people may want to be there every day, or on most days of the week, with a certain regularity. The greater stability of their tenure does not entitle them more than others. Many may come in only for scheduled conversations and events that happen at set intervals. Still others may want to drop in and out on their way to other places. They may want to spend time by themselves, doing (or not doing) things, reading, having non-intrusive conversations with others, or making things with other people, by design or by accident. Cultivate routines of meeting, doing things together, reading, writing, drawing and conversation but make room for randomness, and the stranger, at the same time. Let the nautonomat inhale surprise and exhale familiarity.

6. Furniture

The minimum requirements for a gathering in an nautonomat include things to sit on (sofas, cushions, stools, armchairs and chairs of different kinds, ottomans, rugs and carpets), at different levels, (and on different kinds of surfaces) so that the eye may wander. The furniture should be easy to get up from. Make sure that the furniture and the surfaces are comfortable, but not too comfortable. Short naps are fine, but the nautonomat is a spaceship of the imagination, not the first class retiring room in a railway station.

7. Not This, Not That

Avoid also the spatial echoes of a boardroom, a hotel or airport lounge, an office, a classroom or a doctor's waiting room. These are spaces that kill thought before it can even germinate. Remember, also, that the nautonomat is neither a studio nor a gallery. If anything, it is more like an orbiting clubhouse or a common room, a space for conversation, repose, experiment, disagreement, observation, reflection, play, sleep and joy.

8. Eye Lines

No one should have to sit too close to another person, because it is important that everyone be able to see each other, and turn to each other in conversation, nor too far, because no one should have to strain to speak or hear across a vast distance. Eye contact is key. Avoid flat, even illumination in spaces of conversation. Provide for shadows.

9. Provisions

There should be a few choice books close at hand, to browse, to provoke a thread of debate, to slake curiosities. Have especially poetry, picture books, aged books, some philosophy, some parables, a few polemical tracts, a long monograph on things that no one knows much about, atlases, lexicons, aphorisms, time tables, manuals, and a few books that are impossible to describe casually. This should be a growing library, with books attracting the gift of other books. Over time, the books should attract annotations and insertions. It should be possible for an astronomical atlas to gather a note featuring a line of poetry, not necessarily about stars, or a recipe for soup in outer space.

10. Objects

A few odd objects can also be collected and kept — stones, bits of shaped wood, sea-glass, shells, fossils, tools and instruments,

balls of thread or wool – things to hold, weigh and consider, things to think with, if anyone is so inclined. Avoid figurines, dolls, toys and anthropomorphic objects unless absolutely necessary. Let the crowd grow and not get drowned by familiar icons; fetishes and totems.



11. Tools

Furnish the 'work area' with different kinds and lengths of paper, pens, pencils, brushes, ink, stamps of different kinds, stencils, stamp pads, scissors, tape, glue and other things necessary to make drawings, collages and mind maps. Find ways to articulate the tables as surfaces to work on as well as provisional platforms for display.

12. Copy

Make sure that there is a xerox machine and/or a printer somewhere in the vicinity. Copying, cutting and pasting together are important ways to generate a 'commons' of ideas, images and textures. Repetitions, layers, palimpsests and patterns thicken time in the space for mobile autonomy. Time cooks us all.

13. Tracing

There should be lots of tracing paper. Tracing is way of keeping thoughts and ideas alive and mobile.

14. Projection

There should be a space on a wall to project thoughts and images, just as there should be a few contiguous surfaces tacked onto walls

that can be used to assemble and display notes, drawings, lists, and anything else that comes to mind. Ideas, questions, observations, connections must be materialized, as much as possible, through diagrams that represent the looping histories of conversations, through drawings, through annotations and figures of all kinds. Keep a simple video monitor close at hand, so as to run videos on loop for extended periods of time. Let some things stay constant, and let others change.

15. Beverage

Beverages must always be served. The making and serving of a drink is crucial to having people feel welcomed, and in ensuring that the roles circulate over time. When circumstances permit, the beverage can be a moderate quantity of distilled or fermented spirit. Otherwise, something suitable to the weather, warm and invigorating, in autumn or winter, such as tea in any form or colour, or cool, like a sherbet, in the summer, will do just as well. Sipping produces a necessary silence, because no one can sip and speak at the same time. This makes listening pleasurable. Ingested, the liquid loosens the tongue, and this makes for better conversation. Thirst needs no translation.

15. Flows

Curate flows of things that can be done and witnessed in the nautonomat. This should include collective work, but also leave time for people to work on their own, and at their own pace. Make time for specific discussions led by one or two people on a theme agreed upon previously, and ensure that at least some of the time, these discussions are not related to ongoing 'projects'. There can also be interviews or curated conversations, readings, screenings and collective audition of video material and audio recordings that anyone wishes to share. Avoid the tedium of the 'artists talk'. Invite people to try out ideas, raise questions, air speculations and posit scenarios. Avoid descriptions, reports, promotions, putdowns and other tried and tested narrative tricks. Script nothing, document everything.

16. Purpose

The nautonomat's shifting experiment is the rediscovery of conversation and collective learning as an art form. Nautonomonauts gather to discover things they did not know about themselves and their own practice in the company of others, and to reconfigure

the question of the centre and the margin, in life, art and work. The nautonomat's orbit takes it out further towards the margins and edges of established domains, so that the sighting of worlds becomes a commonplace activity.

[The proposition of the nautonomat and these preliminary notes towards its possible operation are distilled from the experience that Raqs Media Collective had with students and faculty of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence and Brown University during the course of 'A Myriad Marginalia', an open seminar designed by Raqs within the painting department at RISD (with Dennis Congdon) at the RISD Museum in March-April 2015]

Contributors

Noortje de Leij studied art history and philosophy at the University of Amsterdam and the New School in New York. She is currently a PhD student at the University of Amsterdam where she is writing a dissertation on the relationship between art and social criticism. In 2018 she won the Prize for Young Art Criticism in the essay category.

Theodor W. Adorno was a German philosopher, sociologist, psychologist, musicologist, and composer known for his critical theory of society. He was a leading member of the Frankfurt School of critical theory for whom the works of Freud, Marx, and Hegel were essential to a critique of modern society. As a critic of both fascism and what he called the culture industry his writings strongly influenced the European New Left.

John Maus

John Maus is an American musician, composer, singer, and songwriter known for his baritone singing style and his use of vintage synthesizer sounds and Medieval church modes, a combination that often draws comparisons to 1980s goth-pop. On stage, he is characterized for his intense displays of emotion while performing. He was a student of Slavoj Žižek and a former teacher of philosophy at the University of Hawaii, where he later earned his PhD in political science. His dissertation, 'Communication and Control' (2014), discusses the influence of technology on control societies. According to Maus in 2010, he had been diagnosed 'with everything at one point or another'.

Elena Filipovic is an art historian art critic and curator. She studied art history at Princeton University and was co-curator of Berlin Biennale 5 (2008), along with Adam Szymczyk and curator at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels. Since 2014 she is director of Kunsthalle Basel. She was a guest curator of the Satellite Program for emerging artists at the Jeu de Paume, Paris (2010) and has, since 2007, been tutor of theory/exhibition history at De Appel postgraduate curatorial training program and advisor at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. Her writings have appeared in numerous artists' catalogues as well as in *Afterall*, *Frieze*, *Kaleidoscope*, and *Mousse*.

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi is an Italian communist philosopher, theorist and activist in the autonomist tradition, whose work mainly focuses on the role of the media and information technology within post-industrial capitalism. He participated in the events of May '68 at the University of Bologna, where he graduated with a degree in Aesthetics. During this time he joined the extra-parliamentary Worker's Power group where he met Antonio Negri and was involved in the political movement of Autonomia. During the 1970s Berardi fled to Paris, where he worked with Félix Guattari in the field of schizoanalysis.

Peter Sloterdijk is a German philosopher and cultural theorist. He is a professor of philosophy and media theory at the University of Art and Design Karlsruhe. Sloterdijk's ideas are sometimes referred to as posthumanism, and seek to integrate different components that have been, in his opinion, erroneously considered detached from each other. The trilogy *Spheres* is the philosopher's magnum opus. The first volume was published in 1998, the second in 1999, and the last in 2004.

Raqs Media Collective comprises a group of three practitioners—Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta—all based in New Delhi and was formed in 1992. Raqs comes from the Persian, Arabic and Urdu word for the visionary state attained through the ritual dance by whirling dervishes. They work in a wide range of mediums—

installations, film, photography, print and online works, archive related projects, public interventions, essays, publications, lecture-performances, engagements with pedagogical procedures and collaborations, often working with contemporaries from a number of different disciplines. Their work has been shown at Documenta and the Venice Biennale.

Colophon

Reader accompanying the residency and the exhibition (July 4th & July 5th) It is part XVIII and I'm here to be part of the assembly, and this assembly is no longer necessarily ceremonial

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Noortje de Leij, *Some Paths through It is part XVIII and I'm here to be part of the assembly, and this assembly is no longer necessarily ceremonial*, 2020

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