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NAKED PUNCH → ISSUE 09



Featured Artist:
NADIN OSPINA (Colombia Land. Secuestrado, 2002)



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FRAGMENTS OF A PROLOGUE



'WHO'LL DARE TO DRINK THIS WINE OF LOVE...?'

Qalandar Bux Memon



An interpretation of Plato's *Republic* and *Symposium* that I find compelling sees in laws and in particular constitutions loveable 'beauty'. Such value is put on this beauty that Plato has Doitima explain to the puzzled Socrates that love must be directed to these entities rather than devoted solely to a 'single human body' of a beloved or even his/her 'mind'; ultimately it is love directed to this beauty that makes for a good human life. In Doitima's words, "...the greatest and most beautiful kind of practical wisdom by far is that concerned with the right ordering of cities and households, for which the name is temperance and justice". Indeed, this is a strange thing to love — a constitution. Yet, this is a worthy love. Laws/Politics form, structure, and create the very bearing that we take — they certainly do not form a totality otherwise there will be no space for resistance and creativity but they are nonetheless powerful instruments. For example, they govern my relation to wages, to government, to the 'other', to the polity and even the remotest of laws eminent a 'good', a 'bias', a 'corruption' — they are powerful. Plato gives as image in the *Republic* of subjects living under the sun/shadows. For us laws emit these rays. We literally live under them and they among other things interact to curtail or enhance our dreams and humane aspira-

tions. They are certainly not neutral or value free as some scholars from the liberal tradition would try to convince us. Though a gross generalization, one can still say combatively, as they stand they are generally not worthy of love for they reflect or are the instruments of 'national elites' and over the last three decades have been increasingly shaped by the gospel of neo-liberal capital'.

1. For an account of how national elites have come to dominate the Third World, see: Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*, 2006.

However objectionable we find the mysterious metaphysical entities Plato fathomed and the inherent elitism and conservatism he professed, we must agree with him in the value of engagement with Politics and learn with creativity and intelligence to enliven Political institutions to reflect our dreams, desires, hopes and love. And indeed from Caracas to Islamabad (via London) forces assemble themselves to move precisely to reshape power and laws away from 'national elites' and towards the redistribution of 'power and wealth'.

CARACAS AND ARTICLE 88.

When Nora Castaneda² was asked about the reaction of grass-root women's groups to the failed

2. Head of Banmujer (Women's Development Bank of Venezuela).

coup by the Oligarchy to oust Chavez in 2002, she replied,

"grassroots women had gained so much with the revolution [Bolivarian] that to lose it would have been unbearable. The coup was like the loss of a precious loved one: we were in mourning but ready

3. Nora Castaneda, *Creating a Caring Economy*, Crossroads Books, 2006.

to fight"³. Nora also knows about fighting for consti-

tutional change. She writes of their involvement in the Constitutional Assembly of 1999, "we women organized and prepared a document, and brought it to the Constituent Assembly. And for four months, for the entire duration of the Constituent Assembly, we were there submitting our demands, our proposals...as a result this is probably the most revolutionary constitution in the world in terms of gender equity". In particular, Nora is proud of Article 88; it is worth quoting:

The State will guarantee equality between men and women in exercising the right to work. The State will recognize housework as an economic activity that creates added value and produces wealth and social welfare. Housewives are entitled to social security in accordance with the law.

The recognition of household activity as producing wealth in the economy and the granting of remuneration for this work is necessary and overdue. Nora explains its necessity in the context of Venezuela and its role in alleviating poverty (a logic and argument that is applicable beyond Venezuela). She tells us,

"We had determined...that more than 65% of Venezuelans lived in conditions of poverty, and that 70% of these were women. This is to say, in Venezuela, as almost everywhere else in the world, poverty has a woman's face....We had also determined that

in the poorest communities in most of the country women were doing three jobs. They worked in the home —unremunerated housework; they worked outside to feed their children and because they were the head of the family; and on top of that they worked for the community, because they needed some basic services for their families".

She concludes, "that if the problem of poverty was to be tackled it was necessary to invest in women". The remuneration partly comes from guaranteed Social Security which in Venezuela means a guarantee of "healthcare, education, decent housing, training, the right to

4. For more information see: www.globalwomenstrike.net

work"⁴. It is long overdue. Selma James writing in 1970's explains the connection between housework (often women) and reproduction of (this is Selma quoting Marx) "the laborer himself":

First it must be nine months in the womb, must be fed, clothed and trained; then when it works it bed must be made, its floors swept, its lunchbox prepared, its sexuality not gratified but quietened, its dinner ready when it gets home, even if this is eight in the morning form the night shift. This is how labour power is produced and reproduced when it is daily consumed in the factory or the office. *To describe*

*its basic production and reproduction is to describe women's work.*⁵

5. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the community*, Falling Wall Press, 1975.

LONDON AND THE ALL PARTIES CONFERENCE.

On July 7th and 8th in London an All (oppositional) Parties Conference assembled to form a united front against the predatory military of Pakistan.

Paid for by Nawaz Sharif (former Prime Minister) 70 plus politicians from 30 plus parties were given a welcome break from the heat of the Pakistani summer and hosted in Millennium Gloucester hotel in Central London. Indeed, we can have little respect for some of the represented parties in particular the Pakistan Peoples Party (the leader of which, Benazir Bhutto, and her husband, Asif "Mr 10%" Zardari, when last in power plundered tens of millions, if not billions, from the state and reliable sources allege Mr. Zardari's involvement in murders of opponents both political and business related) and Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League (also thugish and corrupt when in power). Nonetheless, the will to dialogue and the attempt to forge a united opposition is welcome. The call for democracy in the long term will be a necessary safeguard against the present predatory military/business elite. And though the opposition today constructs itself out of large elements of discredited political parties, Islamist parties, lawyers, provisional nationalist groupings, and various untried political organisations this 'monster' (as a Pakistani friend described it) nonetheless forms one necessary bed-rock for resistance to a Military that blunders the country and in the process deforms the life and dignity of its people.

Here it is worth noting the research of Ayesha Siddiqi. In *Military Inc.* she shows how today the military has come to controls 11. 58 million acres of land that is 12 per cent of the total 93.67 million acres of state land, 6.8 million of which is owned by individual members of the armed forces. A further 6.9 million acres has been acquired by the military for redistribution to its top officials. In 1981 an acre was being sold (to select army personal only) for as little as \$0.86 — this in a country with over 30 million landless peasants. This land is often acquired

with the full use of force. Siddiqi writes, "the plight of the fishermen in Sindh at the hands of paramilitary forces, and the landless peasants in Okara after 2001, indicate the usurpation of resources by the military. In both cases the military (including the paramilitary) literally fought against the segments of the community involved in order to control the resources. This is not mention the militaries use of its 'power' towards usurping resources to build and run sugar mill, petrol pumps, corn-fake cereals, shopping malls, etc ⁶.

6. Ayesha Siddiqi, *Military Inc. Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*, Pluto Press. 2007.

Not only has the military formed itself as a predatory business elite, its generals do not hesitate to use force against legitimate state players. Over 200 Baloch and Sindhi nationalists have been made to 'disappear' instead of being brought into the political system. Similarity, on the 12th of May people gathering to protests against the government were shoot (with more than 40 killed) by the lackeys of the Musharraf government. Though it may be controversial for some liberal ears the recent murder of 80 people in the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) is equally frightful. Again, force was used as the first rather than last option.

A 'Monster' then is needed to curtail this illegitimate predatory regime headed by Musharraf. The call of this 'Monster' centres around two struggles. Firstly, a call for fair elections and a demand that Musharraf either remain the head of the army or run for president but no-longer hold both positions. Secondly, a different segment demands the independence of the judiciary in light of the politicised dismissal of the head of the Supreme Court. The struggle of this 'monster' is difficult. It faces a military elite happy to kills its citizens. It is also a far cry from Article 88 or a Bolivarian revolution

but fair elections and the withdrawal of the military from political life of the country are necessary first steps. The slogan all over the country, "Go Musharraf Go!" is motivated and pertinent. However, the calls must also proclaim a turn towards 'self-reliance' (from US commands and money) and with it the redistribution of power and wealth away from 'national elites' and towards the instituting of health care, education and social security.

What is evident and must be engaged with (joined!) is the mobilization of groups towards the reshaping of the state/politics/constitution so that it better reflects the aspiration of people. Here I am reminded of the call to protest of the great socialist poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Who, not unlike Plato (and one suspects Nora), imbues a deep love towards the 'just' state/constitution in his work— the beloved is the 'just state to come':

*...Convoys of pain bearing cargoes of love must keep moving,
but someone else must now wave them forward.
And others must tend the garden where ardour blooms –
I can't: the dew of my eyes dried: I won't weep again.
All rapture, the pure madness of passion, has ceased.
And no one's left to bear the rain of stones.*

That road behind me: it was always the Beloved's street.

It is now the color of her lips;

My blood, like a flag, has been unfurled there.

I have nothing left to give.

And a glass is being filled again.

Friends, let one of you now come forward,

For the cry has begun: "Who'll dare to drink this wine of love

That is blood and poison? Who? (...)

Let us all, in our sphere and way, come forward.

Qalandar Bux Memon

London, July 2007.

IN EVIL HOUR

Oscar Guardiola-Rivera



Media outlets and intellectuals have been focusing on the 'spring' of popular and left wing political options spreading throughout Latin America. While America's Fox News deems 'dangerous' the popular process that brought Hugo Chavez back to power in Venezuela in April 2003, British media mix equal degrees of optimism and expectation with concerns about authoritarian tendencies and lack of real economic achievement. Popular processes taking place in Bolivia and elsewhere are interpreted similarly. Others, such as the indigenous mobilization in Mexico, Ecuador and Southern Colombia, or the immigrant mass movement within the US, pass under the radar or get reduced to the post-modernist charisma and literary prowess of balaclava-clad spokesmen.

There is much to be optimistic. John Pilger's award-winning documentary *The War on Democracy* charts the unlikely rise of grassroots movements in Latin America amidst widespread political pessimism in Europe and US imperialism. The journalist reminds us that imperialism would not exist without the decisive collaboration of national elites. Avoiding the anti-American cliché, it concentrates on the learned ignorance of sophisticated national elites, ready to sacrifice their more coloured compatriots in the altars of global capitalism.

These contemporary sophists are the concrete face of post-modern Evil. Their sophism is the representation of popular movements as nothing more than passive puppets in the hands of some arch-evil leader, fuelled by oil revenue or illegal money. With this sleight of hand, popular movements are made into actual or potential 'terrorists', the enemy/friend of a viciously circular discourse of war and retribution that is now dominant in state politics. Popular movements in Latin America show the way out of this vicious circle. They correctly identify imperialism and boundless capitalism as the culprit. They install and overthrow leaders as they see fit, replacing the representatives of the elites with their own. As it happened in Bolivia in 2000, they take on voracious multinational corporations. They write their own constitutions, and practice a kind of solidarity that ignores modern/colonial geopolitical boundaries. In doing so, they rewrite the meaning of democracy.

None of this was thinkable in the previous situation. In that situation, which is still present, politics and policy-making are all about security. Certainly, the threats are real, but the diagnosis and the remedy seem wrong. The real threat is the reciprocity that provides current violence with its perverse logic. In that logic, perceived enemies be-

come models to one another: while one agent of violence decides to intervene and occupy in the name of democracy and security, securing vital resources such as oil that fuel the movement of commodities through the channels of global capitalism, another one uses the same channels to mobilize globally perverse commodities such as the car bomb, in an attempt to 'democratise' warfare. In response to such egalitarian threats, governments worldwide opt for preventive policies that generate all sorts of paradoxical results: democracy becomes the lowest common denominator, the language of emancipation fuses with that of domination, terror appears both real and phantom-like, like capital, and truth indistinguishable from lie. There is no hope of liberation in such circle.

Instances of this can also be seen in Latin America. Optimism should not obscure the fact that current conflicts in the region, particularly Colombia's long standing clash between the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) and far-right wing governmental and paramilitary forces, but also emergent conflicts such as Bolivia's confrontation between the Indigenous and Peasant Unity, on the one hand, and the *Cruceñista* movement, on the other, feature ever higher levels of complexity. Furthermore, the objects involved in such conflicts, which cause many of the present challenges to security, from the car bomb to natural legal and illegal resources, are themselves complex: those who use them, achieve 'success' as they are surprised and humbled (or paradoxically over-empowered) by their own creations.

As a consequence, the situation we have to confront corresponds to a new kind of uncertainty that has very little to do with limited knowledge. It follows that models of prevention and precaution current in political practice are of little help in that ask. Anticipating the consequences of specific

moves by conflicting parties, scenario-planning, policy-design on 'anticipatory self-defence', have become at the same time more important and more difficult, and may be ultimately paradoxical.

The Colombian experience is plentiful in examples of such vicious results: anticipating a 'military rescue' by governmental (or other) forces, itself a pre-emptive strategy aiming at preventing FARC from using captives as political leverage in an exchange, resulted in the death of eleven local elected politicians and a new blockage in the already stagnated process of political approximation between the parties. Partly in response to these events, citizens in urban areas took to the streets. But in this case the mass mobilization was riddled with problems from the outset: the government of Alvaro Uribe Velez attempted to manipulate it by asking the marchers to support his tough stance against real negotiations, effectively blocking any possibility to put an end to the war. Those who publicly declared FARC and the Uribe government responsible were either silenced or 'refuted', a form of censorship far more insidious than denying use of public airwaves to a TV station involved in an attempted coup. Civil society was, and remains, deeply divided.

Split in half, Colombians cannot manage to articulate themselves into a political agent. Unable to invest in an object that may gather them together, their uncertainty remains purely subjective, and the way out of the vicious circle is perceived solely as a matter of faith or enthusiasm. These feelings feed directly into an already stagnant political situation: they explain the soaring popularity of Uribe in urban areas, despite mounting concern and evidence, coupled with international pressure, concerning the government's alleged links to the far-right Paramilitary, and the problematic nature of the peace 'negotiations' between them.

They also explain the continuity and viciousness of the war, but also the persistence of the consensus around Uribe's project among the middle and upper classes. In fact, Uribe's permanence in power is dependent upon the persistence of FARC as a purely militaristic option. They are the archetypical friend/enemies.

This is the case in which a people must abolish its government if it is to rescue itself politically, or rather, in which a people must abolish and reinvent itself anew. What is desperately required in this case, but perhaps also in Europe and elsewhere, is a new form of political practice, one aimed at prediction rather than prevention, capable of dealing with the unexpected future without relegating it to the realm of mere non-actualized possibilities. Put otherwise, what is needed is the creation of a political dimension for the management of complex political objects and situations, uncoupled from notions of risk-management and prospective action, which ultimately boil down to little more than glorifying versions of cost-benefit analysis. This entails, also, the need for a new type of political leadership: the leader of yesterday responds to the challenge of objective insecurity with a mixture of subjective affectation and the deployment of a set of strategies that announce, in order to avert it, that a catastrophe is coming. Such leaders see their task in terms of the deferral of an undesirable future, and the persistence of an always/already constituted people. As a consequence, the future

becomes for them and the governed fundamentally un-real, incapable of giving us reasons to act as a collective. In contrast, the leader of tomorrow is a predictor, in the technical and more secular sense of the term: S/he seeks the point 'where collective will can achieve the very thing that fatality dictates', to paraphrase political philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy. But in doing so, s/he subtracts necessity from fatality, so that the latter is always subject to (objective) minimal failure, and therefore, calls for collective discipline and mobilization now.

This transformation requires also a new objectivity. The different sections in this issue seek to contribute to that change: from Peter Weibel's critique of iconophilia, to Nadin Ospina's take on fetishism, and Graham Harman's aesthetics as first philosophy, the emphasis is on the objective. Similarly, the objective experience of the Constitutional Assembly in Bolivia, but also that of the 1990's in Colombia, can be recovered and described as, precisely, such an attempt to create a new political dimension to deal with complex political objects, and a new form of political leadership that abandons simplistic forms of reasoning and practice, but also the old Leftist mix of fatalism and voluntarism, in favour of a politics of prediction, collective discipline and mobilisation.

Oscar Guardiola-Rivera
London, July 2007.



A QUESTION OF COMPLICITY: THE ACADEMIC BOYCOTT OF ISRAELI UNIVERSITIES

≤± BY JOHN CHALCRAFT ±≥



On 30 May 2007, the University and College Union, the largest trade union and professional association for academics in the UK, voted at its inaugural congress to "encourage members to consider the moral implications of existing and proposed links with Israeli academic institutions". This was a mild motion indeed. It called not for an outright boycott effective forthwith, but for a debate. It urged no particular political programme, but requested only that academics examine their consciences in regard to their existing links to Israel universities. It held out a potential boycott position based not on political tests or on the black-listing and exclusion of Israeli individuals. It suggested instead that UCU members consider whether they should continue to conduct business as usual with Israeli institutions. At issue here is participation in conferenc-

es or research sponsored by Israeli authorities or universities; withdrawal from institutional level cooperation; opposition to the award of grants by the EU to Israeli institutions, and refusal to serve as referees for publications based at Israeli universities.

Even in a week when the Israeli government seized and detained the Palestinian Education Minister himself, the UCU appeal to the collective academic moral conscience was greeted by a chorus of condemnation. 'Gesture politics!' cried the Financial Times; 'self-indulgence' charged The Independent; double-standards, claimed the Daily Mail. The Russell Group – an association of 20 major research-intensive UK universities – immediately condemned outright the UCU call for a debate, calling it a contradiction in terms and "in direct conflict with the mission of the university".

Even the UCU leadership, in the person of Sally Hunt, appeared to reject the motion, maintaining that most UCU members would be against it. Many muttered darkly about anti-Semitism, apparently forgetting that the self-same congress passed a motion, which received very little publicity, condemning rising anti-Semitism in the UK.

Less evident amid this chorus of rejectionism was the small voice of those who had actually read the motion, or who themselves have long felt uneasy with quotidian academic cooperation with Israeli universities in the context of illegal settlement, occupation, wall-building and apartheid. For this less strident group, the motion, in fact, got the matter exactly right. This is because the motion calls for a debate among British academics which aims to confront rather than to fudge the thorny issue of what it means to carry on business-as-usual with Israeli universities, which comprise an important institutional building block of apartheid – an entrenched system of discrimination privileging Zionist-Jews over Palestinian-Arabs, which is in turn the fundamental cause of the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel claims that the Occupied Palestinian Territories of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, seized militarily in 1967, are in fact 'disputed territories'. The Israeli government thus appears to arrogate to itself, outside of the framework of UN-mandated international law, and in breach of the spirit of the Oslo process, the right to expand into those territories, inhabited by almost 4 million Palestinians, to settle them by land seizure and force, to pen the Palestinians into ghettos divided by more than 400 checkpoints and largely surrounded by a meandering, eight metre high wall, to build roads reserved for Jewish settlers, to seal the borders of what have become economically dependent enclaves, seize water re-

sources, to detain and torture Palestinians in large numbers, and carry out political assassinations and air and artillery bombardments. As Amnesty International recently reported, whereas the Palestinians killed 27 Israelis in 2006, the Israelis killed more than 650 Palestinians. Moreover, since January 2001, Israel has refused to engage in any meaningful political negotiations with the Palestinians, preferring unilateral measures and assorted forms of 'security cooperation'. Israel is now apparently in charge of the largest open-air prison in the world. And, as Naomi Klein reminds us, business is booming for Israeli weapons' manufacturers selling their 'field-tested' weapons.

Can academics of conscience give papers at, receive funding from, and engage in joint projects with Israeli universities, as if there was no wall, no occupation, no settlement, and no apartheid? At one point does 'doing one's job' and advancing one's career turn into complicity? These are the key questions that the UCU motion seeks to address, and it is not one that should be greeted with either hysteria or ignorance. The movement for boycott, divestment and sanctions is not a fringe phenomenon called for by a hard-core of troublemaking, anti-Semitic, 'loony-left' academics clinging to positions of power in UCU, but a growing non-violent movement in international civil society at large opposed to Israeli apartheid. As a movement it is especially compelling to those who have seen how high-level diplomacy, and popular demonstrations alike have failed to make a significant impact on the Israeli stranglehold over Palestinians.

As an historian of the Arab world, I have felt increasingly uneasy about business-as-usual with Israeli universities. I witnessed first hand the effects of the Israeli devastation of south Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut in summer

2006, which drove home what was at stake. I am bound to ask, therefore, where complicity begins. Is it acceptable to give papers on the Egyptian guilds, or to debate the fine points of Syrian migration in Lebanon (these are my research topics), while my Palestinian academic colleagues suffer infrastructural degradation, closure, checkpoints, wall-building, border controls, detention, injury and even death? Is it legitimate to act as if nothing peculiar is happening when no Israeli academic institution has ever taken a public stand against the military occupation of East Jerusalem, West Bank and Gaza, now in its fortieth year? Is it defensible to pretend that everything is normal when the Israeli academy provides intellectual, linguistic, logistical, technical, scientific and human support for the apparatus of military and settler domination in the Occupied Palestinian Territories? What is the proper reaction where an institution like the University of Haifa withdraws the award of an MA from a student (Teddy Katz) who questions official Zionist narratives, harrasses faculty (Ilan Pappé) who do the same, or congratulates its reservists when they return from serving in the army of occupation?

Many of the standard objections to the boycott are unpersuasive. Some claim that Palestinians themselves are against the boycott. In fact, the Palestinian Federation of Unions of University Professors and Employees (PFUUE) and many other organizations and individuals, including Hanan Ashrawi, have endorsed the call for boycott in general, and the specific motion passed by the UCU in particular.

Others, withdrawing from real debate, resort to calling would-be boycotters anti-Semitic. In fact, the movement for boycott, divestment and sanctions includes Jews and non-Jews, stands against racist prejudice of all kinds, and refuses

the determinist and anti-Semitic notion that all Jews by nature must be linked to Zionism and its atrocities. The movement's charge is simple. Israel is a state based on discrimination. Israel privileges Zionist-Jews, and subordinates and dispossesses Palestinian-Arabs. The latest phase of this discrimination has been compared by many – former US President Jimmy Carter and Archbishop Desmond among them – to the South African system of apartheid.

Others speciously maintain that one cannot 'single out' Israel. Whether or not there are many other expansionist and apartheid states quite like Israel, it remains the case the Israel has singled itself out for a boycott. Of course there are other violators of international law. There is no reason to exclude other boycotts a priori. As Nelson Mandela wrote long ago, the use of the boycott is a tactic, not a principle, and the case for each must be made on its merits. None of this weakens the case for a nonviolent, international movement regarding Israel. To say it does is special pleading. Noone opposed the boycott of South Africa because of atrocities in Chile. By the same token, in the present day, it does not make sense to oppose taking action on Israeli because of the crimes of other states.

More challenging is the argument that the boycott is counter-productive because dialogue and scientific collaboration are more effective than a divisive boycott. Yet, the example of South Africa tells otherwise. The international boycott movement had a tremendous impact in breaking down apartheid by raising consciousness and disrupting international business as usual. Crucially, Israel now, like South Africa then, considers itself part of, and has multiple ties to the West. This means that unlike in Iran, say, the boycott cannot plausibly be viewed simply as Western imperial-

ism. When Western civil society says enough is enough, Israelis, not to mention Western governments, will take notice.

Finally, academics and others need to be convinced that the boycott stands behind cherished norms of academic freedom. In my view, if one refuses to privilege Israeli academics over their Palestinian counterparts, then it is clear that the situation at present and for decades past has involved the radical denial of academic freedom to one group (Palestinian-Arabs) as a result of the actions and activities of the other (Zionist-Jews).

A more detailed argument for the boycott can be read at:

http://www.7station.cn/nakedpunch/comments_detail.asp?ArtistID=22

The point of the boycott is to end this vicious discrimination and the structural violation of academic freedom involved. While there is no denying that the boycott means some institutional disruption to Israeli academics and their counterparts overseas, such disruption must be weighed against the fundamental injustice of apartheid. More importantly, the boycott will encourage and give protection to Israeli academics critical of academic complicity and occupation, and stands in full solidarity with the long-denied academic freedom of Palestinians. ✱



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AESTHETICS AS FIRST PHILOSOPHY: Levinas and the Non-Human

by Graham Harman
American University in Cairo

Emmanuel Levinas is usually seen as an ethical and religious philosopher. This reading is understandable to the point of seeming obvious, and certainly matches the philosopher's own self-interpretation. But on closer scrutiny, the narrowly ethical reception of his thought seems to be one-sided. For Levinas pushes beyond the oppressive totality of beings not just through ethics, but in three distinct ways.

The infinity of the Other is merely one means by which Levinas opposes totality. Here we find the sum of his ethical and religious teachings (which are neither surprising nor very detailed), and here too that the energy of his readers is focused. But in a second gesture, the system of objects is undercut from beneath no less than from above, through the notion of enjoyment. This gives us direct access to the contours of things, ignorant of any dark infinity lying beyond them; we do not just use hammers and chisels in self-ish power games, but bask in the murmuring qualities that radiate from them. But finally, in a third step ignored by everyone but Alphonso Lingis¹, Levinas glimpses anew the key role of individual substance. Specific rocks, chairs, trees, and oceans are not infinitely other, since each is quite determinate as to what it can and cannot do. Yet by the same token, concrete things are also not just incoherent wind and sound, as Levinas wrongly suggests in his musings on the elemental. What best resists the sleek power struggle of totality is the identity of individual things. The world is filled with concrete realities never fully grasped by any handling, bathing, or biting.

We should endorse the Levinasian complaint against any war of beings massed together in a seamless whole. Yet this grim totality should be replaced, not by a one-sided theory of gods and orphans drawing us beyond the world, nor even by drifting elemental mists, but rather by a global carnival of specific entities that partly hide from each other even while engaging in trials of strength. But this means that *ethics cannot be first philosophy*. All things reside in infinite depths, and all things erupt into enjoyment along the shallowest façades of the world. Both moments, in turn, derive from the life of discrete substances that never fully submit to the war of all against all. And this drama is best described by the familiar term "aesthetics." *Aesthetics is first philosophy*. This phrase is meant not just as an improved reading of Levinas,

1. See Lingis's buried treasure "A Phenomenology of Substances." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (1998).

but as a research program for contemporary philosophy as a whole. Such an aesthetic approach to Levinas is easily convincing if tested on his early phenomenological works: *Existence and Existents*, *Time and the*

2. "Bread, Tobacco, and Silk: Levinas on Individual Substance." Lecture delivered in Sofia, Bulgaria on October 27, 2006. Publication pending.

Other, and especially "Reality and Its Shadow." It is more interesting to try it with his two major systematic books, where it is less immediately obvious. Since I have done this elsewhere for *Totality and Infinity*,² the following pages will focus on *Otherwise Than Being*.

1. TOTALITY AND ITS BREAKDOWN

Every philosophy has a strategic enemy, a rival vision of reality that it constantly seeks to strike down or reverse. It need not find this rival among actual past doctrines, and may even be responsible for giving it a name. The depth of a philosophy can be judged by the importance of its enemy, just as the researcher fighting polio is esteemed more highly than the sadist crushing beetles on the pavement. Levinas chooses an important enemy whose most frequent name is "totality," but sometimes also "system" or "war." The title *Totality and Infinity* shows the importance of this foe for his first great work, but *Otherwise than Being* can be read as a rephrasing of the same words. For Levinas, being is a system, a totality that nothing could possibly escape. War is his code name for a philosophy of relations in which each thing gains reality only through mutual interplay or struggle with the others. The problem lies not with "war" in the limited sense of military operations, since even "peace" is guilty of totality: "rational peace.... is calculation, mediation, and politics. The struggle of each against all becomes.... reciprocal limitation and determination,

3. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 2004.)

like that of matter."³ The point is worth making, since this vision of holistic interactions in a reciprocal web, this interweaving of texts and contexts, this blurring of boundaries between one thing and another, has held the moral high ground in

philosophy for too long. It is generally viewed as more open, diverse, tolerant, and pacific than the supposedly "reactionary" model of independent things. With Levinas, I hold the contrary view. The political reflexes associated with terms such as essence ("bad") and reciprocal interplay ("good") must be recalibrated, and the long relational fiesta of the philosophy of texts must be called to a close. There is no greater Imperialism than the philosophy of mutually determining things, stripped of all retreat from the system of the world.

If Levinasian ethics is discussed in isolation from the global system of beings that it was designed to counter, its philosophical precision is lost. It becomes an abstract piety— a vague appeal to known historical disasters. Ethics is important in daily life for many reasons, but in Levinasian metaphysics its importance stems from its break with the totality of beings in reciprocal determination. What is otherwise than being delivers the human subject "more passively than any passivity from links in a causal chain."⁴ To

4. *ibid.*, p. 79.

5. *ibid.*, p. 182.

6. *ibid.*, p. xlviii.

go beyond being means to go beyond relationality altogether. One name Levinas gives to this beyond is "the Good," a mainstay of metaphysics since Plato. The Good must lie beyond any possible configuration of being and beings. It is not "some new, unheard-of quiddity,"⁵ but is entirely "uncontaminated by being."⁶

It is tempting to endorse this view that something must lie beyond the links of a causal chain. Yet we should reject Levinas's tendency to convert the beyond into a formless monolith of Goodness. His assertion that the Good has no quiddity (i.e., no specific essence) is one alarming sign of this tendency. It becomes explicit when he seems to identify the Good with the One of Plotinus— which lies beyond all specific beings, and even beyond being itself.⁷ Even worse, Levinas identifies the Good with infinity.⁸ And for Levinas, unlike for Georg Cantor, infinity is always *one* infinite. Here we find the central difficulty of Levinasian metaphysics, since he subverts the global system by way of an unjustified alternative. His Good is not just beyond being, but is also infinite, unified, and beyond all quiddity. I hold that Levinas is right to take reciprocal determination as his enemy, but wrong to assume that finitude, multiplicity, and essence must always belong to the warlike duel of the world. The alternative is to say that the world is packed with individual substances that are limited, plural, have an inner core that endures despite changes on the surface, but also that substances withdraw from the "war" of mutual contact. Withdrawn in this way, they still manage to confront each other through *proximity*, an ingenious Levinasian concept that he wrongly confines to human experience alone. More will be said of proximity below.

Additional problems plague Levinas's account of the surface of the world. His theory of elemental enjoyment is designed as a strike against Heidegger's tool-analysis. In the tool-system, one object is plugged into another, and that one plugged into yet another; individual beings vanish in favor of the end they serve, which is ultimately Dasein's potentiality for being. This model is clearly one-sided, as Heidegger himself partly recognized, since the world is always riddled with local finalities. We do not encounter the world as a system, but are always surrounded by countless specific things. Enjoyment is "irreducible to a taking in one's hands, for it is already an absorption...,"⁹ not in the sense of being devoured, but in the sense of being fascinated.

It is a "respiration" prior to any intentional relation.¹⁰ The sensible realm amounts to an "exposure to wounding and to enjoyment." It is the "nonsense" preceding all sense, the babbling of waters and hissing of vapors as they trickle over the stable ideal objects that Husserl finds inhabiting our various perceptions.¹¹ In enjoyment, our experience has no ulterior meaning beyond what we encounter; enjoyment is entirely non-signifying, and this forces Levinas to break with Heidegger. He says that for his great German forerunner, "being's appearing cannot be separated from a certain conjunction of elements in a structure, a lining up of structures in which being carries on..."¹² By contrast, Levinas calls for "the assembling of *nonsignifying* elements into a structure" that would involve "chances or delays."¹³

Just as Levinas exaggerates the infinite Other into a single rumbling mass of Goodness, he exaggerates the realm of enjoyment into a flickering chaos of nonsense. For it is not true that enjoyment is purely non-signifying. When eating an apple or stroking a kitten, we bask in a murmuring surface that exceeds all meaning. Yet meaning cannot be absent, or all forms of enjoyment would be alike; all would be shapeless elemental wind. But the piercing tartness of the apple has a definite structure, as does the tactile pleasure of the animal's fur. In short, Levinas pays too high a price for his assault on the global system of beings. His ethical doctrine counters the mutual presence of things with inaccessible goodness,

but at the price of turning the Good into a One. His theory of the senses opposes the way that references devour singularities and render them invisible, but at the price of stripping the elemental realm of all definite structure. But such costs are unnecessary. We can liberate things from full reciprocal presence while preserving a plurality of concealed beings *and* a sensual realm filled with distinct individuals. The root of Levinasian philosophy is individual substance, rather than a unified Good or shapeless ghostly mists. A substance is that which *withdraws* from all relation with its neighbors, even while emitting surfaces that somehow refer to the depths from which they emanate. We never fully encounter the Other, but also never pure surface. Instead, we find ourselves in a state of sincerity.

The word "sincerity" is generally loathed by the Derridean generation of Levinas commentators, who find this word offensive to their endless restaging of the death of God and morals. Yet sincerity is the most important concept that Levinas ever forged, since it refers to the finalities that obstruct any supposed system from the start. Indeed, sincerity is nothing less than his name for any reality at all: everything is what it is, and does not pass elsewhere by means of relations; each point of reality stands in itself, candidly being just what it is. This is true for all three moments of his philosophy: ethics, the elemental, and substance. In confronting other humans, I do not reduce them to a use-value, but take them seriously. This is the ethical version of sincerity: "The neighbor excludes himself from the thought that seeks him.... The obligation aroused by the proximity of the neighbor is not to the measure of the images he gives me..."¹⁴

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 89.

We look beyond the favors and injuries done by the man now drowning before us, and make efforts to save him. Our life is sincerely absorbed in this obligation. But we are equally sincere when sensual enjoyment is considered. That is the very meaning of enjoyment: a surface never eaten up or siphoned away by the ulterior functions of what it confronts. "To bite on the bread is the very meaning of

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 73

tasting.... There is an enjoying of enjoyment before any reflection..."¹⁵ And finally, sincerity is also the proper title for the reality of substances. Nails, screwdrivers, cages, and drums are not merely devices enslaved to a wider system of tools; each reposes in itself, busy being itself and not just passing into relation with the others. In this third shape, sincerity is the Levinasian version of the classical principle of identity. A thing simply is what it is. The current fashion in philosophy is to scorn identity as a fossil and regard all things as "differing from themselves," but this view requires that we privilege the war of beings in reciprocal interaction, which is precisely what Levinas opposes. A more technical name for sincerity is *illeity*, which "indicates *a way of concerning me without entering into conjunction with me*..."¹⁶ This is what sincerity means: to be different from something even while taking it seriously. It is to touch a thing without fusing into it.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 12. Emphasis added.

2. THE SINCERITY OF LANGUAGE

This sincerity, this proximity without fusion, is the central insight of Levinas's career. He soon brings it into the sphere of language. Recent philosophy has been excessively dominated by the theme of the linguistic turn— not just with analytic philosophers, but among the heirs of phenomenology as well. The trend is regrettable for two reasons. First, there is often an anti-realist prejudice connected with the philosophy of

language. Rather than direct discussion of the world in itself, we are asked to retreat into an investigation of language as the condition of access to the world. With this robotic post-Kantian gesture, metaphysics gives way to the theory of knowledge, though in new linguistic form. Levinas remedies this frequent defect of the philosophy of language, holding that language points beyond whatever surface of the world may be directly accessible to us, toward something real that exceeds language itself. And second, even if we accept that language has a special power to point beyond the world of visible surfaces (as Levinas does), this still seems to be a power belonging to humans alone. Even a staunchly pro-animal Levinasian—if such a person exists— might argue that dolphins and snakes have means of communication, but would still be unwilling to extend this ability to trees or grains of sand. In this sense, language remains a localized power belonging to humans, or at most to sentient creatures more generally.

The most famous Levinasian point about language is his distinction between "the said" and "the saying," both of which occur together at all times. Whereas the said is a literal message inscribed in plain view, the saying points beyond this literal surface; it retracts what is said at the same moment as affirming it. Although "saying states and thematizes the said," it "signifies it to the other... with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the said. This signification to the other occurs in proximity. *Proximity is quite distinct from every other relationship...*"¹⁷ Proximity is another name for sincerity or illeity. Whereas the literal use of language (i.e., the said) immediately draws our attention to the presence of what it designates, the saying brings us into sincere relationship with what lies beyond the surface of the world. But it should be noted that even our relation to the said must also display a kind of sincerity. For even if I were purely occupied with the most superficial literality of a poem, devoid of deeper resonance, I would in fact be occupied with this surface rather than with motorcycles or the waning moon. My life would consist in taking the said seriously. Sincerity is everywhere: in surface, in depth, and in the substance that straddles them both.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 46. Emphasis added.

3. THE FISSION OF THE PSYCHE

We have seen that sincerity takes three forms. Both our ethical relation to the Other and our enjoyment of bread or wind sincerely absorb our attention, providing a terminus for our lives. We do not fuse together with the world as a whole in a blinding flash, but rest wherever we stand, remaining content with what lies before us. What unifies the moments of infinite depth and elemental surface are individual substances, and with these too I am sincerely engaged— bewitched by the hidden power in the forest, or the soul of the beloved beneath her numerous masks. Yet for Levinas, sincerity belongs solely to what we know as human consciousness. As he puts it, "the subject is.... too tight for its skin. Cutting across every relation, it is an individual unlike an entity that can be designated as *tode ti*..."¹⁸ In other words, individual things with their essences remain trapped in the system of relations and quiddities, and humans alone are able to outstrip this system. "The ego is an *incomparable* unicity.... The history of philosophy, during some flashes, has known this subjectivity that.... breaks with essence..."¹⁹

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 8. Emphasis added.

Like every phenomenologist, Levinas wavers between an assertion of subjec-

tivity and a denial that humans are all-important. He spins the two sides of the vinyl as craftily as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. As Levinas puts it, with the forked tongue of his school, "the implication of the subject in signification.... is equivalent *neither* to the shifting of signification over to the objective side....

^{20.} *ibid.*, p. 131. Emphasis added. *nor* to its reduction to a subjective lived experience."²⁰ In one sense, "the *appearing* of being belongs to its very movement of being, [and] its phenomenality is essential, and.... being cannot do without consciousness, to which manifestation is made." Yet in a contrary sense, "objectivity... somehow protects the unfolding of being against the projection of subjective phantasms.... Objectivity

^{21.} *Ibid.* concerns the being of entities that bears it; it signifies the indifference of what appears to its own appearing."²¹ He adds that "anthropology cannot lay claim to the role of a scientific or privileged philosophical discipline, with the pretext.... that the whole of the thinkable passes through human consciousness."²² This double game of subjectivity and objectivity is the false

sophistication of present-day philosophy. Recently, Quentin Meillassoux has pinned it down with the marvelous name "correlationism," a pejorative term deserving of widespread use.²³

^{23.} Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*. (Paris: Seuil, 2006.)

For correlationists, it makes no sense to think of the world apart from humans, nor humans apart from the world, but only of their mutually dependent interplay. In an obvious sense, Levinas upholds the dogmatic correlationism found throughout phenomenology. But correlation is, after all, a kind of *relation* or mutual dependence. In this respect, it runs counter to Levinas's own aspiration to discuss reality apart from the relations that mark the war of the world. We can ignore this problem for now. The important thing is to focus on sincerity, which confronts the world without fusing into it.

Along with sincerity and illeity, *proximity* is a key term for contact without fusion. Proximity "forgets reciprocity, as in a love that does not expect to be shared."²⁴ Hence, proximity is

^{24.} Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 82.

not just contact without fusion, but an *asymmetrical* contact. My fascination with the other does not entail the other's fascination with me; if this does happen, it should be thought of as a separate but parallel sincerity. Nor does proximity merely touch a surface: "an approach is not a representation, no matter how detheoretized its intentionality would be..."²⁵ But

^{25.} *ibid.*, p. 97.

this theory of proximity pertains not just to human perception. Instead, it brushes up against one of the forgotten central problems of modern philosophy: communication. In a world where things are more than any access we might have to them, the question arises of how we gain access without it being *direct* access. This evokes the traditional problem of occasionalist philosophy, to which Levinas is elsewhere sympathetic (namely, in his theory of time as an escape from hypostasis). For occasionalism, no two substances touch directly, but must interact through God. Despite the overwhelming presence of God in Levinas's philosophy, communication is not the task of his deity. Instead, Levinas finds that *proximity* is the site of communication. It is a kind of pre-contact or pre-relation from which all relation must emerge. The problem of communication is clearly visible in Levinas. Echoing an older German forerunner, Levinas asks: "Can openness have another sense than that of the accessibility of entities through open doors or windows?"²⁶

^{26.} *ibid.*, pp. 178-179. Sincerity, illeity, proximity is designed to enable communication without doors or windows: communication without full contact. And for Levinas this communication is always asymmetrical, since the things are proximate to me without my being proximate to them.

Levinas uses the term "fission" for this asymmetrical communication, in which I am sincerely fasci-



From the series "Views and visions of Bogota",
Cristina Figueroa

nated by the other without the reverse being true. Consciousness splits from itself in such a way that we ought to speak of a "nuclear metaphysics." The passivity of the saying, in which the other is there but not *fully* there, "is a fission of the nucleus opening the bottom of its punctual nuclearity... The nucleus does not open this depth as long as it remains protected by its solid crust, by a form..." If the nucleus of the world is the intentional relation between me and the phenomena, this nucleus is not a hermetically sealed vacuum, since it is penetrated by rays from elsewhere. This "inspiration," this "fission of the mysterious nucleus of inwardness of the subject,"²⁷ entails that the intentional relation has two sepa-

^{27.} *Ibid.*, p. 141.

rate elements. I do not fuse with the things I see, but exist side by side with them in the nuclear core of intentionality, sincerely absorbed with them even though they do not return the favor. I am contiguous or adjacent to the phenomena. This "adjacency in proximity is an absolute exte-

^{28.} *ibid.*, p. 100.

riority,"²⁸ but not "the indifference of spatial contiguity."²⁹ In sincerity, we have something that is neither fusion nor side-by-side indifference. It is proximity. And only proximity gives us hope of communication between one portion of the world and another, since only proximity lets the things be themselves while also transmitting messages to one another from afar. Without it, "no language, as a transmission of messages, would be possible."³⁰

^{30.} *ibid.*, p. 16.

Communication, for Levinas, is responsibility, and "responsibility... goes one way, from me to the

other. In the saying of responsibility, which is an exposure to an obligation for which no one could re-
31. *ibid.*, pp. 138-139. place me, I am unique."³¹ This leads to the key notion of "substitution," which Levinas claims is the motivating concept of the entire book. In being open to the other in my own unique and irreplaceable way, I somehow "substitute" myself for what is other by taking responsibility for it. For
32. *ibid.*, p. 115. Levinas, this is the very basis of subjectivity: "through substitution for the others, the oneself escapes relations."³² Unfortunately, he always wishes to grant responsibility, proximity, illeity, or sincerity to human subjects alone. When he speaks of "the self," he seems to have in mind a narrowly
33. *ibid.*, p. 139. human kind of self: "I, said in the first person— I, unique in my genus."³³ And this apparent focus on the human self opens the door to Levinas's impossible glorification of ethics as first philosophy: "...it is necessary to ask if... there is not heard a voice coming from horizons at least as vast
34. *ibid.*, p. 140. as those in which ontology is situated."³⁴ This vaster horizon is supposedly ethics, and since one has never demanded "ethics" even of monkeys and dogs, let alone rocks and trees, we remain stranded in the parochial human kingdom. What Levinas has demonstrated is the importance of a proximate contact without fusion. But what he merely assumes is that humans alone are able to spy into the distance, while inanimate matter, and perhaps even animals, are but blind links in a warlike causal chain. For Levinas, rocks and animals belong only to the totality of being. The infinity of the "otherwise" is found only in humans, and even then only in their ethical and linguistic dealings.

In this predicament, it is our own responsibility to save diamonds and reptiles for philosophy, since Levinas has no interest in helping us. Ethics cannot be first philosophy, since ethics unjustly divides the world between full-fledged humans and robotic causal pawns, in a manner little different from Descartes. First philosophy needs a more general theory of individual substances and their sincere proximity to one another, for only in proximity does communication occur. This must be true for all forms of communication, including the inanimate kind. The gears in a machine do not fully dissolve into one another any more than humans fully dissolve into an army. If one gear affects another, this can occur only through form of sincerity or proximity. The fission of substance that Levinas regards as a uniquely human phenomenon is a general characteristic of reality as a whole. Thus first philosophy is to be found, not in ethics, but in a general theory of substance and causation. I will now propose that "aesthetics" is a better name for such a discipline than "ethics" could ever be.

4. AESTHETICS

Heidegger used the term "world" for the system of mutually referring entities. In this sense, the whole of *Otherwise than Being* is an attempt to escape the world, to allow for extrawordly communication between different segments of reality. For Levinas, another escape route besides ethics is art: "every work of art
35. *ibid.*, p. 41. is.... exotic, without a world..."³⁵ Yet there is a problem here. Works of art appear in our lives only from time to time. If art is a kind of proximity, a fission of the human subject, it is still only an intermittent kind. The explicit use of language is a more frequent sort of fission than art, and sincerity itself is such a common form that we ought to call it constant. We are sincere merely by existing, but it

would be sheer affectation to say that we are artists merely by existing. This same ambiguity is found in the term "sincerity" itself. In one respect, sincerity refers to any consciousness whatsoever, and in this sense it is found even in cynical technocrats or "critical" academics who enslave us for villainous ends. But there is another sense of the term "sincere," used only as an infrequent compliment for what is charming or adorable. In other words, philosophy must recognize two distinct forms of sincerity, proximity, illeity, or fission: one of them constant, the other intermittent.

Levinas works explicitly within the idiom of phenomenology, as established by Husserl and developed by Heidegger. Husserl's initial gesture is to bracket the real existence of the world and focus solely on how it appears to consciousness. The convoluted defenses claiming that Husserl is not an idealist simply amount to tacit forms of Meillassoux's "correlationism." Though insisting that human and world always come as a pair may save Husserl from the absolute idealism of Berkeley, it grants no independent reality to the things in the absence of every human witness. Yet Husserl's view that philosophy must focus only on phenomena does not confine him to sense data: his greatest contribution to philosophy is his notion of *intentional objects*, despite his bracketing of real objects from view. Against empiricism, we do not perceive splotches of green and triangular shapes, but *trees*; we do not hear sound waves or even a series of isolated tones, but *songs*. What is first given to us are not sense data, but intentional objects. Yet naturally such objects never appear as pure essences, but only in highly specific incarnations. As I circle the tree, or simply wait for its appearance to change in the fading dusk, I see new versions of one and the same tree. The intentional object "tree" remains the same for me amidst all these changes, for as long as I continue to recognize it as the same thing. But we always sense that the intentional tree is more than its appearance in any given moment— some deeper unifying principle to which the entire series of appearances is subordinate. In this respect, there is always a kind of fission between the surface qualities of the tree and its unified ideal depth.

But this type of fission is relatively weak. For the most part, we identify the tree with its various qualities, even if we notice these qualities changing slightly from moment to moment and from different angles of observation. This is because the tree seems fully present in my mind. It does not seem withdrawn or absent in any way, since I have already recognized it as present just by taking it seriously. The various "adumbrations" of the tree are not perceived as if they covered some infinite depth of absence, but are more like an encrustation of gratuitous data on something that is fully present. The fission of everyday perception is a feeble sort of rift, noticed only through the painstaking work of description. This is the usual state of things in our lives. But matters are different if we consider a deeper sort of fission. In this enhanced type of split, we become openly aware that the thing to which we refer resides in absent depths, and is not directly present before us. If our perception of a tree brings the tree directly before us, there are other cases in which our sincerity does no more than *allude* to a tree that is more than what our minds can directly present. There are numerous ways for such *allusion* or *allure* to take place, even in the humble case of the tree. Following Heidegger, we can cite poetic language as one such instance. Consider the following lines of a possible poem by Georg Trakl that Trakl never wrote:

The ruined city devours an ebbing guitar.
The monk-girl mourns a tree.

The sister, or a wolf,
 silences the poppy.

Uproar:
 Oh man!³⁶

36. Emphasis added. (These lines are of my own invention.)

Now, if we witnessed an actual monk-girl in mourning before an actual tree, it is quite possible (though unlikely) that we would have no aesthetic experience at all. We might remain in the standpoint of a Husserlian analyst, circling the girl and the tree and describing their various adumbrations so as to reach an intuition of the ideal essence of both entities. But when reading the poem, unless we are highly prosaic or distracted readers, something more will happen. The word "tree" in the fourth line will bring about what Heidegger terms a "calling" or "summoning" of the tree. It comes to presence in our minds as some sort of hazy image, even while suggesting or hinting into shadowy depths that exceed our intentional relation with it. In this case, there is a more ominous and explicit sort of fission than the one described above. There is an *allusion* to the tree, not a presence of it as a Husserlian

37. The theory of allure is sketched in my book *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005) and in the article "On Vicarious Causation" in the journal *Collapse* (Oxford: Urbanomic, Volume II, 2007.)

ideal principle of unity for a series of appearances. The tree becomes alluring.³⁷ If our perception in each moment is termed by Levinas a "nucleus," what we have in cases of allure is a rare penetration of the nucleus by forces from beyond, even though these forces merely take the form of allusions.

As Levinas teaches us, the real problem of metaphysics is not how beings interact in a system: instead, the problem is how they withdraw from that system as independent realities while somehow communicating through the proximity, the touching without touching, that has been termed allusion or allure. If we identify this event with "aesthetics" in the broadest sense of the term, it becomes clear why first philosophy is aesthetics, not ethics. The ethical relation to other humans is merely a special case of substances communicating without touching. Aesthetics is first philosophy, because the key problem of metaphysics has turned out to be as follows: how do individual substances interact in their proximity to one another? Yet aesthetics is generally regarded as belonging solely to humans, or at most to certain favored animals such as beautiful songbirds and mournful humpback whales. If we follow Levinas, inanimate objects would be excluded from the kingdom of allure, with rocks and milkweed merely used up as links in a blind causal chain. But this is impossible. If it is true that other humans signal to me without being fully present, and equally true that I never exhaust the depths of non-sentient beings such as apples and sandpaper, this is not some special pathos of human finitude. Instead, I do not grasp things in their depths because *communication is not a matter of depth*. Communication occurs only through proximity, not through nonexistent doors or windows. When avalanches slam into abandoned cars, or snowflakes rustle the needles of the quivering pine, even these objects cannot touch the full reality of one another. Yet they affect one another nonetheless. The only way for this to happen is for one object to *allude* to the reality of the other even while brushing against its surface. Allure is not just a theory of art, but a theory of causal relations in general. Levinas is the accidental mentor of a new metaphysics of causation. ✱

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you see with words,
my eyes refuse the office;

nothing has happened,
a few fathomed lies, yes,
but that's natural as murder;

but nothing special
at least nothing you can
name save for fractions
of minute disintegrations;

like grains of sand
we fall through the waist
of an hourglass,
not without reward;

nothing happening
as we slip by and on,
forgetting, forgotten,
the noise suddenly switched off;

something is still there
like an empty road at dusk,
the comfort of a soul dipped
in hibernation, a flash of eternity;

these blind words.

COMMENT DIRE?

How to say it — once said
impossible to erase
therefore not remembered
recalled though again
and again as weapon or hook
to tear out the heart
or a whispered lisp
of love light as morning mist
thrown carelessly over the lawn
like a chiffon scarf
but not by God
not by me or witnesses
not by anyone
not called
how to say it
from the beginning
il suo principio
without iteration
irritating repetition
the only thing worth
repeating is a heartbeat
we depend on it to weigh
the anguish we hold
dear together — better not to.....

NOSTALGIA OF LOSS

He wanted to see again that abstract of light and flow that were the kissed
Trees — orange, lemon, guava, banana, yellow and neon green - in his parents' garden,
When dream and desire merged and discovered
a diaspora of gods;

It was a vision he saw naturally as a boy, but he was still getting used to
The stratagems of middle age which mouth morality, faking nature;
Until he did that, he could not return to the slender numen which had once
Contradicted him with astonishment, a secret life drawn from time
into dance.



SAPHIR

forget about love,
 loving;

 watch instead,
 discard stereotypes that
 fix rates of sense;

 even stones play,
 they are worth watching,
 even shuttered windows dance
 in stillness
 blistered by seasalt,
 swallows
 draw a wild calligraphy
 over their closed eyes;

 attend to the outside,
 a song in part, in part
 a confession of things
 that reserve the right
 to stand alone,
 like a drop of light
 on a wall only you see,
 as sharp as a star, as distant,
 a secret point of pleasure,
 an illumination
 where longing is sited
 like a ship
 emerging from the mist,
 a veil that melts
 from your soul;

 climb the steps,
 open the windows,
 undress the moment,
 live inside it;

 here things emerge
 slowly
 naked,
 wordless.

TEDDY

A parenthetical message during a work phone call:
 You died this morning, I am told with proper solemnity;
 Diluted bereavement dampens the December air,
 Winter has come to stay permanently turning you to stone.
 So what do I feel? It's about assessment, not yours
 But mine — the multiple illusions only I must learn
 To observe without excuses, standing apart remembering
 Our encounters in sly flashes bruised with an excess of guilt.
 No, not bruised, but divided by this dark partition in our natures;
 I failed to preserve the nurture I owed you, being selfish,
 Impatient, fastidiously bound to each moment's fictions
 As its only child; I am appetite and cupidity, a December
 Man in my December time incapable of love, not made
 For the virtue your presence demanded, so you died
 Alone with a panel of paid help to confess you over.
 Three score and ten, and a little more, a plasma of frustration
 Taking with you a portable four-year-old mind of loss.
 This truth, even when observed, is too strong to sup on.



TO ADAM

You are not a copy
Thank God,
Though some salient features
Pass through as an autocracy
Of ancestral clichés -
Framed mind and character;
You tend to
Well, there is that obsessive
Engagement, the scourge
To compete — with yourself
(I was never as harsh to you);
Narrow but deepening,
Your knowledge,
A forked contemplation
Rich as raisins,
A rare acquisition, I dare say;
But loosen up a little,
Do not assiduously step into
The grammarian's stagnant puddle;
The day is short
As the Dhamapada;
It's up to you to choose
To make it telling with
Your own words for the life
That passes and stalls in you.
But what do I know!
I have yet to learn
To avoid wanting too.

Cecilia Vicuña

ON CLOUD-NET

In 1999 I was asked to create a travelling installation that would change from place to place, and yet, always be the same. I meditated and saw the image of a cloud basket protecting the Earth from our violence, the heat we create which is warming the atmosphere. A few minutes later I found myself reading "Savitri", the long poem by Sri Aurobindo, where I found these lines:

*"We who are vessels of a deathless force
messengers of the incommunicable
one day shall change the suffering earth
Delight shall sleep in the cloud-net of her hair
And in her body a music of griefless things shall weave"*

I knew then that would be the work: a cloud-net. I went out my door and wove a cloud in the street. "The model for coolness and moderation" as the Guarani from the rainforest say.

I went for a walk and found on the sidewalk the book on The Maya Scribe by Michael D. Coe, where Pawahtun, the god of scripture wears a head net!

A few days later, I invited a group of friends to join me in an unannounced performance. We wove a large net with our bodies as the loom. Skaters and bikers rode under it or above it, becoming for an instant, the images of a living loom.

In the video of the event, the poem, set against the towers said: "We will all go away unless a new net worth is born." The unsaid words completing the phrase were: the worth of the entire net of life."

The installation travelled to Hallwals in Buffalo, Art in General in New York, and Diverseworks in Houston, Texas.

Cecilia Vicuña

HEAD NET

The unborn
net

is humid
hem

unravelling
sack

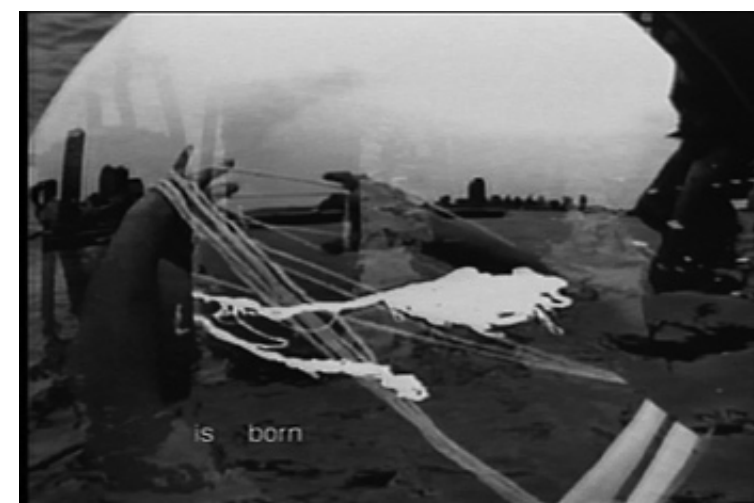
ink
in a shell

the thinking of thought

tenacious
wrap

the fall and re
turn

nectar
co
mmencing



Stills from
The Cloud-net,
written and
directed by
Cecilia Vicuña,
photographed
by Francesco
Cincotta

the net is play	cloud and head	the girl weaving
an old snail	the future passing	master of scribes
drool draggin	old Pawahtun	a first stroke
the ancient forming	the hand remembers	writing & painting
one con tinuity	blood burning	the sign fades
a form of speaking	the cloud ascends	the street a she-grid
the old go forward	the god's head	to market on bike

AH TS'IB

The book is knot	monkey gods rabbit gods fox and maize
and the artist its'at	Painting themselves paintbrush in hand
To write and paint	was an 'attribute of the gods'
One act	Heady flower
One immolation	Lighthouse lily
One cooling	Gushing she-cricket
Return to the gullet	'Flower and paint- brush'
The interior mountain ts'ib	knot they are knot they carry knotty head of hair bad-knot, knot thug
They painted themselves painting	

DHEU

do clouds have a root?

you said

dheu

at the base

'to rise in a cloud'
as dust, vapor, smoke

'all notions of breath
defective perception or wits'

in Latin *fumus*

in Greek *thumus*

'soul & spirit'

the breath
of the earth

its pain

a strong smell

*ahora el único lazo que nos une
es ésta tenue nube*

dice el maori.

h
a
n
g
i
n
g

by a thread

the
web

says: www

we will weave

una puerta llorosa
y piedras en los pies

a weeping door
and stones on your feet

web up
web on

re a lida des
a linea das

weaving clouds

against death

THE DECIPHERMENT

"The masculine ah
in the head of the God C,
and the syllabic sign na/house
K'u, called 'the sacred'
were read ah k'u
'of the sacred house'

a knot
in the na

said hu-n (a)"

the book
is the knot

and the scribe
ah k'u hun

"of the sacred book"

knot book
sexless

the ah
neither a he
nor a she

scribes
equal
in the knotting

SWEATSHOP

Sweat
is the scripture

going up
in smoke

oscuras plegarias
tejiendo en sudor

lengua del canso
escribe tu olor

the cloud
is sweat

nubes
a rás

la fuerza
enterrada

juntando
vapor

ghostly speech
criss crossing the street

D O S S

I E R :

L A T I N

A M E R I

C A N

A R T

Curated by Sylvia Ospina
and Oscar Guardiola-Rivera

With text by
Jaime Cerón
Oscar Guardiola-Rivera
Nadim Julien Samman
Pilar Cervantes

TRANSLATING HEGEMONY: ART PRACTICES IN LATIN AMERICA

Translating Hegemony: Art Practices in Latin America

By Jaime Cerón



Doris Salcedo
Noviembre 6, 2001
Stainless steel, lead, wood and resin
Daros-Latinamerica Collection, Zürich

One of the texts included in the programme of the IXth International Biennale, Sydney, 1992, was Charles Merewether's 'Inventing Mythologies: The Art of Bricolage'. Using Lévi-Strauss, Merewether confronted contemporary Latin American art in order to identify the many ways in which it deconstructed the signs of identity imposed by transnational discourses of colonialism and nationalism through the use of techniques and formal strategies such as readymade, montage and installation.

According to Merewether, during the 1970's and 80's many artists in Latin America experimented with the idea of inverting or subverting the effects of transnational culture –incapable of representing the experience and uniqueness of the peoples and communities that lived in the area- by means of a focused analysis of the materiality of their own systems and procedures of production. He emphasized that the use of installation, photography, communication technologies and on site works were based upon a bricolage of materials, objects and images that 'become the means for the opening of a space within which one can identify different histories and local positions'. Although Merewether focused upon a wide number of artists, he concentrated his analysis particularly on the work of Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles given his capacity to generate critical and significant interventions.

Photo credit: Stephen White, London - Courtesy White Cube, London

Miguel Ángel Rojas
Nowadays, 2001
 Round coca leaf cutouts on Guarro paper
 Daros-Latinamerica Collection, Zürich



The theses that support Merewether's critique can be re-appropriated in order to analyse the work of other Latin American artists who tried similar strategies in the last three decades of the XXth century; for instance, Beatriz Gonzáles' co-mingling of hegemonic and subaltern cultures. Gonzáles' re-description of the most characteristic signs of both cultures is central for a proper understanding of the discourses that run through her work with furniture. In her paintings, the Colombian artist would place

some of the icons of so-called 'universal art' on the surface of deliberately autochthonous-looking furniture. In turn, the pieces of mostly metallic furniture would appropriate and even simulate more 'sophisticated' materials such as marble and wood. Her point was to translate models of European painting into a simplified language and to produce a short-circuit between them and another form of painting, popular furniture. The result was the re-location of the original and the problematization of its status and meaning, given the evidence of its own dissemination as a cultural model.

Antonio Caro, also a Colombian artist, pursued a similar path while exploring the possibilities of transformation of a commodified object such as the Coca-Cola bottle by appropriating the morphology of its enunciation and bringing the politics of connotation and denotation into the equation. Thus he wrote the name 'Colombia' using the typography and form of the Coca-Cola brand, highlighting the tension between the global and the local that emerges from within the dissemination of transnational paradigms.

A few years later, in 1987, Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar unveiled his project 'A logo for America' sponsored by the Public Art Fund of New York, part of a series of 30 works made by artists of different nationalities and set to appear in the heart of the city. His 45-second animation played during a month in the big screen at the heart of Times Square alongside all manner of advertisements and publicity logos. In six steps, the animation would use the American flag and the map and, superimposed, the phrases 'This is not America' and 'This is not America's flag'. Then it would turn around and reshape the 'R' in 'America' so as to make it appear as the map of the whole of the Americas. By adopting as his the formal strategies of advertising and branding, Jaar defied the hegemony of the media while at the same time questioning the efficacy of the processes of identification which are supposed to be inherent to these practices. Jaar imposed upon them a foreign cultural reality that was, nevertheless, intimate to them.

Cuban born Félix González Torres explored in a similar way the uses of billboards. In 1989 he started to use them in order to intervene certain spaces in NYC; first he would put on them white-coloured captions

related to the struggle for Gay rights emphasized against a black background; then, two years later, he would introduce in the same billboards a black and white photo of a bed just seconds after its occupiers had emptied it. Without adding any explanation, the images seemed to insist upon the impossibility of translating private life into the hegemonic codes of the public sphere, making evident what was nothing more than the trace of an absence.

Miguel Angel Rojas used in 2000 Richard Hamilton's title for his famous collage —'Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?'— as the starting point for a project named 'Nowadays'. For this artwork Rojas would write Hamilton's title on a wall, in its original English, using a computer-type font. Each line was made out of a succession of points, but each point was a cut-up from a coca leaf. In this way, the meaning of Hamilton's phrase in the original collage is subverted by the unexpected intervention of the 'war on drugs'. With the United States as its main supporter, the war has been particularly harsh on the poor Colombian peasants, caught in the crossfire between the different parties to the conflict. The work simultaneously refers to two different realities and postulates them as the terms of a counterpoint: the reality of those who consume the drug and that of those who produce it. Later on, Colombian performance artist Wilson Díaz would ingeniously attempt the ultimate piece of 'conceptual' art: to ingest coca seeds before taking a plane abroad, simulating the fate of so-called 'mulas', ordinary people used by drug-traffickers to carry the drug into other countries within their bodies. Upon arrival, Díaz would evacuate them and plant them somewhere else in the world, thereby disrupting the circuit of production and consumption.

In all these instances the aim of the bricolage would seem to move beyond anything that could be interpreted within a Lévi-Straussian framework. The 'recycling' of objects and issues opens up a different space for the subject and for subjective memory, and allows the history of a specific, often forgotten community, to sustain the history of the present thereby highlighting the way violence is framed and hidden behind the codes and signs that reaffirm global hegemonic relations of power and domination.

The constant in the different dimensions that make up the field of artistic practices in Latin America during the last three decades is this 'drive to re-appropriation'. This brings to the fore the notion that our collective experience has been, historically speaking, that of a culture of translation(s). If this is so then to speak of a primary level, a more transparent or authentic level of culture, is nonsense. This holds also for that most 'archaic' level of assimilation of 'cultural roots' which includes indigenous cultures and indigenous peoples. The incorporation of these 'cultural roots' into models of identity is an act of symbolic translation that is never foreign to hegemonic discourses of power.

Starting in the 1990's artists such as Nadin Ospina would relate to this point of view and elaborate their artworks in the vicinity of similar meditations concerning the problem of cultural identity. Ospina explores different paths for the recognition of the complexity inherent to the question of identity. Rather than falling into the facile adscription of identity as incommensurable particularity or isolated singularity, he emphasizes that the very notion of identity implies a tension between self-definition and the definition of self through otherness, in the formal sense. The point is to focus on the centrality of 'the foreign' to any confirmation or elaboration of 'the intimate', what is taken as own and proper. One case that seems to verify this mechanism, a proof of this axiom, is Ospina's work from within practices of copying and falsification, a politically active and culturally complex phenomenon that subverts the claims to originality that are central to Romantic mod-

ernism. The contact with these forms of 'theft' produces yet another effect: by linking up the symbolic weight of conventional art to a set of traces and techniques that belong to another, foreign professional practice, it pushes the boundaries of art in general beyond such conventions. The artwork emerges out of the efforts of different person confronting a different set of materials, beyond the originality of design and projection, and that fact—the distance that generates the meaning of the artwork—makes it his/her own, proper.

In the series *Crítico Bizarro*, exhibited in 1990, Ospina took this position to the extreme, turning the practices of copying and falsification into an anthropological, socio-historical and cultural form of critique. It questioned the assumption underlying the relationship between a chronological past that is presented as 'the root', the original model, and a chronological present that is represented as 'context', the familiar or singularly meaningful surroundings. Confronted by a sculpture of Bart Simpson cross-dressed in pre-Columbian style, us, the spectators, realize deeper affective attachments with the American animated series and *our* context than between the latter and *our* heroic past. In fact, it makes it evident that our habits of recognition in relation to pre-fabricated cultural environments such as history museums and so on are no less problematic.

Even within hegemonic construction we are still being 'represented' from the point of view of transnational culture and remain related to it. Thus, it is important to disassemble the ideological value of such notions as authenticity, singularity, originality and wholeness that tend to be understood as markers of identity and units of expression in other instances. These notions have served as the instruments for the positing and establishment of certain forms of representation which in turn have produced certain subjectivities as 'the other' in modern times.

Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, recently commissioned for the Unilever Series at Tate Modern in London, has insisted on this point through her systematic attempts at proposing radical forms of inscription of difference as a critique of that most conventional of all artistic media, sculpture. In *Atrabiliarios*, produced between 1990 and 1992, she elaborated upon her contact with groups of peoples who had confronted the disappearance of close relatives and loved ones. Her research for this work involved an exhaustive exploration of the facts surrounding these events, in the manner of a forensic scientist. She then translated some of the results in the shapes and materials chosen for the project. From the beginning her attention focused upon choosing elements internal to these events. Materials, objects and procedures, but also the spatial location of these elements, were suggested by the narrations and testimonies that the artist had compiled as part of her research. The twenty layers containing an equal number of images of absent bodies, suggested by the row of shoes in *Atrabiliarios*, are covered over by animal skins sawn to the wall in the manner of a surgical procedure. The skins interrupt the spectator's gaze and the manner of their suture incorporates a gesture of solidarity before the trauma, in spite of the invisibility of the bodies, visibly inscribed in the social structure represented by the wall. The details of this ghostly vision escape a conscious survey, thereby generating a form of communication that is supported by the (in)corporeal dimension of the spectator.

In parallel with *Atrabiliarios*, Doris Salcedo produced a series named *Sin Título*, which originated in her work upon several pieces of wooden furniture. Her work for this series lasted over a decade. These pieces seem to concentrate on the subtraction of the inner space of the objects that serve as their starting point. In this way they appear to gravitate between a stone-like surface and an absent, drowned depth. It is as if, because of the lack of use, the architectonic spaces that surround them had become their true interior. This solidification of

emptiness in the pieces of furniture alludes to the absent bodies that would give them 'meaning'. As a result, on the one hand, these objects appear dysfunctional, sick, existing only as remainders when the bodies they refer to have been destroyed. On the other hand, because of the manner of their installation, one can observe that in spite of their inanimate nature, these objects have the capacity to generate places and locations without precise references. They are not just remainders or derivatives, but in their unplaceable situation they become constitutive.

Charles Merewether suggested the problem of memory—the relation between the event and the image of the event— a constant in the history of art, as a framework from which we could approximate Salcedo's work. He emphasizes that the usual manner in which this problem has been dealt with, particularly in the practice of erecting monuments, involves a chain of assumptions which include presence and permanence. However, whenever we are confronted by a monument we cannot help to question such assumptions, which in turn support the notion and the normative that some event should be remembered. Who decided that and why? A cultural sign for an event, a human event, that is thought to be worthy of unchanging eternity? These are crucial questions. Confronted by them Merewether takes sides with James Young's idea of a counter-monument set against the illusion of permanence fed and supported by monumental sculpture.

Like many of her contemporaries, Doris Salcedo conceives the artwork as the marker of a wound, and the artwork/wound as the marker of a specific place; a place of loss, a void of being. In this manner, the work of art re-places that seemingly unplaceable absence in a physical dimension, external and more or less visible. Robert Smithson's notion of a non-place may come to our help in our attempts to better understand the implications for peoples and communities of the fact that certain human actions have rendered uninhabitable the spaces they once but no longer occupied. ✱

Rendition into English by Oscar Guardiola-Rivera



THE IMAGE

The Image-Space

By Oscar Guardiola-Rivera



E - SPACE A - C E

For the sources of the work done by photographer Felipe Londoño one has to look into mathematics and modern logics rather than any avant-garde movement in the visual arts. Londoño's interest is the unexpected, and he is the first one to be surprised by the forms that his still photographs of civic buildings and outdoor open spaces take when they are digitally intervened according to an algorithmic procedure that is one part cut-up technique and two parts M. C. Escher.

It is the latter's drawings that seem to exert a powerful grip on the imagination of the photographer responsible for these 'kaleidoscopes' (this is the name Londoño gives to his unnatural creations). It is well-known that Escher was profoundly impressed by what he saw in the Alhambra of Granada, Spain, but perhaps it less well known that the intricacies of the decorative motifs to be found in the Moorish building correspond to very precise mathematical patterns whose complexity only now modern mathematicians acquainted with the revolutionary insights introduced by such people as George Pólya, Kurt Gödel, Georg Cantor and Escher himself, among others, are starting to come to terms with. Chief among such discoveries is the 'obscure' object, a material that loops back onto itself and reacts explosively, the fragments going in

directions that no design or designer could forecast. Londoño's images are exemplars of the obscure object. On the one hand, the obscure object illustrates Gödel's incompleteness theorem; on the other hand, it seemingly holds the key to one of the most intractable questions: how is it that animate beings can come out of inanimate matter? Put otherwise the issue at hand is to locate the point of paradox and boundary, the limits that we know should or can not be surpassed, which nevertheless spills over into alteration (we know the limits that should or can not be surpassed, and yet they are). Such is the question of boundary-crossing. This is the problem of materiality, of emergent space and the unexpected, of rebellion, the true novelty that cannot be traced back to some given set of possibilities, which animates Londoño's images.

Like Escher's, Londoño's understanding of mathematics is largely visual and intuitive; and like Escher's, Londoño's images are paradoxical. On the one side, just like many of us, Londoño's orthodoxy means he takes sides with the still image; photography, the captive image, the fixed space. His images are nothing else than the inexhaustible repetition of the same still image. On the other hand, that appearance of quietness and permanence is always already gone. Movement is immanent to the still image but it is not empirically immediate, not even in the form of the potential. Londoño's kaleidoscopes make the transition between apparent stillness and virtual movement objective and suggest that it is such transit what produces space, rather than occurring in space. In this way, his work brings to the fore not only the question of the origin of the work of art and of artistic practices but also that of the conceptual chain comprised by presence, origin, causality and substance in general. In this sense at least, his work occurs at the level of the more elemental structures of reality.

His work is an invitation to reconsider the scheme of our most basic distinctions: neither potentiality nor immediate actuality; neither passivity nor velocity; neither nature nor derivative artificiality; neither substantial permanence nor accidental change. This seems to suggest the possibility of another metaphysics and another aesthetic; a different model of cultural production that emphasizes the creative capacities of mere labour, the labour of inanimate objects themselves, including the creation of new space almost ex nihilo. This suggestion has political implications: the notion of a truly new space, one that does not owe its generation to the coordinates of the existing order corresponds to the only topology left to those who have no place or have become unplaceable in the present order.

This would not be a space that takes place as yet another additional point that succeeds the previous one in a comprehensive given set, or one that subjects occupy because of their race or the line of succession that determines their belonging. Strictly speaking such a space does not take place, at least not in the present order: certain events, certain human actions, have rendered their place in the world uninhabitable or simply obliterated it, and the peoples who were there once are no longer. At the very least they are not there any more. Where have they gone? Where is this space that does not take place? How to localize or show such a place without disturbing the fact of its vanishing? Londoño's original answer to this question seems to be: Certainly not as a still space, a fixed background or a set of successive spaces; perhaps only as an altered space. In Londoño's treatment of the still image there is no proper succession —no filiation, the normative bond of the line that links the original and its copies down the ages— but rather boundary-crossing, paradox as alteration and transformation. To sum up, there is no (re)production but only distribution. No transportation without transformation.

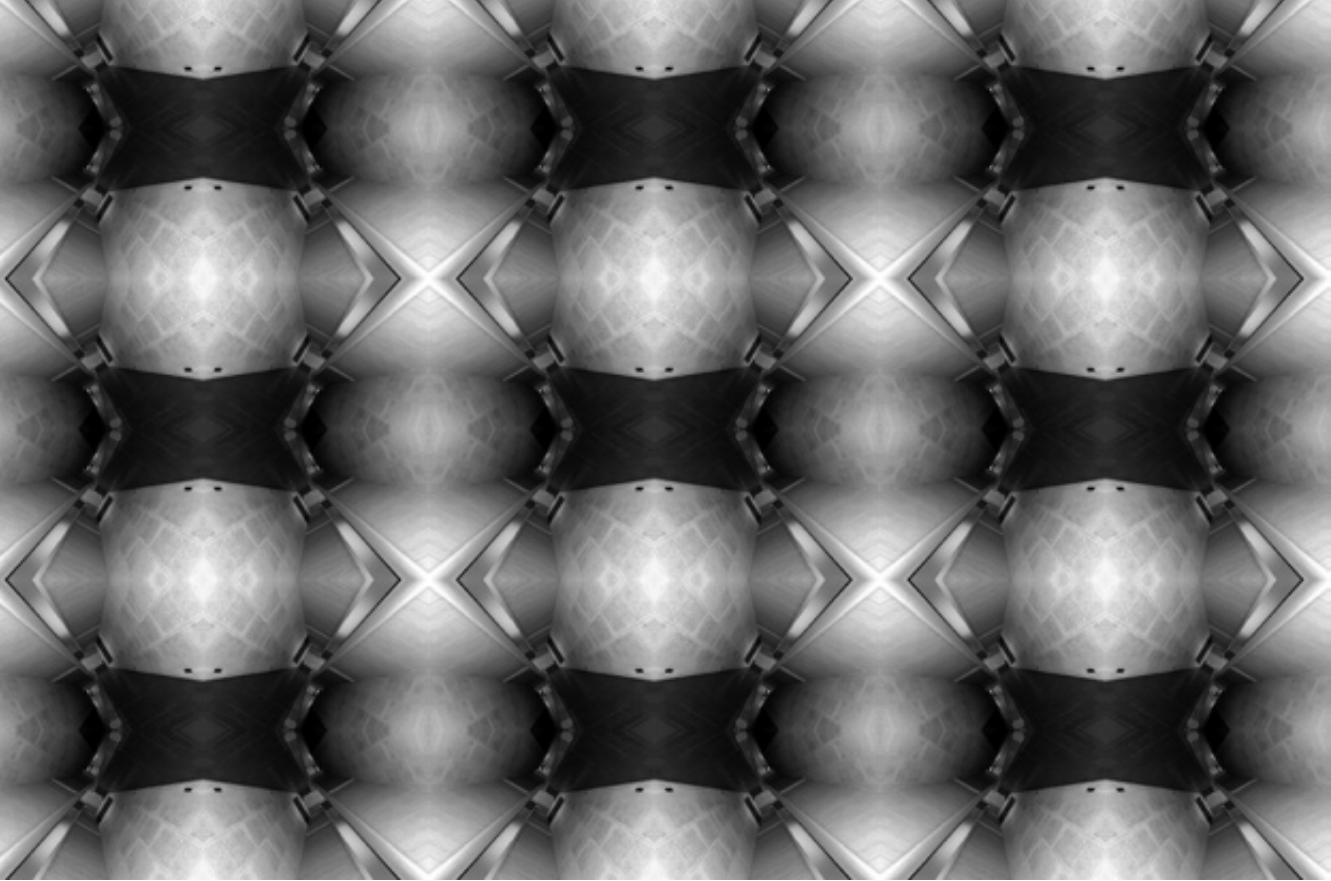
For 2,500 years our ideas about production, also in aesthetics and politics, have been dependent upon the model of analogical reproduction: the succession of objects and points in space branching out like a tree. In this model the loss of information is directly proportional to the number of generations, and thus there is always a variation between the copy and the original that explains, for good or bad, usually the later, the avatars of the process of production.

In order to grasp correctly the reasons behind the images made up by Londoño, we must give up such manner of understanding. His photos are images of spaces, often familiar and recognizable: a library, a public square, the HQ of the Colombo-American centre in Bogotá. After being turned into a 'kaleidoscope' the familiar becomes entirely foreign: an insectoid (like his hero Escher, Londoño seems enthralled by such uncanny creatures), a three-dimensional sphere, Borges' aleph. However, the foreign appears intimate; never 'the other' of the familiar space captured in the still. How can an animated uncanny creature come out of the inanimate ordinary building? How to imagine a new space out of the one that has become uninhabitable, its occupation been rendered impossible; a space that does not take place? Londoño's answer to this intractable conundrum brings forth the problem with the model of analogical reproduction. The problem with this model is that even in the post-modern version we have grown used to, thanks to the critics of the media and digital culture, the copy remains a prisoner of its relationship with the unique reference and although such a reference is no longer the true original (in the stronger sense of the term) it could still be called a matrix.

As it is well known, possession over the matrix—in this case a photographic negative—implies control over the copies. It is true that one could make copies of a copy, but the image thus obtained would not translate with exactitude the information contained in the matrix. In this aspect the case seems to confirm the rule of all systems of analogical reproduction: that there is loss of information, at an incremental rate in relation to the number of accumulated generations. As can be seen, the matrix-copy relationship relies on the same series of assumptions present in the adult-child model of relationality, and perpetuates it. Furthermore, this is the model of filiations that also informs ideological structures of coloniality and global governance.

In these structures, certain peoples, objects and places are condemned to occupy the position of cultural particularity, filiations, borrowing and copying (however 'creative') but can never aspire to second degree observation of the aesthetic and political universe since generality is exclusively a matter for the centres of production, the matrix. Such peoples are fated to remain 'in the margins', to use a nowadays common parlance. However, given that certain events—from wars of occupation to the various forms of violence and counter-violence inherent to globalization—have rendered such marginal spaces uninhabitable and their exact location uncertain. The communities that used to occupy them now experience permanence, remaining and belonging (even belonging to the margins, being the lowest among the low) as an impossibility. This is an irreversible fact, one that contradicts the will to permanence (or containment) at the heart of the notions of security, citizenship and global governance or globalization. The result is a seemingly intractable paradox that no form of analogical thought, no matter how sophisticated or innovative, can solve, and no analogical model of representation and distribution can show or unveil.

In contrast, while experimenting with the model of digital distribution, the art of Felipe Londoño



invites us to observe the de-colonization of the image, its liberation from the tyranny of the matrix and the model of permanence: it forcefully suggests that the still image is not passive, it is not fixed space-time, it is already on the move, it has always been. This is not the sort of movement that is introduced within it from without, by direct contact or penetration, originated in an outside source or agent, the mother, the original in the line of succession and filiations, but rather, that which it gives to itself from itself. Phenomenologists call this 'immanent transcendence'; given Londoño's taste for Escher (and the mathematical implications of his work) it would be better to conceive this phenomenon in the image of the loop that comes back onto itself. Thus, the photographer as agent, as creator, is unimportant. Similarly, the object as passive recipient of the photographer's gaze, animated only by the click of his camera, is irrelevant. What matters is what the photograph does to itself, how it reacts back upon itself—even if it does that indirectly, through vicarious means: the spectator for instance-. Put otherwise, what is relevant is the wound caused to the photographic observation, the photographer's gaze, the photograph, by the absence of the photographed object; something we may have learned already from Warhol's pioneering photographs of car crashes, or similarly, from J. G. Ballard's literary treatment of image-mediated car crashes in *The Atrocity Exhibition* or *Crash*. The real returns here in the form of trauma or wound, a spectre or a ghost: pure virtuality.

Strictly speaking, this is the difference between a culture of reproduction and a culture of virtual production, the discovery of Escher (and Gödel) that fascinates Felipe Londoño: starting from the algorithmic procedure that sustains the digital treatment of the image-space, the procedure that Londoño calls 'kaleidoscops', a combinatory practice that moves between perversion, logic and performance, there is no difference whatsoever between one generation and another even if they are separated by millions of

intermediary copies. Crucially, it is the lack of difference what is creative. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to speak of a 'minimal difference' that shatters the given order of reproduction and brings forth a new scheme of distribution, an alternative way of counting. The issue is no longer copying, but rather, recounting, redistributing and replicating.

Inanimate, still or inert matter self-organizes when it distributes itself y gives to itself new forms, mobile and organic: El Tintal library in the southern, poorer part of Bogotá re-emerges as an insectoid, a burning field in the Eastern Planes between Venezuela and Colombia becomes a planetoid, the intervened HQ of the Colombo-American centre simply vanishes and is substituted by fuzzy whirls and becomes an impossible object. Soon, without knowing exactly how, the spectator finds herself within a *mise en scene* of the entire universe condensed in one image-space like in Jorge Luis Borges' story.

The secret lies in this 'without knowing exactly how', in allowing oneself the position of the thing observing the observer and determining the space, rather than the observer positing the photographed, observed object. Thus, the origin that is postulated in each artwork (there, under the spiral staircase is the still; do not be afraid) is a real event (the library, the Eastern Planes) but one that can only be conceived because its reality is *méconnue*, misunderstood and never exhausted in the act of postulation. If this is the case then the problem is not that of the copy of the reproduction ad nauseam of the same image, the procedure behind the erection of monuments for instance, but rather, that of access to the information contained in the image that suggest infinitude, the total alteration of everything that is. Perhaps it was because of this that Benoit Mandelbrot thought he had come to occupy the viewpoint of the deity when he gazed at his fractals: not the viewpoint of the All or that of studied ignorance but rather that of genuine surprise before that which comes without being expected.

This theme is analogous to the one developed by cyberpunk writer William Gibson in *Pattern Recognition*: the protagonist of the novel is a coolhunter who arrives in London determined to access the information contained in a fragment of a footage that circulates on the web. Like Londoño's, these are images composed out of images gathering people around that otherwise would have nothing in common, the so-called footageheads. The primacy given by Londoño to composite images (liberated from the illusion of the simple image that would carry additional ontological weight) reminds one of the notion of artefactuality coined by Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler in their dialogues concerning the nature of televisual images.¹ Before Londoño's artefactuality we are all footageheads. Londoño's stills do not capture the image in order to represent it, fix it or include it (the key term in our 'democratic' normative systems of being-with) but rather leaves it as it is and it is up to the participant spectator, us footageheads, to do the inevitable work of articulation, translation and misinterpretation.

The act of observing the world as a specific entity — that's how we must understand Londoño's labourious efforts- be it an insect or a planet or a community is misinterpretation, articulation, in the sense that nothing is immediate and all meaning has to go through the process of expression, always in a specific dimension, in a specific space. Just as it occurs with texts and other cultural practices, Londoño's

1. Derrida, Jacques and Stiegler, Bernard. 'Artifactualities', in *Ecographies of Television*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.

images can be articulated with different 'accents' by different observers and become the support of different aesthetic, advertising or even political strategies. However, what matters here is not difference but rather the fact that such observers, gathered around the image, become observers of the same class and thus their observations must be consistent. Londoño's images are truthful because they are consistent. Put otherwise, the object of his work may be strange and obscure but it is never illogical.

Misinterpretation and misunderstanding haunt always the origin; blindness is the condition for photography rather than transparency, consensus or the immediacy of the object, what could be called monumentality. Thus, for instance, the monumental building of El Tintal library in Bogotá—seemingly designed to become a political object, both in the sense of becoming a memory of the state-political agent who commissioned its construction and in the sense of being occupied and interiorized by the public—becomes after Londoño's intervention (through lenses and computers) a scary insect. In this sense, his photography could be described as a radical critique of that most conventional of all art forms: sculpture. In this way Londoño walks the same line with other Latin American artists such as Doris Salcedo, Nadín Ospina or Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Their work is extremely political but not in the usual sense of a call to arms. In any case their objects of choice are quite unusual—in Londoño's case the rebellion opts for the lens, the camera and a laptop rather than an AK 47—and nobody is saying that such tools may be sufficient are that they can become weapons if one knows how to hold them properly. The objects are not inert, and they are not waiting for the agent to rescue them from their slumber in the earth. This work is political in the precise sense that it includes this insufficiency within its own discourse and practice, but rather than seeing it as a limit, it dares to take the next step. In more concrete terms, it directs the lens against architectonic and sculptural monumentality.

Now, Londoño is Colombian. Traditionally, Colombian violence has been posited by its pseudo-intellectuals and politicians as unsayable, as the embodiment of the very limits of expression. Monuments, mostly sculptural and architectonic monuments like the Palace of Justice that houses the higher courts, re-built after a tragic showdown between the guerrillas and the armed forces, are supposed to embody the memory of these unsayable events. However, nobody seems to notice the paradox: violence is supposed to be unsayable, it cannot be expressed or explained without loss of meaning or moral fibre, and yet it is. The monument is supposed to be a stand-in, a witness reminding its viewer that what happened is unsayable and inexplicable, and it is this (im)possibility of representation what gives it, and the memory-event it refers to, their moral weight. And yet, in doing so, in insisting upon the inexplicability and inexpressibility of the event, it goes beyond the limits of understanding and expression; it is as if the sculpture-monument comes back upon itself, on a loop, and explodes. I would like to think that Londoño's images capture the explosion. The sculpture, the building, the monument become an obscure object, the fragments shattering the comfortable notion that the violence cannot be seen or comprehended, that it has no reason, or that no reason would be enough to explain it. In short, it shatters the notion that what explains violence is irrational and totally foreign, and in doing so, obliges the observer to return the gaze back upon himself. From then on, he would have to look for the foreign element within himself and stop blaming the other and making him/her into a scapegoat. What follows is a universal injunction: that all scapegoats are innocent.

Londoño photographs the process. More precisely, his digital intervention of these monumental im-

ages destroys their comfortable numbness. The spectator can see the fragments flying in mid-air, in unexpected directions; and perhaps, just perhaps, can catch a glimpse, a vision, of the uncanny form such fragments will compose in their free fall. At the very least the spectator confirms that such forms have nothing to do with the purpose they were given by their designer. They cannot be traced back to the design.

This destruction of public buildings and monumental constructions (even open spaces such as the Eastern Planes serve in this part of Latin America as markers of a monumental narrative of identity, freedom and nationality) strikes one as much more subversive than blowing up any two towers.

The latter is far from being a subversive or rebellious act. In fact it takes for granted the existence and iconic character of that which it seeks to destroy—capitalism, western imperialism—and in doing so its denunciation turns into an act of affirmation. In that sense it is a profoundly reactionary act: it takes meaning (the meaning of the towers, for instance) as a given, a social product that represents in transparent form the community that observes it, uses it or inhabits it. It then considers such a community as its (co)author and based upon such a spurious line of reasoning reason it infers the legitimacy of its punishment. In this way the equation for the absurd act is complete: to blow up the building is to punish the people that uses it or inhabits it as if such people were the living representatives, the memory evoked by the monument-building.

As we know, things are much more complicated: immigrant cleaners and unionized firemen died in the Twin Towers, and not the captains of the oil industry or the tzars of finance capitalism. Similarly, the destruction of the open spaces of the south of Colombia by means of chemical warfare, which affects mainly the poor peasants and the indigenous peoples that use them or inhabit them, obliterates or displaces the latter rather than the druglords or their political allies and beneficiaries who continue to sit comfortably in Congress and the Governmental Palace, situated right in front of the Palace of Justice.

Londoño's images propose to us a different notion of meaning. They suggest that meaning is a production that takes place with the objects—like inhabiting a space, or the impossibility of occupying it. In that respect, the reality of these meaningful circuits involving humans and nonhumans is not merely a matter of social production and it is neither solely the representation of the community of observers, a representation of the common; rather it is produced by the common for the common. 'The common' refers here to the act of making a common cause with the objects, which are not just given 'for us'. The world that Londoño's work expresses is a composite; it has to be composed to be meaningful and it is precisely because of this that the spectator of these images always has the feeling of being confronted by an explosion or a battlefield, figures of the unexpected. The image that confronts the spectator is a novelty because it destroys the given-ness of the objects, it intervenes them and relocates them in a physical form, external, but one that owes nothing to the set of initial elements. It is not a picture of a building but an image that, in fact, exists only when the referent is destroyed. This allows the spectator to confirm that although these are merely objects, the images are objects, they are able to generate spaces and forms with a precise referent. This is novelty in the most precise sense of the term. ✱

JULIANA CERQUEI- RA LEITE: WORKS IN PROCESS

Juliana Cerqueira Leite:
Works In Process

By Nadim Julien Samman



The plaster bas-reliefs and sculptures that adorn the Flaxman Gallery of University College London constitute the apogee of British neo-classicism.¹ Here the men defy belief, battling mythical beasts, performing historic feats, while the women are variously allegorical figures and goddesses. In such high-blown Academicism the humanoid form is a mere vessel for narrative and idealistic content. By contrast, during the summer of 2006, only a few corridors away at the Slade School of Art an alien object was on display. Likewise made from plaster, the approximate height of an adult male, stood a monolith. One side of this tower was a mass of globular drips, sloppy lumps and splats, disordered, violent indentation. The reverse, however, manifest repeated fragmentary casts of a female torso and pelvis, of such exquisite detail that the smallest hair follicle on a collarbone quietly, but insistently, demanded attention. It soon struck me that, with respect to its representation of a body, Juliana Cerqueira Leite's *Object made by pulling wet plaster vertically with body as only support* (2006) was more human than any Flaxman nude.²

But in what sense?

¹ John Flaxman (1755-1826).

² To aid the reader the title is hereafter abbreviated as *Pulling Vertically*.

BODY AND MATTER

Leite's body conditions the treatment of materials and dimensions of her objects while constituting the subject represented. At its best, as it is in [*Pulling Vertically*], her sculpture demonstrates the close proximity of means and end, input and output. That her corporeal limitations structure the process of creation is brought to the very surface of this piece, rather than being hidden by post-production or 'finishing'. Thus, the artist's 'hand', in its widest possible sense, is on display. This situates her work within spitting-distance of Formalism. Crucially, however, this piece retains a figurative element. As she puts it, her physical person is 'captured in its very essence as an active and creative force'.

The artist's hand, hundreds of times over, literally makes up *Object made by pulling apart a 70 x 70cm solid cube of terracotta clay* (2006).³ This work consists of four heaps, the result of her methodical physical action – two hands gouging out lumps from a one-tone block. From a distance the impression is somewhat minimalist. Seen from up-close, however, each nugget bears the delicate impression of her palm lines. Beyond their aesthetic qualities, these detailed marks function as a biometric artist's signature. Cumulatively and individually, the handfuls of clay represent the extent of her grip, or control, over this body of material. It is worth noting that outside of the studio Leite is an avid rock climber. In her own words, she relishes a 'physical challenge'.

On a very basic level, the body is driven by a need to consume, excrete and secrete. A multitude of fleeting pleasures issue from the many acts that satisfy these drives. More precisely, such enjoyment stems from overcoming obstacles or challenges to satiety. Leite's sculptures are both record and metaphor for such perturbations of the flesh. That the piles in [*Pulling Apart*] are the byproduct or aftermath of her physical contention with the medium is underscored by their fecal dimensions. Furthermore, in a work like [*Pulling Vertically*] the act of using of bare hands to pull, push, and knead the wet plaster parallels the preparation of food such as bread. Indeed, while still an undergraduate at Chelsea College of Art she created a human form out of chocolate. In fact, the artist agrees that her creative appetite requires a large body of raw material – a block of clay – to consume or digesting.

Undeniably, there is a glint of heroism in her sculpture – one artist subordinating a suitably challenging quantity of material to her will. Yet, this aspect is tempered by the pathos of the fragile, site-specific, finished products. As Leite relates - 'I want the material to look like someone has just shown up, shaken it up, and left'. Yet it is not just the material that has been worked but, as the clunky titles suggest, the artist's body as well. Leite is recorded as privation, in absurd, labored, functions or processes. The implications of penetration aside, what else is there to make of *Object made by throwing plaster into hole made by digging through a 1 x 1 x 1.5m solid rectangle of terracotta* (2006)? Here is a visual marker for what Sartre called the 'useless passion' of man. Indeed, the will towards safeguarding her creations is by no means a given. For lack of space in her studio, she took a sledgehammer to [*Pulling Vertically*]. A clear case, also, against the intuitive argument that artists are the best conservators of their work.





THE MATTER OF HER BODY

In [*Pulling Vertically*], Leite's nudity is indicative of the stripped-down process of her making. The indexical aspect of her sculpture means that the works can be read as corporeal self-portraits. In a sense, they constitute a *memento mori* of her physical person at time x – capable, and fertile. Beyond the obvious record of her youthful breasts, the latter quality is played out through the sculpture's coming into being – or being born – between her legs. In a confident but subtle swipe at masterful predecessors who swung tools as if they were cocks, the birth of this work is also the performance of her own erection. In the male dominated area of sculpture, she is able to 'perform' a full five-foot eleven inches of self-realization. Compare this to the average length of a chisel.

Within the history of art it is commonplace for representations of the vagina leave much of the organ hidden. One manifestation of this is the rounded pubis on a Flaxman nude – a fine example of how far his sculptures deviate from life. That is to say, the body is overdetermined, worked, or smoothed-over by culture – a vessel for a host of narratives. By contrast, in the case of Leite's [*Pulling Vertically*], where a negative impression of her vagina is on full display, the sculpture is a vessel for her own body.

At this point it must be noted that the artist denies having a 'feminist agenda'. Instead she emphasizes that she wants the *matter* of her body to dictate the work, stating that she is constantly 'struggling against narrative and context in order to address general human conditions'. This aim, she relates, stems from her position as a relocated Brazilian. In her view, such a situation engenders two possible approaches to art. The first, exemplified by Doris Salcedo, endeavors to construct a framework for interpreting the artist's national or post-national identity, while the second is the 'general condition' route. While claiming to uphold the latter, Leite rejects the charge that she is engaged in a utopian project. Rather, she muses that her work may be a sort of response or manifestation of the ethos of globalism in the provision of art education across London. As an international student she 'did not feel unique at all' amongst other relocated, rather than displaced, peers. Indeed, passing each other below the Flaxman bas-reliefs, eating the same horrible kebabs, crammed inside the night-bus home to Wood Green, most students' bodies are equal.

When pressed, Leite also suggests that she may have drawn some inspiration from the writing of Lygia Clark, another expatriate Brazilian artist who has commented on the lack of physical contact between strangers on the streets of the UK – in contrast with Latin America. The original title of [*Pulling Vertically*] was *Pull*, an emphasis, she explains, on the intimate gesture of bringing something close to oneself. However strange to one another we may be, it is a gesture known to all which springs from the bond between mother and child.

PERFORMING SCULPTURE

Leite's foetal *Object cast from form made by surrounding body with handfuls of clay until only breathing space was left then crawling out of clay enclosure*(2007) bears some resemblance to similarly crouching works by Anthony Gormley. Furthermore, the two artists share the view that figurative sculpture must ex-

plicitly issue from the maker's own physical form. Yet the degree to which Leite and Gormley's processes differ reflects their circumstances. The latter now employs a team of assistants to better render his arse, and other hard-to-reach bits. In a sense, this has meant the crux of his project - making his body the zero-point of representation - is in danger of disappearing up his own backside. After all, why not address the body *in making*, as maker, through the physical process of creating a sculptural representation?

Of course, Leite's current financial situation precludes her from falling at such a hurdle. Beyond this, however, she actually intends to embrace her corporeal limitations both *in making* and *subject*. These limitations are, for the most part, discovered without aid. Although her sculptural works 'happen' in a performative way — from a script or program, so to speak, and in a single session - they occur without an audience present. Her aim is to avoid performing the task unnaturally, which she defines as being too aware of herself as subject and not enough as maker. The balance of the two is constituted in form of her sculptures.

Notably, these objects circumvent the perennial problem of documenting a performance while avoiding doing violence to it. If there is to be aggression then it is to be on her terms. *Violent Object 1* (2006) was created by repeatedly beating a block of clay with the very stool that would later function as its plinth - a neat metaphor for the slippage between creation and destruction.

* * *

Apart from their powerful formal appeal — the well handled juxtaposition between worked and rough, sloppy and refined, pores and plaster, figurative and abstract — Leite's works pulse with art-historical engagement. In part, the latter consists in the unique manner in which the artist closes the gap between the body in art and the body as maker of art, and between conceptualism and the sensuous. Yet, this is only the beginning of what might be said on this subject. The objects discussed are ambitious, virile, irreverent sculpture — made, unusually, by a young woman. Her body is no vessel, but the wellspring of a vigorous art. As she puts it:

'I want the material to look like someone has just shown up, shaken it up, and left. I want the sculpture to look a bit pathetic, standing there, static, like someone who has just been mugged'. ✱

Antanas Sutkus, *Blind Pioneer* (1962)



Olga Chernysheva
Oleg Kulik
Sergei Bratkov
Stephen Gill

Sergei Chilikov
John Hinde
FNO
Martin Parr

Nicolay Bakharev
Boris Mikhailov
Vitas Luckas
Antanas Sutkus

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TRANSMISSION

Transmission

By Pilar Cervantes



Art is a medium, an agency for the transmission for the forces and powers that are sacred, that are other to humans. As Octavio Paz once put it: "the function of art is to open for us the doors that lead to the other side of reality."¹

1. Octavio Paz, *Essays on Mexican Art* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, c. 1993), 40.

Let us start this reflections on the work that I produce as an artist, by posing a seemingly naïve question: why do we make, hate or appreciate art?

When we appreciate art, we are confronted by translations and the meaning of translations; interpretation thus, becomes a metaphor of true meaning.

As a maker, I struggle, I am concerned, I strive with visual and plastic phenomena, such as the rough surfaces of an object, a wall, a landscape or a photograph: its texture.

This text is an experiment, a venture to invite the reader to unveil the layers of meaning attributed to texture when we see images, objects, photographs, litter, stones, mirrors, walls, water or films.

2. Richard Woodfield, *Gombrich on Art and Psychology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 44-77.

3. Definitions of the sign; signs as expressions charged with meaning. Jaques Derrida, *La Voix et le Phénomène, Introduction au problème du signe dans la Phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Epiméthée, 1967), 17-27, 34-51.

4. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida; reflections on photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Flamingo, 1982, ca. 1981), 4.

I believe in the impossibility of art to serve as a representation of reality, and I understand it more as a form of illusion and psychology², science, philosophy and symbolism.

I want to read texture as signs that tell something³. A penetration of reality through a logical construct that involves the idea of play with materials, techniques, processes and accidents that seek to reveal an entirety or whole.

Photography, unlike painting, carries its reference in itself. I feel challenged. The object or subject in the photograph, through a reverse human vision process, enhanced by science and the machine, is newly represented and becomes anew.

*What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: The photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially. In the photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular ...*⁴

I work my way through a pile of collected photographs, magazines, books, newsprints, photocopies — and find coincidences to create a narrative among recycled images, a repetition of instants. Poetically, the fragments of materials are archaic, in a state of depletion, residual values in abstract language.

They are old things in a state of decay and are brought in to coexist with other materials or fragments, creating a second order-meaning, a new context. I make allusion to the notion of rebirth; the metamorphosis of matter and meaning⁵. The volumes or textures are not intellectual but they are repetitions, verses of emotional quality.

5. Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. By Richard Howard (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1985), 143-148.



Heat, January 2007
N.B. These artworks are in tones of red.



*No I mean the change that took place
In the rising and setting of the sun and the
other heavenly bodies.*

*It's said that in those days they used to set
where they rise nowadays, and rise on the
opposite side of the earth...*

*... we are also bound to think that this is
the time when we inhabitants of the universe
experience the greatest changes.*

(Plato, *The two cosmic eras*)



Melting ice, October 2006
N.B. This artwork is in tones of blue.

I believe that this "heavy" representation is like the idea of abstraction in Modern Mexican art. Like pre-Hispanic art, it is kinetic, geometric and craft-based. The idea of volume is crucial. It not only expresses weight, but also time⁶.

6. Martin Heidegger, quoted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception and Temporality* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1967), 410.

There is something pulsating and volatile in the earth, which is analogous to the inner self and also analogous to global violence.

I made a reflection concerning the war and was concerned to unveil a collective unconscious.

*If I am given this world with its injustices,
It is not so that I may contemplate them coldly,
but that I may animate them...*

(Sartre, J.P)

Silence

Silence is the music of misery.



Silence, November 2006

In the production of a new work there is an invisible texture, derived from intellectual and corporal energy; the body and its physiological states, such as the sensation of ecstasy. Parallel to the experience of reading a map, that produces in us remembered fantasies akin to an experience of cosmic forces. ✱

PILAR CERVANTES → Born in Guadalajara Mexico.

Exhibitions and projects:

- 2008 From Europe to Mexico, collective exhibition, Guadalajara, Mexico
- 2008 Homebodies, collective exhibition, London and Europe
- 2007 Collective exhibition, Mezcalito Gallery, Hackney, London
- 2006 Silence and change of skin: Zizzi Art Gallery, Mayfair, London.
- 2006 Thesis: Texture in 20th Century Art: Matta, Tamayo and Tapiés
- 1986 Collective exhibition: Academia de Pintura Providencia, Bancomer- Banamex, Guadalajara, Mexico.

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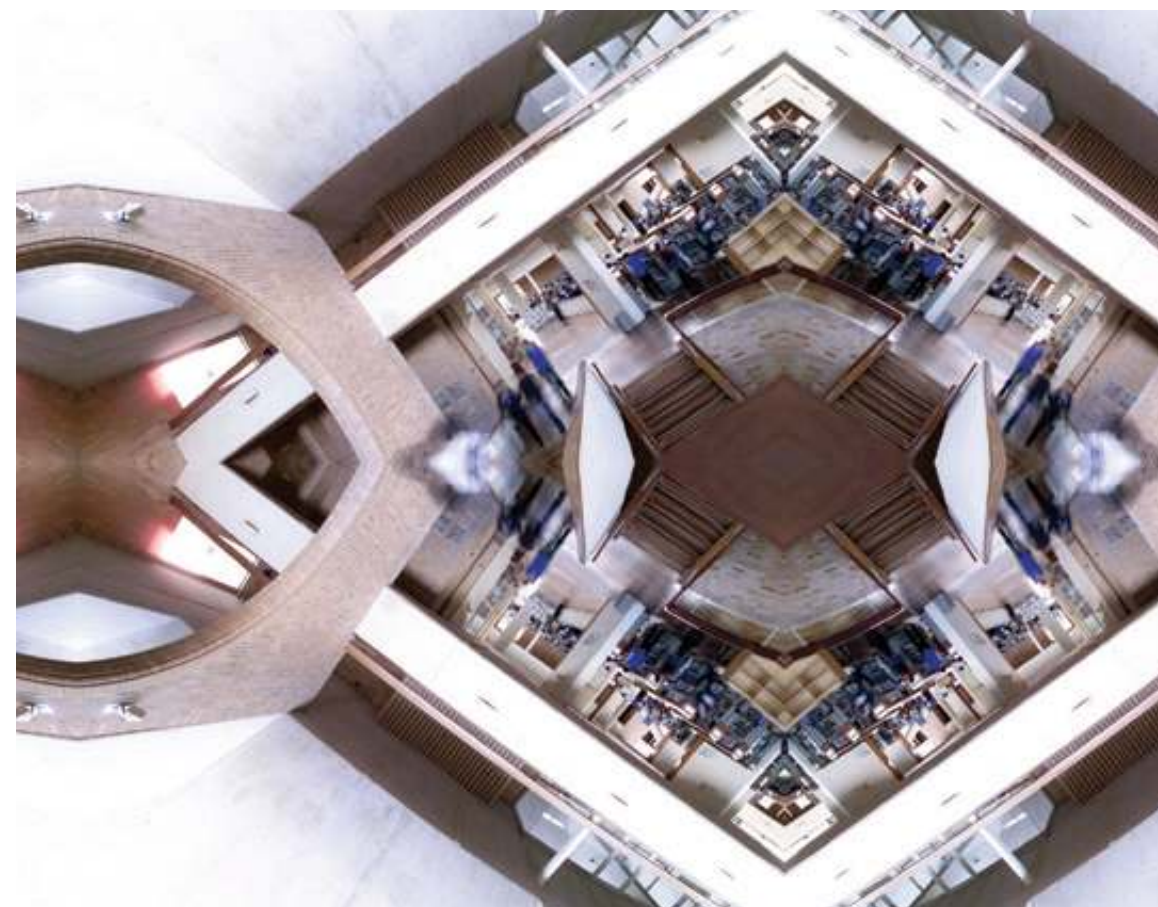
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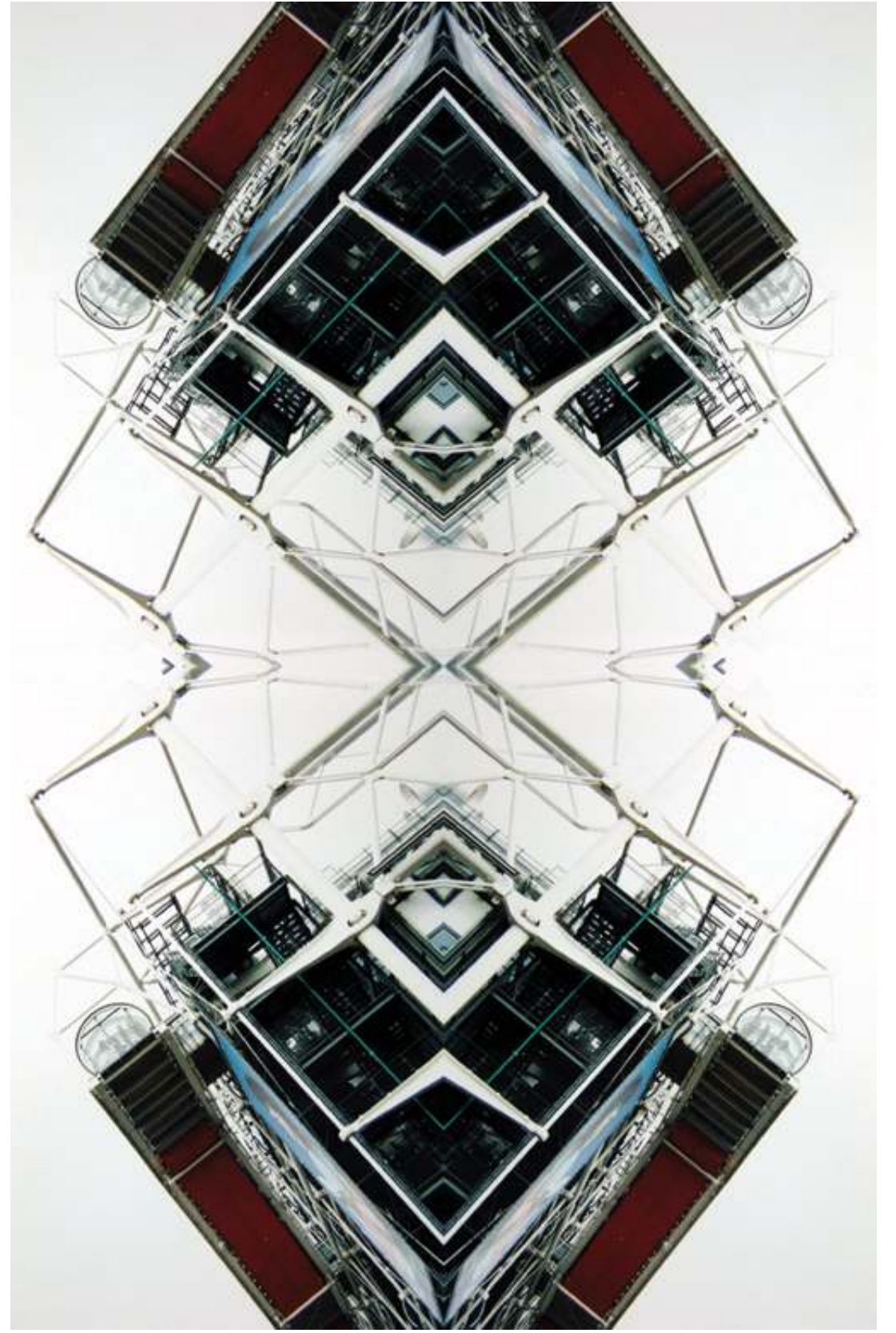
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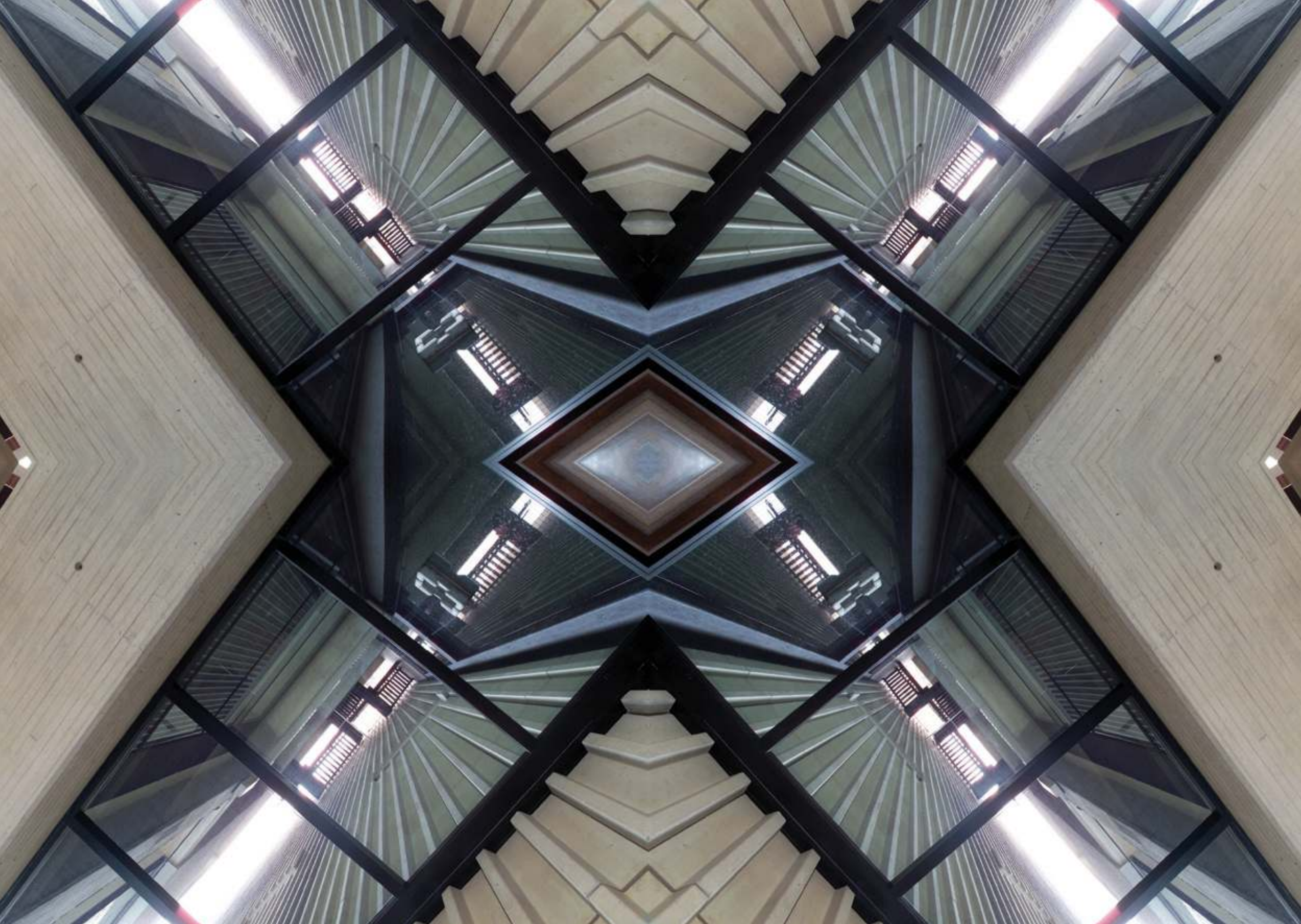
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Artist #1
Felipe Londoño



(Detail.)





Artist #2
Alfredo Jaar



A LOGO FOR AMERICA
1987/2003, 1:00 min, Digital video disk color animation of spectacular sign at Times Square, New York, April 1987
(Photo Credit: Zoé Tempest, Zürich)
Daros-Latinamerica Collection, Zürich

Artist #3
Cildo Meireles



MISSÃO/MISSÕES (COMO CONSTRUIR CATEDRAIS)
1987, Approx. 300 x 600 x 600 cm, 600'000 coins, 2'000 bones, 800 communion wafers, light, 80 paving stones and black fabric
(Photo Credit: Zoé Tempest, Zürich)
Daros-Latinamerica Collection, Zürich

OBJECT MADE BY PULLING WET PLASTER VERTICALLY
WITH BODY AS ONLY SUPPORT.
2006, plaster.



Artist #4
Juliana Cerqueira Leite



OBJECT MADE BY PULLING APART
A SEVENTY CENTIMETRES BY
SEVENTY CENTIMETRES SOLID
CUBE OF TERRACOTTA CLAY.
2006. Terracotta clay.



'VIOLENT OBJECT 1.'
CAST MADE BY REPETITIVELY BEATING A CLAY MOULD WITH WOODEN STOOL.
2006.



OBJECT MADE BY
THROWING PLASTER
INTO HOLE MADE BY
DIGGING THROUGH
A ONE METRE BY
ONE METRE BY ONE
AND A HALF METRES
SOLID RECTANGLE OF
TERRACOTTA.
2006, plaster.





All images courtesy of the artist

Artist #5
Nađin Ospina



COLOMBIA LAND. MUERTE EN EL CAMPO DE AMAPOLAS.
2002

Left: COLOMBIA LAND. EL HECHICERO GUERRILLERA CON RAMO DE AMAPOLAS.
2002. Digital Print



COLOMBIA LAND. SICARIO.
2002



COLOMBIA LAND. GUERRILLERA.
2002. Oil on Canvas



e n d

CINEMA & POLITICS:

PART I



Edited by Qalandar Bu x Memon.



HUMAN RIGHTS (AND) FILM

>> by Illan Rua Wall

The emergence of human rights cinema and film festivals attest to the growing importance and power of 'Human rights film.' Making a film 'human rights' is increasingly a concern for producers in their quest for distribution/market. I want to argue, perhaps a little polemically, that this tends towards a reduction of political cinema and a closing of liberatory horizons. Film, as a directed collective gaze, is central to the political imaginary, and the attempt to make political films correspond to a 'human rights' vision or imaginary is a challenge to both politics and film. A challenge which must be resisted. Von Trier's *Dogville* (2003) and Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* (1966) attest to this resistance.

THE REDUCTION OF A HORIZON

The notion of 'human rights film' presents a complex set of associations which tie together around the question of the 'truth of suffering'.¹ From the beginning of *human* rights² a relation to the figure of the victim is cultivated. Power is drawn from an attachment made at a fundamental level of the political imaginary to *wrongs*. The Holocaust; Apartheid in South Africa, Southern Rhodesia and the USA; Genocide in Rwanda; Mass murder in Cambodia; Rape camps in the former Yugoslavia; each is represented as the state which does not respect human rights. There is a simple logical step then taken: Wrongs or violence occur *because of* an absence or diversion of Human Rights Law. The nexus between the existence of these wrongs and human rights is then constitutive of the entire politics. The first operative subject is that of the victim, followed swiftly by the rescuer and the figure of the oppressor.

1. It is important to say that there are of course many diverse forms and practices of human rights. This piece addresses itself not to the more radical rethinking of human rights – from critique, feminism, queer theory, post-Marxism, etc – rather its object is the more traditional human rights scholarship and practice which often gathers around the UN, and takes the traditional form of International Human Rights (Law).

2. This can be traced back really only as far as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the discourse of the initial post-war years. Though this is not to say that this discourse simply sprung out of the acrid air of the war, but a further genealogy is not of interest to us here. (Instead, see for instance Douzinas, C, *The End of Human Rights*, (Hart, Oxford, 2000)).

Human rights, beginning with the Universal Declaration, appropriate a relation to the victim. The preamble revealingly explains: 'disregard and contempt for human rights *have resulted* in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind...' ³ Having posited rights which are owned and inalienable as existentially fundamental, the declaration asserts that disrespect for human rights was the cause of those events which inflamed this conscience. Here, of course, the Holocaust is to the forefront of the minds of the drafters, along with the Second World War itself. In this explanation of the War and the Holocaust (as the result of disrespect and contempt for human rights), the Declaration appropriates the memory of these events. It attempts to totalize the political relation to that death and destruction. It does this by creating the terms in which those events will be understood, which over time become the terms for understanding similar events: the Holocaust is so to be understood *as* an end-point of the utter disregard for human rights.

Human rights are powerful because they define themselves through the most violent and repulsive acts. The position is simple: The victim of rape camps, genocide or apartheid have had their rights violated. However, this position is tautological because human rights violation is defined *through* victimization. Human rights politics is the attempt to define and appropriate this victim-status. There is a power in the victim. It is the appropriation of this power which is central. In a sense, every victimization, throughout history is retrospectively seen as a violation of human rights, and in this accumulation of power the movement itself gains strength. However, it is premised on the simple position that the pathetic victim should be defined as he who has been stripped of his rights. Counter-intuitively, the victim is perhaps the strongest point of authority after the Holocaust and Second World War. Suffering is at a premium in terms of justifying a state of power. We cannot look into the eyes of suffering and not feel it.

The difficulty with human rights is two-fold: Firstly, they are acceptable because they close themselves to specific radical political claims (redistribution, anti-capital, etc) while

laying claim to the broadest political principles (justice, equality, freedom)⁴ and so gain cross-political support. Secondly, the association with the figure of the victim is totalizing – that is, it tends toward the exclusion of other relations to victims. The language of human rights becomes central to the victim – not only does the victim code its suffering in the (apparently) empowering language of rights, but victimization itself is coded as human rights violation. Thus discourse developed on the figure of the victim tends towards human rights. Liberationary movements become human rights oriented, but the impulses to liberation and human rights are not synonymous. Broader and more radical solutions are lost, other relations to victims are eschewed, possible directions and tactics are closed, movements are reduced to the witness/martyr.⁵ The logic that sees all liberationary struggles as human rights fights is highly reductive. As they stand, human rights foreclose upon the world, they present a relation to the victim which fundamentally strips political action of much of its liberationary potential. Further, the particularly close focus on suffering levels down the political. It reduces politics to a direct examination of *particular* victims, which often forgets the more structural reasons for the continuation of modes of domination and exploitation.

Human rights has a number of limits, the foremost being the State. The human rights state is the horizon of human rights. This may seem like the most stupid and simple assertion, even problematic on the grounds that there is no simple one human rights 'good practice' but always multiple practices. However, the point is twofold, firstly, that the state is at the core of human rights horizon and secondly that the limitedness of some of these ideals are astounding.⁶ That human rights are about and stem from one's relation to the state is demonstrated by Arendt's discovery regarding the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*.⁷ She shows that all rights are the rights of the citizen and that there are no rights of Man. Rights accrue from the state and the refugee demonstrates this by her exclusion. The refugee is the person at their most vulnerable, violated, uprooted and excluded. Just when the human of *human* rights should be operative (that is the rights accruing from the very fact of *humanity*). Just when the most supportive and compassionate politics should be extended by the logics of human rights, the refugee is incarcerated, insecure and mal-treated. Rights accrue from the state, that is, they are all rights of the citizen not of Man. When we talk of human rights, we are dealing in political demands of citizenship and statism. In this sense, human rights centers on the presentation of individualized victim to the state (and when the state fails, to the 'international community' of states). The state is placed at the core of the human rights practice and imaginary.

4. See Douzinas, C, *ibid.* no. 2.

5. In Greek the witness is *martus*, retranslated as martyr.

6. There is not the space here to discuss this, suffice to say that by demanding only the minimal amount (anti-torture, anti-discrimination, free speech, minimal welfare provisions, etc.) from the state, in order to gain cross political support human rights activists find themselves setting their horizons to the lowest possible common denominator.

7. Arendt, H, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (Harvest Books; New York; 1973) Ch. 9.

STILLS FROM THE FILM *THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS*,
DIRECTED BY GILLO PONTECORVO, 1966





The language of human rights is that of testimony: Amnesty, the UN, or indeed Human Rights *Watch* workers are not activists but *observers, monitors, and witnesses*. Human rights work seeks to find victims and present them to the sovereign power in the faith that the sheer power of the victim will prevent further victimization or redress the specific wrong. In this sense, the developing relation between human rights and film is only surprising by the fact that it is so recent. Film is pregnant with the world and human rights demands its child, in fact, all its children.

FILM'S COLLECTIVE GAZE & THE CHALLENGE

Film is fundamentally the mobilization of the *regard* or look, onto a world which is always our own. The filmic images, *without suppressing the spectacle*, fit us into a way of looking and allows us to share this. It is a mobilization of our eye into line with the film-maker; the director of our gaze.⁸ Film is pregnant.⁹ It gives birth to a way of seeing, it gives birth to a world. It presents a world through motion – a world of change – and this is (a) film's action on/in the world. It is *presented* and in this we access the world, but not the 'real' world behind that which is represented:

With film, the wall [onto which it is projected] becomes an opening cut in the world onto this very world. That is why the recurring attempt to compare cinema with Plato's cave is inaccurate: precisely, the depths of the cave attest to an outside of the world, but as a negative, and this sets up the discrediting of images, as we know, or it demands a consideration for images that are loftier and purer, named 'ideas.' Film works the opposite way: it does not reflect an outside, it opens an inside onto itself.¹⁰

Film opens us to our world, by presenting an approach to the world which is not immediately our own. Film is an education in looking. Nancy announces this insight most eloquently, speaking of Kiarostami's films in particular he says:

8. It should be said that this is not simply a privileging of the position of the director as author, whose vision is authoritative. Rather, the director of the gaze is more abstract than that – it is a cumulative process, but I'm not sure it is worth getting into these questions here.

9. See Jean-Luc Nancy's discussion of this in *The Evidence of Film, Abbas Kiarostami*, (Yves Gevaert, Brussels, 2001) p20-21

10. Nancy, J-L, *ibid. no. 9*, p44-46

The posture has shifted as well as the stakes for 'art': substituting for the contemplation of a work, there is an interest set in motion as well as the movement of *education* in the precise sense of the word, meaning 'to bring out...': it is an education in looking at the world, with a look at this world where cinema dwells: a look taken by the hand and led away on a journey that is not an initiation, that does not drive to any secret, but that amounts to making a gaze move, stirring it up, or even shaking it up, in order to make it carry further, closer, more accurately. All of art is set in motion, and one consequently finds oneself very far from that which shaped the idea of a supernumerary art, and close to the kinematics that put at stake again a whole way of relating to the world:... because, for more than a century, 'cinema' has done much more than record the forms of motion, but has rather been one of the animators and agitators of the shift.¹¹

Film is a process of bringing out, a process which takes your gaze and shakes it in an attempt to realign it. This way of looking at the world, which cinema at once announces and shakes up, is film's potential. Film acts as an imaginary which is always shared.

Political cinema is a highly problematic concept. That there is such a thing in the first place presumes that non-political cinema is a possibility. In this it demands that only certain films which either set into motion a radical politics (*Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), *Rome, An Open City* (1945)) or which deal specifically with the machinations of some political system (*Wag the Dog* (1997), *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962/2004)) are political cinema. However, all cinema is political, in the sense that the political is the manner in which one approaches the world. There is a challenge in a film's approach to the world, which is shared through a collective gaze. This challenge, even if it is only the latest installment of a Hollywood genre, is the demand to look at the world in an active sense, to see. Where Hollywood is *generally* so problematic is in its explicit presentation of a fundamentally conservative world, however, as Žižek shows over and over this constantly subverts itself. Cinema demands that you be touched by a world other than your own, it plays in/out the imaginary realm. This demand, coupled with cinema's radical possibility, puts it in a position of political activism which is potentially released from those demands implicit in current politics.

'Human rights films' function in a similar way to human rights' reduction of the political, by demanding testimony to a victimization. The idea of a human rights film is to show victimization, *to reveal, attest to, observe, publicize a victimization*. This is not as noble as it may first seem; regularly these 'human rights' stories are told in an imperial/colonial manner, but we will have to come back to this elsewhere. Bronkhorst (one of the first to write on this subject) demands that to be a 'human rights film', the film must be truthful. He defines this sense of 'truthful': firstly it corresponds 'to the facts'; secondly it complies 'with a normative system within which both those who make a statement and those who receive it are able to make judgments'; and thirdly, it 'should be sincere, honest, i.e. 'truthful.'"¹² This attempt to find the essence of a human rights film is unspectacularly unsuccessful, given the basic tautological position: to be true, a film must be truthful. There are a number of other problems with Bronkhorst's argument but this is not the place to discuss them. However, he does reveal the difficulty which I wish to address here; that is, he reveals the reduction implicit in the idea of human rights

11. Nancy, J-L, *ibid. no. 9*, p44-46

12. Bronkhorst, D, 'The Human Rights Film, Reflections on its History, Principles and Practices,' available at http://www.amnesty.nl/filmfestival/index_en.shtml, p7



STILLS FROM THE FILM *DOGVILLE*,
DIRECTED BY LARS VON TRIER, 2003



cinema. When discussing the top human rights films he mentions *Battle of Algiers*:

in the Top 100 of all-time classics is *Battle of Algiers*... 'the prototype for all mainstream political films of the 1970's'; some 15 minutes of torture sequences were cut from the prints in US and Britain. *Torture was also the theme of...*¹³

Yet torture is *not* 'the theme of' *Battle of Algiers*. Such a reduction must be rejected. From a specifically human rights perspective it is easy to see why he has difficulty classifying this film. The ideas of collective heroes, of the FLN as revolutionary vanguard and of the humanity (or perhaps the rational inhumanity) of Colonel Mathieu, pose problems for a system which would wish to externalize oppressors and generate an association with victims. There are moves afoot, indeed now well developed and already in place, to put human rights in a central position for the funding and screening of films, through human rights film festivals and funding bodies. This is disastrous: If one attempts to make an activist film about a political struggle and one just sees torture and self-determination, one has already lost the power of struggle. One gives up the political imaginary in favor of a presentation of victims; testimony becomes the means and end.

A RESISTANCE

Film demands that we look at our world, in this demand is something which must by its nature escape

| 13. Nancy, J-L, *ibid.* no. 9, p44-46

the reductive categories of human rights. Human rights cannot account for the world, its categories are too shallow. It demands the opposite – that we blindfold ourselves to the actual structural causes of suffering. In this sense both *Battle of Algiers* and *Dogville* show, in different manners, how film resists – how the world resists its reduction. Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* is important in light of human rights film's relation to 'truthfulness' which is seen as the defining feature for many human rights film festival selection committees. *Dogville* is a trick and a play. It is designed especially to confuse the watcher, to conflate violence and victimization, and unite in single characters Good and Evil. It cheats the watcher and provokes a reaction to the entire process inherent in human rights – that is testimony to victimization. *Dogville* does not try to fit into our terms for what happens in human rights victimization. Human rights films like *The Killing Fields* (1984), *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) and *The Constant Gardener* (2005) try to reveal the real of global suffering, in the attempt to provoke action.

This entire method is itself attacked in *Dogville* through the character of Tom (Paul Bettany) and the voice of the narrator. Tom struggles with the essence of 'the Human Condition,' constantly attempting to 'illustrate' it. In this, both he and the narrator attempt to 'put words' on the events. They explain the events, instigate, justify, and condemn them. They presents those discourses which claim to provide the answers to the problem of victimization, but in fact are an integral part of that system. In the penultimate act, Tom forces Grace (Nicole Kidman) to confront the townsfolk with her victimization through her own testimony. This is fundamentally the process which many of the traditional

human rights films engage in, but it is the reaction of the Townsfolk and of Tom himself which reveals Von Trier's critique of this human rights film framework. The townsfolk reject their responsibility for the victimization, Thomas Edison (Snr) states quite clearly that Grace's portrayal does not 'accord with the perception [he has] of [the] town and its residents.' Thus, when confronted with the reality of the victimization they reject the entire story in favor of their own self-pre-conceptions.

Dogville attempts to convince us that the entire system is rotten and would be better to be removed entirely. It absolutely denies the legitimacy of a system which accumulates victims, and then talks in vain about these victims, to persuade us as to the legitimacy of the (victimization) system itself! In other words, it attempts to show us that the system which creates victims is the system which human rights is constantly a part of. A certain strand of human rights and humanitarianism is the justification for war, violence, repression and domination. As such it is Tom who presents us with human rights: The face of the self-conceived rescuer who realizes his position as part of the victimization system. The use of light in *Dogville* is essential. It is the changes of light which reveal the view of the actors. It is importantly the change of light at the end of the film which reveals to Grace the necessity of her revolutionary act. Here Von Trier is playing with a number of ideas of cinema itself; the role of light in the science of (re)presentation; the idea of light/cinema (itself) revealing a different perspective on the world; but also that other meaning of film – to put a film on, to hide or gloss over. He draws attention to the fallacy at the heart of the Bronkhorst-style definition of both human rights and human rights film. That is, when we talk of being able to fit a normative system to a reality or a world, we are simplifying and reducing reality to a system or model, this idea is also revealed by the set which strips reality down to a paradigm. When Grace initially sees the town in a good light it is because she is inclined to do so through the reaction of the townsfolk to her arrival. In the final act the change of light again is directing us to the relation between film and the presentation of a reality which fits our conception and preconception, especially our self-preconception. Von Trier points to the films which are placed on actions, the portrayals of actions by film, by filming over real experience.

Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* is a much more straightforward attack on the paradigm presented in human rights film. It refuses the victim; not in the sense that the film does not show suffering, but instead by perceiving each of the figures as political actors. Each character is active, but a victim is fundamentally passive. At the end of a 'self-interview' in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Žižek sets out clearly his thinking on the victim (in the context of the Bosnian war). He argues that 'the ideological constellation that characterizes our epoch of worldwide triumph of liberal democracy [is] the universalization of the notion of the victim.'¹⁴ He cites the adoption of causes/victims by celebrities from Richard Gere to Vanessa Redgrave as evidence of the mobilization of a 'fantasy-image.' Of the most interest to us here, however, is his argument against this victimology, to which we would subscribe:

So what is wrong here – what does this fantasy-image of the victim conceal?

The fantasy-image, its immobilizing power of fascination, thwarts our ability to act – as Lacan put it, we 'traverse the fantasy' by way of an act. The 'postmodern' ethics of compassion with the victim legitimizes the avoidance, the endless postponement, of the act. All 'humanitarian' *activity* of aiding the victims, all food, clothes and medicine for

Bosnians, are there to obfuscate the urgency of the *act*. The multitude of particular ethics that thrive today (ethics of ecology, medical ethics...) is to be conceived precisely as an endeavor to avoid the true ethics, the ethics of the ACT as real.¹⁵

Žižek argues that this compassion towards victims is the ultimate avoidance of the very issue of the victimization itself. When we empathize with those who suffer, when we (minimally) donate money, even, and especially when we support human rights, we are lending our support to those institutions and feelings which deal with the appearance of suffering itself, which reduce the feeling of guilt upon us, but which do nothing to actually end the (structural) suffering. In 'humanitarian' activity is the elision of the act which is designed to end the suffering.

Film's political potential is enormous. The growing explicit politicization of Hollywood films is to be welcomed. However, we must be careful that in bringing out victims we do not evacuate the more radical political potential of cinema. We must not give up on a radical political imaginary in favor of something more 'reasonable,' 'acceptable' and sanitized.



14. Žižek, S, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality*, (Verso, London, 2005), p213

15. Žižek, S, *ibid. no 14*, p214



TO BE OR NOT TO BE IS NOT THE QUESTION

— ON BECKETT'S FILM

>> by Simon Critchley

We never know self-realization.

We are two abysses – a well staring at the sky.

(Fernando Pessoa, The Book of Disquiet)

Samuel Beckett wrote just once for the cinema. *Film* was written in 1963 and first shown publicly in 1965, forty years ago (Beckett 1986, 321-334). *Film* was shot in New York in 1964, with the opening external shots in Lower Manhattan close to Brooklyn Bridge and the rest in Greenwich Village, and it was the occasion of Beckett's one and only trip to the United States. The movie was the idea of Barney Rosset, Beckett's New York publisher and legendary editor of the Grove Press in its long heyday from the 1950s to the 70s. *Film* was the movie debut of Alan Schneider, Beckett's most trusted, long-serving and long-suffering theatre director in the United States. It stars Buster Keaton in his one of his last movie appearances – he made several B-movie beach movies before his death in February 1966. Beckett said of Keaton that 'he had a poker mind as well as a poker face' and their relationship did not get off to a good start. Schneider tells a story of their first meeting in Keaton's hotel room, where Beckett awkwardly tried to engage in conversation with Keaton while the latter replied in monosyllables, drank a beer and watched the baseball game on TV. Beckett was a huge sports fan and considerable sportsman himself – the only winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature to be mentioned in Wisden's Cricketers' Almanack, playing first-class cricket for Trinity College Dublin – and went to see the New York Mets at Shea

Stadium during his trip to New York and apparently thoroughly enjoyed the game. A little sadly perhaps, Keaton was the fourth choice for the role, behind Charlie Chaplin, Jack MacGowran and Zero Mostel. That said, Keaton is excellently cast and his entire physical presence, in particular the extraordinary face with which the movie finishes, seems to carry the entire tragi-comedy of *Film*. Ask yourself: what is sadder than the face of an aging comedian? We somehow expect a comic's face to be eternally frozen in their glory days; think of the late movies of Laurel and Hardy or The Marx Brothers, where youthful elasticity and energy has given way to wrinkles and clichéd, plodding self-parody.

There is something oddly and deliberately anachronistic about the period in which *Film* is set. Beckett laconically and typically remarks, 'Period: about 1929. Early summer morning' (Beckett, 1986, p.324). What exactly does 'about 1929' mean? This is a typical Beckettian elision. Let's not forget that 1929 was quite a year, with the first presentation of the Academy Awards (Keaton's 1929 movie, which didn't win any prizes, was 'Spite Marriage'), and in October there was a little something down the road from the setting of *Film* called the Wall Street Crash. Yet, as readers of Beckett will know, many of his novels and plays are set in a comically unreal period between the wars, a world full of bicycles, bowler hats, dark suits, and whimsically anachronistic technology. The other salient feature about the period in which *Film* is set is that it is silent; well, almost silent apart from a 'sssh' in the opening scene. In the original project for *Film*, Beckett notes, 'Climate of *Film* comic and unreal'; and he adds that the Keaton character, 'should invite laughter throughout by his way of moving'. Is *Film* funny? It is certainly not *very* funny and one does not exactly fall about laughing watching it. As one of Beckett's characters in the *Trilogy* remarks, 'Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I'll grant you that'. We would do well to keep those words in mind as we watch *Film*.

The dramatic *agon* of *Film* is about 'the *agon* of perceivedness' [Beckett, 1986, 324]. There are a few minor characters in *Film*: an oddly antique couple with a man wearing a pince-nez and a woman carrying a lorgnon or eye-glass in the opening scene (the woman was originally meant to be carrying a monkey, but I guess no monkeys were available in Greenwich Village in 1964); there is also an old woman carrying flowers in the staircase scene, and some wonderful domestic animals in the scene in the room: a cat and dog, a parrot and a particularly handsome goldfish.

But the two main characters are E and O: Eye and Object. The Eye is the camera, so that throughout *Film* we are looking at the Object, or the Keaton character, through the eye of the Eye, as it were. The camera has subjectivity, indeed one might go further



- and I will come back to this later – and add that the camera is subjectivity, or is one side of an essentially divided subjectivity. The drama of *Film* consists in E's pursuit of O, who is in flight from E. E perceives O and therefore what O is in flight from is being perceived as such, where perceivedness is experienced as an *agon*. In other words, visibility is *agon*, and what is in play in *Film* is the dramatic or cinematic *agon* of vision.

Although the main line of cinematic perception is E's view of O, the camera's perception of Keaton, there are also crucial moments in *Film* where O himself perceives others and, in the final scene, perceives E itself. More exactly, O perceives E and sees that O is E itself. Eye and Object, or perceiver and perceived, are the same, or two sides of the same split subjectivity. I will come back to this. The two lines of perception are technically distinguished with a filter, which gives a slightly blurry effect, like a muslin cloth.

* * *

What is *Film* about? Well, firstly, obviously and stupidly it is about *Film*. That is, it is concerned with the genre of *Film* itself, the nature of the cinematic medium. To this extent, there is not just a laconic economy or simplicity to Beckett's title, but also an arrogance, even a hybris: his one experiment with *Film* is a definition of the nature of the cinematic medium itself. Otherwise said, as Alain Badiou would put it, Beckett is concerned with the *generic* character of *Film*, or *Film* as a way of giving character to the generic. This concern with the generic is not unique to *Film*, and one might say that Beckett's work attempts definitions of each of the aesthetic genres with which it engages: the short story, the novel, radio, television and, of course, the play. Indeed, the piece of writing that precedes *Film* from 1963 is a play called *Play*, which has many similarities with *Film*, particularly on the theme of perceivedness. It ends with the line, 'Am I as much as...being seen'.

This concern with the generic character of *Film* as such, that is, with the nature of moving image, is something that Gilles Deleuze brings out in his writings on Beckett's *Film*. As far as I know, Deleuze discusses *Film* in two places: in a short and brilliant text from 1986, 'Le plus grand *film* Irlandais ("Film" de Beckett)' and a discussion in the first volume of his work on cinema, *L'Image-mouvement*, where it occupies an important transitional moment in the argument of the book (Deleuze, 1998, pp.23-26; & Deleuze, 1986, pp.66-70). Without going into too much detail, Deleuze sees *Film* as exploring the three sorts of images that make up the movement-image and which define what he calls the 'general tendency of experimental cinema' (Deleuze 1986,

68). These are the action-image, the perception-image and the affection-image and they can be seen sequentially in each of the three scenes of Beckett's *Film*. With the action-image, Deleuze refers to the figure of O running along a wall, an image which is, Deleuze writes, '...the first cinematographic act'. With the perception-image we see the character in the interior of the room being perceived from the back on both sides but never face-to-face; and finally, with the affection-image the camera turns around the room to face O (Deleuze was very interested in long full-face close-ups) and we witness the perception of the self by the self, pure affection or cinematic auto-affection, which culminates in the seeming death and immobility that we see at the end of *Film*. However, as every reader of Beckett knows, his protagonists rarely die, and it is in this inability to die, this endless living on, that Beckett's entire comedy consists, witness Vladimir and Estragon trying, but failing, to hang themselves in *Waiting for Godot*. In tragedy, people die; in comedy people live; in Beckett's tragic-comedy people who want to die are condemned to live on. Funny isn't it?

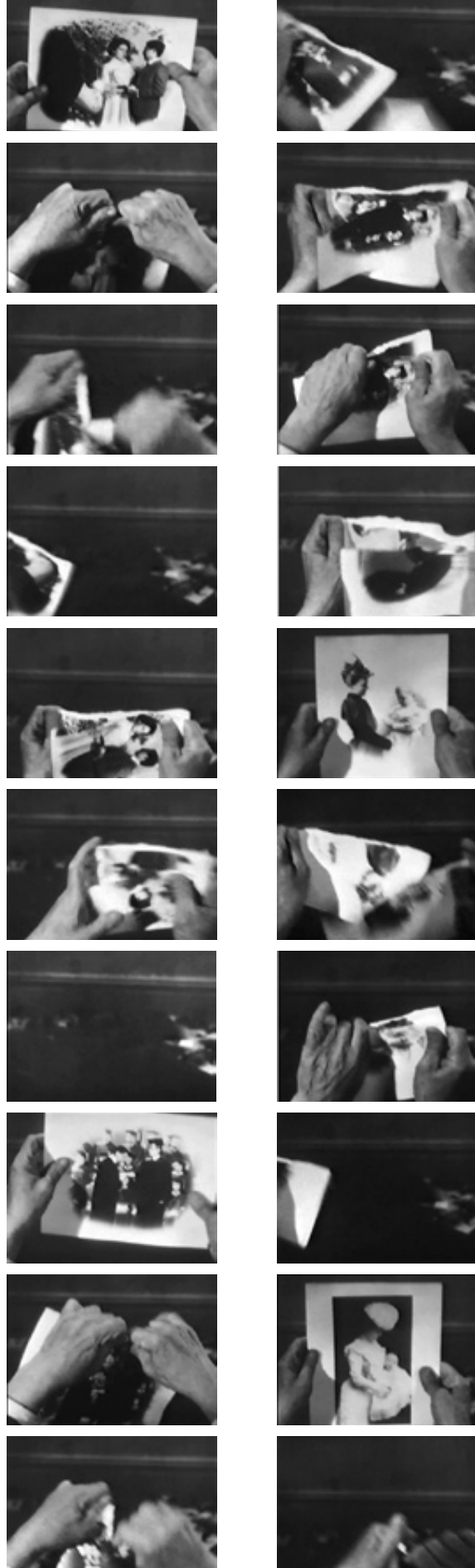
Deleuze sees Beckett's work, both in *Film* and in the television pieces like *Quad*, to which he devotes a wonderful interpretation in 'L'épuisé' ('The Exhausted'), as culminating in 'the luminous plane of immanence, the plane of matter and its cosmic eddying of movement-images'.¹ For Deleuze, what is glimpsed in *Film* and, for him, this defines the essential trajectory of Beckett's work from the early novels to the late drama and prose pieces and which culminates in a cultivation of the soundless, voiceless image, is 'the world before man, before our own dawn...' It is here that I would like to mark a disagreement with Deleuze and in what follows I will offer a strongly divergent interpretation influenced by Levinas. (Levinas, 2003)

Far from seeing Beckett's work as announcing 'the world before man', I see Beckett as constantly struggling with the irreducibility of the human world. There is no reduction of experience to a time before our dawn, but rather a deathless groping in our all-too-human twilight. I've always found this deathless groping as the source of Beckett's *humour noir*, yet Deleuze seems peculiarly deaf to both Beckett's sense of humour, his sense of the human, and his sense of humanity's humorousness. Let me explain myself by going back to the beginning and back to the original project for *Film*, the text that Beckett wrote in 1963.

* * *

Beckett's *Film* – and let us say *Film* as such in its generic character – is concerned

1. Although published as a small book in French, together with pieces by Beckett, in English it is included as the final essay in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, op.cit. pp. 152-174.



with a clearly stated and compelling philosophical problem that derives from Berkeley's famous proposition *esse est percipi*, to be is to be perceived (see Berkeley 1975, 77-78). One might ruminate much on the relation of Beckett to his 17th Century idealist compatriot. But in my view one can easily go awry by reading too much into the apparent philosophical sources of Beckett's work, many of which have their source in the 17th Century, in particular the occasionalism of Geulincx and Malebranche, which exerted a powerful influence over the young Beckett and whom he studied carefully. There is a common fallacy that is oddly and sadly even more widespread amongst non-philosophers than philosophers, that art is somehow *explained* by philosophy. It is not. To be clear, I am not suggesting the cultivation of philosophical ignorance, as I might be seen as arguing myself out of a job. Yet, to interpret an artwork in terms of a pre-existing philosophical or conceptual grid is not to encounter an artwork, it is simply to confirm that pre-existing grid. It is to see through the artwork and not to see it. This problem is particularly acute in the case of Beckett, where his text is nicely littered, cluttered even, with philosophical allusions and passing references. In my view, one should treat these philosophical allusions as red herrings and one must tread carefully to avoid slipping on them. In a particularly irritable and slightly insouciant exchange in a 1961 interview with Gabriel D'Aubarède, Beckett notes:

Have contemporary philosophers had any influence in your thought?

'I never read philosophers.'

'Why not?'

'I never understand anything they write.'

'All the same, people have wondered if the existentialists' problem of being may afford a key to your works.'

'There's no key or problem. I wouldn't have had any reason to write my novels if I could have expressed their subject in philosophic terms.'

With those cautionary words ringing in our ears, I would like to stay with Beckett's words and images as much as I can. If the meaning of Beckett's work were somehow translatable into philosophical terms, then there would be no reason to write a play, a novel or a screenplay. Beckett begins the original project or shooting notes for *Film* (to call the text a screenplay is an exaggeration) with some general remarks, which are extremely intriguing and very gnomic. He writes:

Esse est percipi

All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self-perception maintains in being.

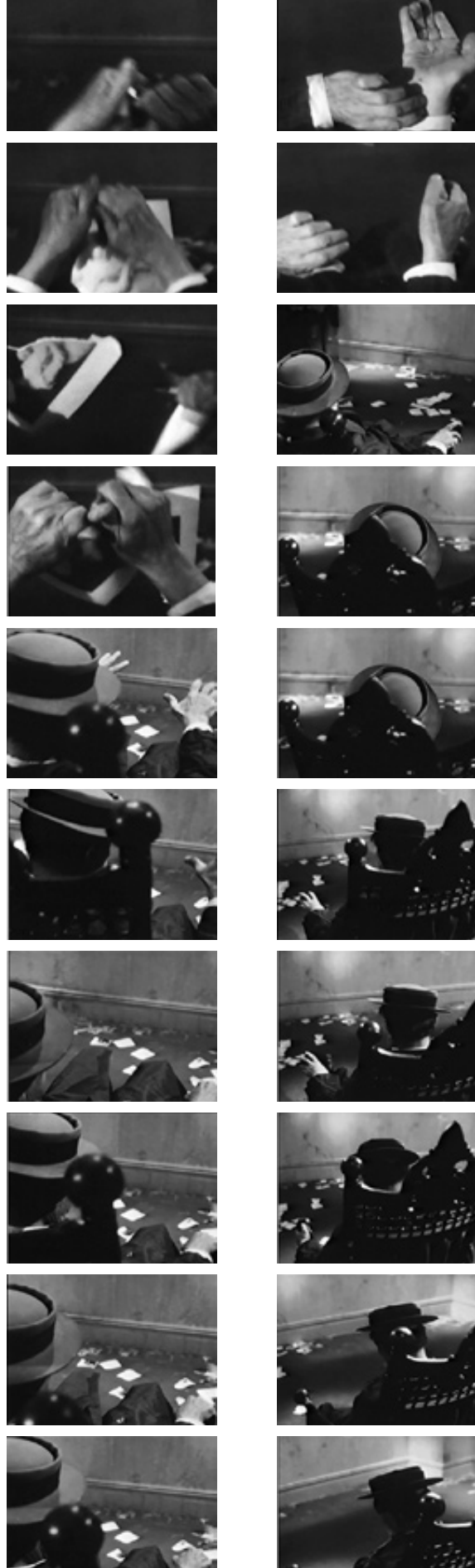
Search of non-being in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in

inescapability of self-perception.(Beckett, 1986, 323)

This is Beckett's cinematic variation on the Berkeleyan thesis: if to be is to be perceived, then both the things perceived and the perceiver are maintained in being through perception. Such is the philosophical position that is normally called empirical idealism, which Samuel Johnson famously sought to refute by kicking a stone. We are aware of things, of things perceived, and we are also aware of ourselves, we have self-awareness through self-perception. Now, what Beckett adds to this thesis is revealed in the second sentence of the above quotation: if self-perception is inescapable, then what we are searching for is an escape from self-perception. Beckett's thesis, if we may call it that, knowing that it is not the right word, is that human existence is defined by a search for non-being. Let's note in passing the curious inversion of Spinoza at work here: the human being is not defined by a *conatus essendi*, by a persistence or striving to maintain itself in being, but rather by a desire for non-being. This desire is displayed in a movement of flight or evasion from extraneous perception and from self-perception, a flight from both perceived objects and the self-perceived subject.

Yet, and this is the crucial complement to Beckett's thesis, this search for non-being, this movement of what Levinas would call evasion, breaks down in the inescapability of self-perception. Despite Beckett's protestations, this amounts to a clear, indeed startling, ontological claim, a claim about what there is: self-perception is what maintains us in being, but what we desire, what we crave, what we yearn for, is non-being, that is to say, the escape from being. Human existence, we might say, is defined by a movement of flight against that existence. That is, the movement or very kinesis of human existence is defined by a desire to escape the condition that defines our existence. Otherwise said, we are divided against ourselves by a desire that attempts to deny that which makes ourselves the selves that they are. Simply stated, we are a paradox.

Let us go back to Beckett's words: if existence is defined by a search for non-being and a movement of flight from extraneous perception, then this is impossible and the search breaks down in the inescapability of self-perception. Existence is irremissible and irresistible. Although we are defined by a flight against the *agony* of perceivedness, the melancholy conclusion is that we are stuck ineluctably with ourselves, that is, with self-perception. We are riveted to the fact of a subjectivity that is divided between Eye and Object, a division at the heart of the self that makes the self what it is and which maintains it in being for as long as self-perception persists. For Beckett, unlike Hamlet, to be or not to be is not the question. It is rather to be while wanting not to be, and



this constitutes a fact to which we are answerable prior to any questioning.² It is this dimension of facticity in the experience of *film* and of *Film* that interests me, what I call 'originary inauthenticity'.

It is this entire existential drama that is being *filmed* as *Film* itself. We might say that this is the ontological condition of cinema, of moving images that we perceive and of self-perception. We watch the Object, Keaton, who only is insofar as he is perceived by the Eye or the camera, and we watch him try to escape perceivedness. Each scene shows him being drawn tighter and tighter into the net of perceivedness, from the street, to the staircase, to the room, to the rocking chair with its gentle to and fro. If there were world enough and time, then it would be interesting to talk about Beckett's spiritual furniture and his obsession with rocking chairs, which is something that can be seen from an early novel like *Murphy*, where Murphy chains himself to a chair listening to a 'matrix of surds', to a wonderful late dramaticule called *Rockaby*, where the action – if that is not an exaggeration – consists in a woman rocking in a chair listening to her recorded voice:

till in the end
the day came
in the end came
close of a long day
when she said
to herself
whom else
time she stopped
time she stopped

going to and fro(Beckett, 1986, 435).

The piece ends with the following words:

so in the end
close of a long day
went down

2. Permit me another note of caution about philosophical interpretations of Beckett. Beckett was invited to Frankfurt by Siegfried Unseld, head of Suhrkamp publishers, in 1961. He was obliged to listen to Adorno's interpretation of *Endgame*, during which the philosopher insisted that the character Hamm was derived from Hamlet. Things did not go well and Unseld describes the exchange:

"Beckett said, "Sorry, Professor, but I never thought of Hamlet when I invented this name". But Adorno insisted. And Beckett became a little angry... In the evening Adorno started his speech and, of course, pointed out the derivation of "Hamm" from "Hamlet"... Beckett listened very impatiently. But then he whispered in my ear – he said this in German but I will translate it into English – "This is the progress of science that professors can proceed with their errors".

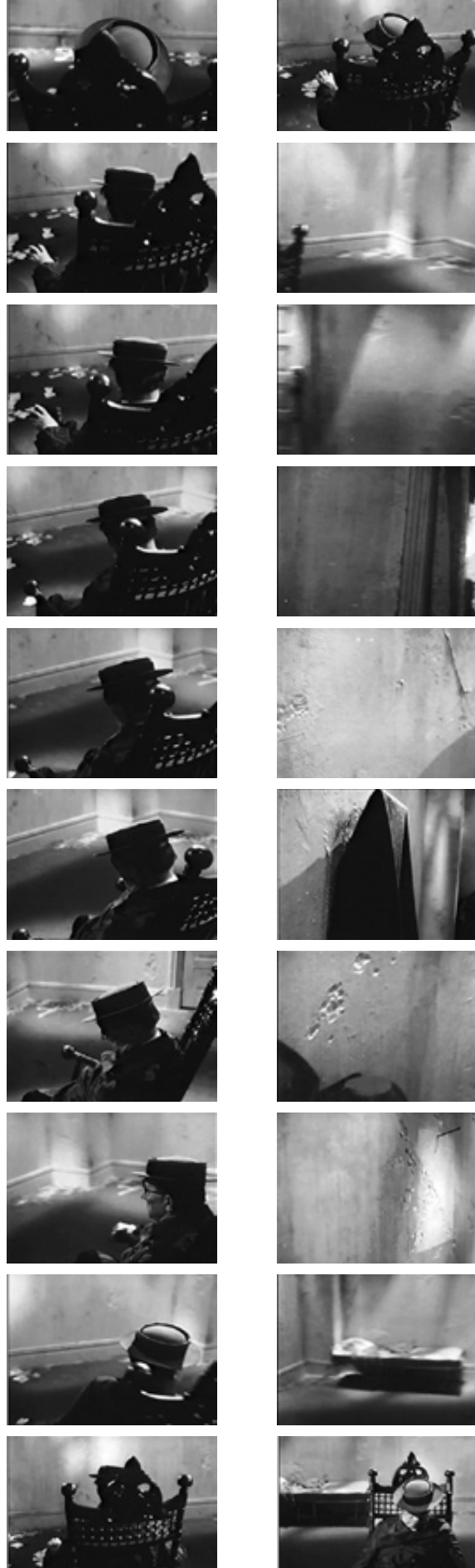
let down the blind and down
 right down
 into the old rocker
 and rocked
 rocked
 saying to herself
 no
 done with that
 the rocker
 those arms at last
 saying to the rocker
 rock her off
 stop her eyes
 fuck life
 stop her eyes
 rock her off
 rock her off (Beckett, 1986, 442).

There is much in Beckett about the movement to and fro, between being and non-being, of being as being rocked, being lolled back and forth or up and down. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, the wizened, older character listens, as in *Rockaby*, to the recorded voice of a younger version of himself, who is both more hopeful and more idiotic. The portion of tape to which he listens repeatedly is an epiphanal moment with a lover while punting on a lake:

I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side (Beckett, 1986, 221).

At the core of Beckett's work is this movement to and fro, of a gentle rocking up and down; or, in the words of a slightly later dramaticule, of coming and going.

But I digress. In *Film* existence is stripped down to its minimum condition, its basic elements: me myself perceiving myself in a rocking chair. Here, when all the animals in the room have stopped perceiving the Object, when they have been covered up, when the picture of God the father has been ripped to pieces (the image is actually a reproduction of the Sumerian god Abu from the Museum of Baghdad – perhaps it was also ripped to pieces during the invasion of Iraq and the ransacking of the museum in 2003 - and was suggested to Beckett by his friend the artist Arikha), along with the photographs of the Object's life, when all that remains is the gentle to and fro of the



rocking chair, here at the end of the *Film* we are confronted with the inescapability of self-perception. The self confronts itself: E perceives O with an expression that Beckett nicely describes as 'impossible to describe, neither severity nor benignity, but rather acute *intentness*'. (Beckett, 1986, 329) Intentness is an interesting word, which connotes attentiveness, heedfulness, or even care, but without intimacy. At the other end of the line of perception, O becomes aware of E perceiving it and freezes, semi-stands up, appears to scream silently, sits down, covers its face, uncovers its face, covers its face again, and then rocks more slowly until the rocking dies down, to and fro, to and fro, 'rock her off, rock her off'.

Is the Keaton character dead at the end of *Film*? *Au contraire*, as Beckett once said when he was asked by an American journalist in Paris, '*Est-ce que vous êtes anglais?*' If O were dead, then there would be an escape from perceivedness and self-perception, which there is not. Life goes on, not on a plane of pure immanence, as Deleuze claims, but on a plane of paradox, movement to and fro, and self-division; the physical human plane rather than some metaphysical airplane. The essential thing is that we go on. As Beckett famously writes at the end of the *Trilogy*, 'you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on'; or again, at the end of *Worstwood Ho!*, 'Try again, fail again, fail better'. One goes on in failure. It's not much, but it's human, 'a lobster couldn't do it', as Beckett quips. One goes on and that's how it is, *Comment c'est*, in the title of Beckett's extraordinary 1961 novel. Existence is shaped by a movement of flight or evasion that tries to escape that existence, a movement that fails and one begins again, *on commence*, *on recommence*. How is it? *Comment c'est?* It is to begin, *commencer*. For me, this is the core of the ethic of courage that defines Beckett's work.

* * *

What I have said so far amounts to no more than an attempted commentary on two sentences at the beginning of the original project for *Film*, listed as 'General'. Arguably, this is not stunning progress. But there is a third sentence, which appears to be rather bad news for my interpretation. It reads: 'No truth value attaches to the above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic significance.' So, after having laid out his ontological thesis, Beckett very casually withdraws it. Now, there is much to be said about Beckett's withdrawals and qualifications. Indeed, I think one can see an entire logic of denial in Beckett. He will say something and then immediately unsay it, letting the affirmation and denial spin together in an antithesis that it would be philosophical bad manners to name dialectics (it is close to what Levinas says about skepticism and its refutation or the oscillation of the Saying and the Said). This is what Beckett calls, and I call in following him, 'the syntax of weakness'. For example, from the *Trilogy*:

'Live and invent. I have tried. Invent is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. I have tried.'

And again:

'I resume, so long as, so long as, let me see, so long as one, so long as he, ah fuck all that, so long as this, then that, agreed, that's good enough, I nearly got stuck'

And again:

'There I am back at my old aporetics. Is that the word? I don't know'.

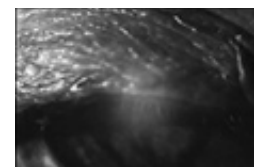
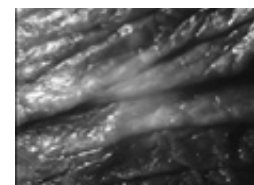
Throughout Beckett's work, one is presented with a series of self-undoing, self-denying sentences, where the affirmation and its negation unharmoniously chime together to produce the effect of aporia. An aporia is a perplexity, a path that appears to be blocked or criss-crosses into a cul-de-sac, in which we run back and forth like the cat and dog in *Film*. I have tried to show elsewhere that this syntax of weakness is a comic syntax or the syntax of Beckett's dark humour, his *humour noir*. (Critchley, 2002). For example, Clov to Hamm in *Endgame*: 'Do you believe in the life to come?' Hamm to Clov, 'Mine was always that'. And again, Mahood to himself:

'The tumefaction of the penis! The penis, well now that's a nice surprise, I'd forgotten I had one. What a pity I have no arms'.

So, it is perfectly characteristic and inconsistently consistent of Beckett to take back in the third sentence what he appeared to advance in the first two sentences. Both the proposition and its negation are to be taken seriously, in a seriously comic sense.

Indeed, one might go a little further here and say that the essence of humour (if, indeed, it has *an* essence, or is not itself a sort of curse on all essences and essentialization) consists in this movement of assertion and negation, this syntax of weakness that enacts the self-dividedness of the subject: for example, Groucho to Chico with his hand on his pulse, 'Either this man is dead or my watch has stopped'; Chico to Groucho, 'What'll I tell them?'; Groucho to Chico, 'Tell them you're not here'; Chico to Groucho, 'They won't believe me'; Groucho to Chico, 'They'll believe you when you start talking'.

Humour can only occur in a personality more or less consistently split into two parts, '*scindé en deux*', as Dominique Noguez claims - think of Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*. In true humour, one looks at oneself as another, as what Hegel calls 'self-alienated spirit'. *Film* is not funny, but its drama of divided subjectivity might begin to tell us what humour is.



At a particularly troubled moment in Beckett's life after the death of his real father and separation from his symbolic father, Joyce, Beckett went into psychoanalysis in London with Wilfrid Bion. The analysis lasted for nearly two years, throughout 1934-35, when Beckett was in his late 20s and Bion was a training analyst at the Tavistock Clinic. Not much is known of the detail of the analysis, although James Knowlson produces some extraordinary testimony from Beckett, where he confesses that he found his analysis with Bion utterly engrossing and helped him with the chronic range of psycho-somatic symptoms with which Beckett was suffering: panic attacks, cardiac arrhythmia, night sweats and general feelings of morbidity (you know, the usual sort of thing) (Knowlson 1996, 171-182). There is also no doubt that analysis with Bion helped Beckett to overcome his pathological self-immersion and isolation and begin to connect with other people.

However, let me tell an anecdote in this connection. After giving a talk in London to a group of psychoanalysts many years ago, an elderly psychoanalyst said to me afterwards in the pub that Bion once said of Beckett, 'There was nothing I could do with the boy. He was too happy'. Although this is almost certainly apocryphal, it is one of the deepest remarks anyone has ever made about Beckett. Beckett's work is an anti-depressant that works by returning us to what Freud called 'normal human misery' and giving us the courage to endure, to go on, and to go on with a wry and deeply human humour. It is the very antidote to nihilism. But Bion's alleged remark also opens up a can of psychoanalytic red herrings to accompany our aforementioned philosophical ruddy fish. Indeed, one may well want to interpret Beckett's syntax of weakness in psychoanalytic terms, as the pattern of affirmation and negation that is at the core of analytic experience, or rather the pattern of negation that the analyst seeks to interpret. However, I want to look at another wonderful denial slightly later in the original project for *Film* under the illuminating heading 'suggestion for room'. It reads:

Suggestion for room.

This obviously cannot be O's room. It may be supposed it is his mother's room, which he has not visited for many years and is now to occupy momentarily, to look after the pets, until she comes out of hospital. This has no bearing on the *film* and need not be elucidated (Beckett, 1986, 332).

This is a very peculiar speech act, wonderful for its banal detail and characteristic because of the denial with which it ends. If the nature of the room has no bearing on *Film* and need not be elucidated, then why elucidate it, particularly when it bears so directly and obviously in the drama of *Film* itself and indeed more widely on Beckett's life and work. Recall the aporetic opening words of Beckett's *Molloy* and indeed the

entire *Trilogy*: 'I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there. Perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind.' It was Beckett's mother who paid for his psychoanalysis in London (psychoanalysis was illegal at the time in Ireland) and whose 'savage loving', as Beckett called it, was arguably at the core of his troubles. It is often only when one's father has died that the full extent of the chronic relationship of dependence on one's mother is revealed. I speak hypothetically, of course.

Mention of mother opens up another dimension of perceivedness: perceivedness by the past. This takes place through the use of the photographs in the closing scene of *Film*, those anachronistically comic and unreal images that O scans in careful succession. Let me recall the dramatic action here: O is going to his mother's room in order to avoid being perceived.

(Question: why would you go to your mother's room if you don't want to be perceived? There would seem to be an abundance of perception and self-perception in one's mother's room.

Answer: in order to look after the pets as Beckett suggests in the above note?

Question: so, why does he kick out or cover up all the animals?

Answer: to avoid the *agony* of perception by animals.

Question: so, why is O going to his mother's room?

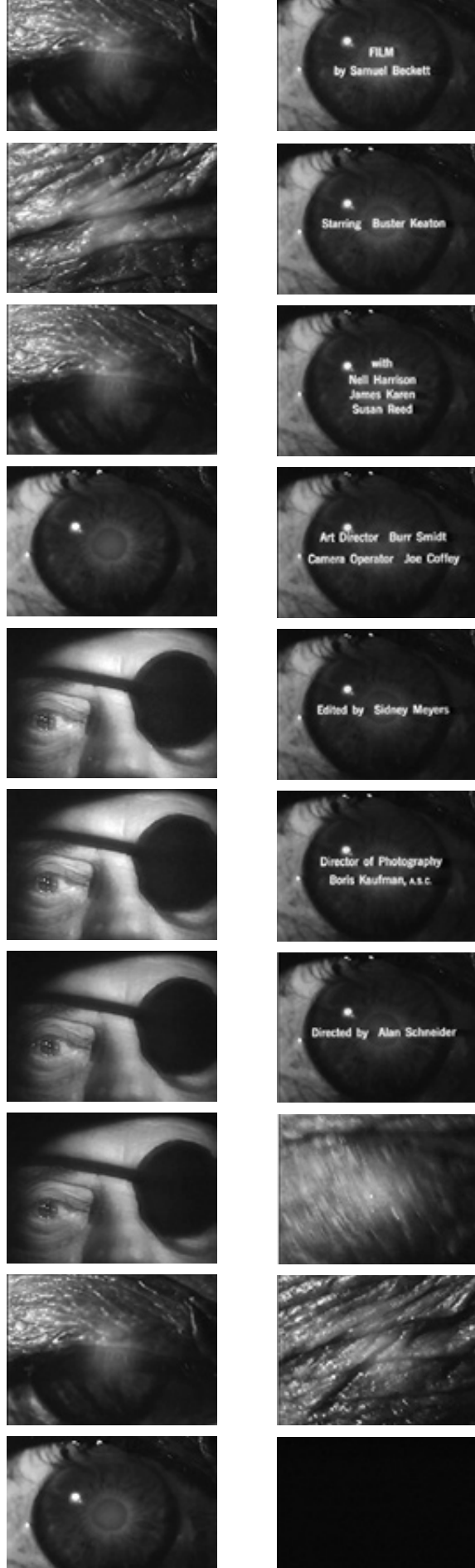
Answer: perhaps O lives there now.

Question: is this of merely structural and dramatic convenience that has no bearing on the *Film* and need not be elucidated?

Answer: doubtless).

O then examines and destroys the photographs of his life, photographs that he has brought with him in a folder that also begins to perceive him with its two eyelets, which echo the two eye-like holes in the back of the rocking chair. O seeks to eliminate the past and escape into non-being. But, as we have already seen, this is impossible and we are glued ineluctably to ourselves in a way that we can seek to evade, but we cannot escape. To be riveted to the fact of a divided subjectivity is also to be riveted to the past. The inescapability of self-perception is also that of a past that cannot be excised or extirpated.

Note the nature of the photographs in the closing scene of *Film*: 6 months, 4 years, 5 years, 20 years, 21 years, 25 years and then the aged monster of the antique face of Keaton. In the original project for *Film*, Beckett suggests 30 years old for this last image,



whereas Keaton was more than twice that age at the time of the *filming* of *Film*. With the 6th photograph, O pauses and touches his daughter's face with his forefinger. It is hardly a huge movement, just a slight caress of the hand, yet it communicates both tenderness and transience in a way that is more powerful than any grand pathetic gesture. It also reminds us of a crucial aspect of Beckett's work with which I would like to close, namely what Badiou calls its nostalgia for the past, a feeling of tender loss, of lost intimacy and lost time. Far from being some sort of abstract and cold modernist, Beckett's work is marked by an intensity of feeling, at times a sentimentality, for a past whose presence is gone, but which flickers and burns in a way that cannot be torn up in little pieces and thrown on the floor. What might call this? In a word, *saudade*, which is a fascinating Portuguese word meaning longing, melancholy and nostalgia. At its core is the experience of an indolent, dreaming wistfulness, an existential lassitude or langour. One can experience *saudade* for someone, for something, or for somewhere that is dear to one. As such, *saudade* is a yearning for an impossible object, usually an object from the past, as in the above-quoted passage from *Krapp's Late Tape*. But Fernando Pessoa, whom Beckett read approvingly in 1969 while convalescing on the Canary Islands, fascinatingly speaks of *saudade* for the future, which has both an existential and a political significance in his writings. My point is that there is something of this *saudade* in Beckett's writing, turned towards past and future, a yearning for a lost past and a courageous hope for the future. The core of Beckett's work is not nihilism or dark despair, but an ethic of courage and continuation. One goes on. At that point, I will stop

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JANAM'S COMMITMENTS.

>> by Vijay Prashad.

Sudhanva Deshpande, Ed., *Theatre of the Streets. The Jana Natya Manch Experience* (New Delhi: JANAM, 2007).

Lalit Vachani, Dr., *Natak Jari Hai (the Show Must Go On)*, (2005), Hindi/Urdu, with English subtitles. 84 minutes.

* * * *

A revolutionary theatre without its most living element, the revolutionary public, is a contradiction which has no meaning.
Erwin Piscator, 1929.

* * * *

On January 4, 1989, Jana Natya Manch (Janam) convened at Jhandapur village, on the outskirts of Delhi, to complete an interrupted play. Three days before, Janam began to perform their play *Halla Bol* in support of Ramanand Jha's campaign for the Ghaziabad municipal elections. Jha was backed by the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the federation of unions affiliated with the Communist Party of India [Marxist] (CPI-M). Jha's adversary, Mukesh Sharma of the Congress (I) Party worried that the play would turn the tide in Jha's favor. He, along with a group of armed men assaulted the actors. They fled to the CITU office. En route to the office, Sharma and his men shot a CITU activist and laborer, Ram Bahadur. At the CITU office, Janam's leader, thirty-

PREVIOUS PAGE:
SAFDAR HASHMI'S FUNERAL,
DELHI, 1989.
PHOTOGRAPH: RAM RAHMAN

four year old Safdar Hashmi, held the weak door while the rest of the troupe fled. Sharma and his men eventually broke in and ferociously beat Safdar Hashmi. The next day, Safdar, as he was and is known, died in a Delhi hospital.

The country was stunned.

On January 3, over fifteen thousand people gathered to cremate Safdar. The funeral procession was nine miles long. Every artist, every intellectual, every worker – it was a sight to behold.

Janam returned to Jhandapur, to finish what they had begun. Dressed in their trademark black, solemn and angry, the players threw themselves into their art and their activism. Among them was Moloyashree Hashmi, Safdar's wife. Reflecting on that moment, Moloyashree wrote several years later,

"We are often asked what made us perform in Jhandapur that day. Why did we go there a day after Safdar died? Was it difficult? And so on. At that time, it seemed the most natural thing for us to do; I don't think it was carefully planned. Was it an emotional response? Perhaps it was – we had lost a dear friend, comrade, companion. But I don't think it was merely an emotional response. We were doing what we had been doing for so many years: performing among the people. And as performers, we felt very strongly, as we do till date, that we should never leave a performance incomplete. The 4 January performance was also Janam's salute to Safdar, the people's artist. And there was also the political context: we had to assert that people's art cannot be crushed by brute force."

The clearing was packed, not just with those who had come from the city itself, but with the workers of the area who came out to honor their fallen comrades and their struggles. Janam's brave action of that day seared its importance for many of us.

SAFDAR

Habib Tanvir, the remarkable director and writer, remembers ten-year old Safdar Hashmi (this is one of the fine pieces in Deshpande's collection). It was in 1964, and Safdar's father Hanif Hashmi who worked in the Soviet

Information Department, brought his son to work. Meeting Tanvir, Hanif Hashmi said of his son that not only was he a Communist but "his color is much deeper red" than the father, who was a member of the Communist Party of India. After which, Hanif Hashmi added, "he is trying to follow in your footsteps," by which he meant that Safdar had a deep interest in the theatre. The two pillars of Safdar Hashmi's life had already been erected: his politics and his art.

A decade later, in 1973, Safdar and his friends created Janam. He was not yet twenty. At first, Janam produced full-length proscenium productions, the first a translation of an Utpal Dutt play and then original work done by the many talented young playwrights who are to be found in Delhi. Janam did not come out of nothing. It grew on soil fertilized by an arts movement that incubated alongside the anti-imperialist movement. During the last legs of the freedom struggle, and into the new republic's first few years, cultural production from the left, including activist theatre, was commonplace. The Progressive Writers' Movement and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) are well known. In 1943, the IPTA's bulletin proposed that this cultural movement must delve deep into the lively traditions of folk culture and link them with the energetic freedom movement,

"It is not a movement which is imposed from above but one which has its roots deep down in the cultural awakening of the masses of India; nor is it a movement which discards our rich cultural heritage, but one which seeks to revive the lost in that heritage by re-interpreting, adopting and integrating it with the most significant facts of our peoples' lives and aspirations in the present epoch. It is a movement which seeks to make of our arts the expression and the organizer of our people's struggles for freedom, economic justice and a democratic culture."

Three decades later, IPTA had wilted (except in West Bengal), and its Delhi office had been usurped by a member for his import-export business. Safdar and other young people around IPTA seized the office and set to work to revive not only cultural production, but also this institution of the left. From this base, they took their plays to working-class neighborhoods, to colleges, and to parks where office workers gathered for lunch. They also went on the road, around Delhi, doing plays on behalf of trade unions and Communist Party candidates for local elections. Drawing from Nautanki (the folk theatre of the Hindustani speaking region) as much as from Brecht and Utpal Dutt, Janam experimented with songs, with the structure of a narrator and a counter-narrator, and with a





democratic form of play making. The company would interact in the making of the play, as would the audience, whose input became important to the development of their repertoire. As Safdar told the theatre scholar Eugène van Erven in an interview collected in Deshpande's book, "That was our real initiation to street theatre."

Janam's signature, street theatre, came to life after the Emergency (1975-77), when Safdar returned to Delhi from a teaching stint in Kashmir. The spur came in 1978, when a Communist leader told the group around Janam about a workers' struggle at a Harig-India factory (A U. S. tool and die maker, Harig moved to India in 1961 to become an industry leader in hydraulic machinery). The workers' demands were elementary: they wanted a parking space for their bicycles and a canteen to make tea. Harig refused, so the workers went on strike. Their demands were modest, but they struck just as the post-Emergency Janata government decided to introduce a draconian Industrial Relations Bill to the parliament. The Left poised to fight back, with an all-India united trade union delegate conference on 19 November, and a 200,000 person rally the following day. Janam prepared a play. It is called *Machine*, and it is perhaps Janam's most evocative and powerful product (Lalit Vachani's documentary uses a stripped down section of the play as a device to introduce Janam and its current members).

As soon as the 7,000 delegates ended their session and began to file out of the cavernous Talkatora Stadium in Delhi, a group of actors dressed in black ran into the center of the arena. They formed a machine that huffed and puffed along till they got the attention of the delegates. The machine eventually

stops. The narrator asks, "What has happened? The machine has stopped. This is a first-rate crisis! Why has it stopped? Can someone tell me?" An actor steps forward and says that he or she has stopped the machine because he is on strike. When he finishes with his complaint, the owner steps out of the machine, then a factory guard, who "persuade" the workers to go back to work. Eventually, the workers refuse and they shout slogans, including *Inquilab Zindabad* (Long Live Revolution). The guard fires on the workers, and kills them. The narrator then steps in, "No matter how many bullets you pump into us, the workers are not going to be defeated. They will rise again." The workers rise, and gherao (surround) the owner. The play lasted for a quarter of an hour. As Safdar told van Erven, "After we sang the final song, the trade union delegates jumped over the rails. The leaders were like kids. They lifted us on their shoulders. We became heroes."

Janam repeated the play the next day, at the rally. People tape-recorded the performance, went back to their towns and cities, formed groups and performed the play in their own languages. The trade union movement adopted Janam, and it became a fixture at factory gates and in working-class neighborhoods. Sixty-eight original street plays and ten original proscenium plays followed in over the next three decades. The content ranges from women's rights to international solidarity, from the price of bus tickets to the police violence at a Honda factory, from the rise of Hindutva to the visit of American presidents to India. Not much happens in the Delhi region or in world affairs that misses Janam's dialectic of inspirational satire.

The murder of Safdar Hashmi marked Janam, and its reception. After 1989, Janam was identified with the assassination of its founder. Lalit Vachani's documentary is haunted by Safdar, as are most other such documents of Janam. Vachani, who made his name with a pair of sensitive films about the RSS (*Boy in the Branch*, 1993, and *Men in the Tree*, 2002), is led by Janam member Sudhanva Deshpande through the fateful day. They walk through Jhandapur, down the streets where the Janam and CITU members ran, to the CITU office and then finally to the street, where "in full public view," Safdar was beaten to unconsciousness. The film shifts focus, a brief archival sequence of Safdar in a relaxed mode at a workshop, a title "Safdar," and then an homage to Safdar and their relationship by Moloyashree. This part of the film is deeply moving, but at the same time it shows us how differently the filmmaker sees Safdar from the radical "friend, comrade, companion" (the phrase used by Moloyashree in an interview collected in Deshpande). For Vachani, and for much of the liberal arts establishment in India, Safdar's death has become a



ritual occasion – to allows for an engagement with what is without a doubt one of the most innovative and dynamic sections of the Indian art's scene. Safdar alive was a man of politics, a communist who was moved to act and acted to move history. But Safdar-as-martyr allows the liberal establishment to “consume” Safdar as a dead hero, and to ritualize his practice.

Safdar deserved his memorial. When the Bengali writer Somen Chandra was killed in 1942, his comrades created the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association. In Safdar's honor, and much the same as for Chandra, his comrades created the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT), which has since become the hub not only to remember Safdar's own legacy, but also for assembling the materials for an alternative, secular Indian culture. SAHMAT, of that period, was not simply a response to the barbarism of capitalism; it was occasioned by the death of a beloved person, and it used the basis of a *memorial* to galvanize a cultural movement. Janam had a different orientation.

For Janam, it is not Safdar's death that is as significant as it is his *life*, his commitments. His death is only the spur to continue the project to which they aspire collectively. Moloyashree's intimate portrait of Safdar is one space; but another is January 4, 1989, when she as part of Janam return to complete their interrupted play. Writing in 2003 after Safdar's killers were finally acquitted, Moloyashree wrote, “The grief and loss cannot be repaired. They remain. But what endures is Safdar's dreams, our dreams, our convictions. Safdar lives with us. He lives among the people...For Janam,” Moloyashree wrote, Safdar “is no cult figure – a word with negative implications. He himself had no time for such concepts. He saw himself as the people's artiste whose creative energies were unleashed by the forces of society.”

Safdar was a people's artist. But what is also remarkable about him is that he was a *horizontal leader*. A man of many talents (playwright and dramaturge, children's book author and illustrator), Safdar was also interested in people's abilities and problems. In that sense, he was democratic. Nothing went by without his active intervention: if someone needed medical attention, he would summon all his doctor friends, and on. His investment in democracy and socialism was a personal one, in that every person had to be embraced to create humanity. His was not only a socialism of theory or a socialism of aspirations, but it was a socialism of interactions as well. To take from one of Safdar's favorite theatre people, Brecht, Safdar's stance, his *Haltung*, ennobled him in the eyes of his contemporaries. He led. Without Safdar, it is unlikely that Janam would have moved so quickly from ideas and ambitions to having made

an institution and a modern tradition. But he did not lead from above. He led with his stance.

Safdar's commitment drives Janam. That much is clear. It is not as clear in Vachani's movie or in the morose way he is often talked about by the liberal intelligentsia; this is partly because Safdar's commitment is to a Communism that is not as easy to digest as the good humored man who was killed by a foot-soldier of tyranny.

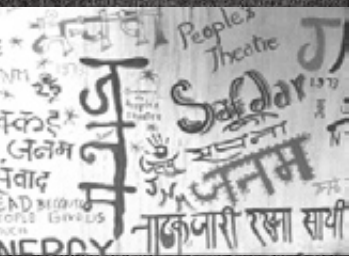
Safdar's mother got it. In 1995, Qamar Azad Hashmi wrote a tribute to her son which ends with this, “Comrade, your name, your actions, your commitment will never be forgotten. Your courage brings strength to my arms today. Your love will envelop us, today and in the future. We will not give up hope. Though you no longer walk beside us, your laughter and your songs will rise again from our throats, and when we advance to new revolutionary goals, your example will be there before us, encouraging us to forge further ahead. Comrade, farewell.”

LAAL JHANDA LE KAR COMRADE.

Safdar joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI-M] in 1976. Safdar's father was a member of the CPI, but Safdar joined the CPI-M's student organization in college. When Janam was formed in 1973, it worked with the trade union organizations of both the CPI-M and the CPI, although Janam avoided the CPI in the 1970s because of its close association with the increasingly authoritarian Congress (the CPI supported the Emergency, but has since been very critical of its positions in that period). The CPI-M became active in Delhi only in the early 1970s.

The CPI-M was formed in 1964, after more than a decade long struggle within the united





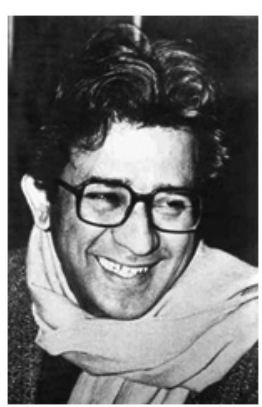
Communist Party of India. The main fissure within the CPI was the assessment of the international role of the Indian bourgeoisie and of the Congress Party. Was there still sufficient anti-imperialist political dynamism within the national bourgeoisie and the Congress or were they now roadblocks to the further development of the Indian people's struggles? The election of 1952 returned the Congress to power with a weaker mandate than it expected (a fifth of the electorate voted for avowedly left-wing parties, with the CPI gaining only 3.3% of the vote and the Socialist Party gained almost 11% of the vote --- the Congress was by far the largest winner with 45% of the national vote). The showing of the left indicated to sections of the CPI that the agrarian and other crises that the Congress seemed unable to address had made an impact on the election. The left within the CPI was strengthened by this situation. The Congress also identified the problem, and at the Avadhi meeting in 1956 it moved a set of socialistic policies. This furthered the divide within the CPI, as the more right-leaning section now felt that the Congress had demonstrated its socialist character. A compromise held the party together till 1964.

During this decade, an important development occurred in the international Communist world that has a bearing on the CPI-M's formation and on Janam. Nikita Khrushchev, who was now the head of the Soviet Communist Party, formed a personal relation with Jawaharlal Nehru, and he pushed the CPI to have good relations with Nehru's Congress. In the midst of this initiative, at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Khrushchev revealed details of Stalin's authoritarianism. Bitter debates enveloped the CPI for the next few years, and it sharpened when Nehru's Congress unconstitutionally dismissed the CPI government in Kerala (1959) and when the CPI central leadership backed the Congress-led war against China (1962). When the CPI-M was formed in 1964, it took with it the bulk of the cadre and with a substantial section of the leadership (including members of the central committee who had held a central or moderating position over the past decade, such as Jyoti Basu). It was because of Khrushchev's role in trying to move the CPI to the Congress that the CPI-M adopted Stalin in its iconography (much the same occurred in China at this time: Mao was a strong critic of Stalin, but as a consequence of the Sino-Soviet dispute and after the 1956 Congress, the Chinese adopted images of Stalin as a way to denounce Khrushchevian revisionism and Soviet interference). The "Stalin" of iconography does not imply that the CPI-M or the Chinese party championed Stalin's entire history (although "Stalin" is also seen as the symbol

of the Russian people's resilient sacrifices during World War 2). Indeed, in its documents and in the writings of its leaders, the CPI-M has quite consistently abjured the "personality cult" around Stalin and been very critical of the style of administration during the Stalin years (for example, B. T. Ranadive's article on the USSR in the 1987 issue of *The Marxist*). The CPI/CPI-M split happened because of domestic factors, largely, although developments in the USSR certainly refracted upon the Indian scene. "Stalin" is a symbol of those splits, rather than a glorification of his personality.

Stalin mesmerizes Lalit Vachani's camera. Stalin's portrait in Moloyashree's house is not far from pictures of Charlie Chapin and Albert Einstein, of Haneef Hashmi and Tagore, as well as a poster of Safdar. But the camera lingers on Stalin. Then, in the home of another Janam member, Nakul, the camera is stopped by an image of Stalin on a calendar. The problem is Stalin himself (and a lack of analysis of how "Stalin" becomes iconic as part of the CPI/CPI-M split), but it is more the communism of Janam. Vachani follows Janam to Pauri Garhwal, where the group does an agit-prop election play on behalf of the CPI-M candidate Vijai Rawat. When Rawat loses, Vachani interviews Sudhanva Deshpande at his office, and asks him if it is worth it. Deshpande answers, "In a sense, of course, you've asked me about all our work," and then goes on to suggest that Janam performs to create a "space for dissent, a space for an alternative viewpoint." He is right, that Janam opens up space for all kinds of alternative views, of dissenting forms. But it is not simply dissent or an alternative that is being offered in abstraction. What is offered is communism, which is far more specific. Brijesh, another Janam member comes to the heart of why he performs with Janam, "There's so much poverty that surrounds us. You look at the poverty and feel that something is wrong with the system. Even if you say socialism is a utopia, I think it is a better system in any case." Janam acts, Brijesh says, to "mobilize public discontent to join our fighting organizations." This is a significant point, in that there is little illusion that Janam's work itself changes the world. Janam, as artists and as culture-shaper, is able to *allude* to reality, or in Louis Althusser's words, to draw attention to certain problems, even to provide understanding of them. But, art "cannot *define the means* which will make it possible to remedy these effects." For that one needs the "fighting organizations" that are driven by a different kind of knowledge, a science of society that has a theory of the mechanisms that produce the social effects that are depicted by art. For that, one needs an organization with a "science." For Janam, it is the CPI-M/CITU and Marxism.

Vachani's film is structured so as to introduce us to the individual members



of Janam. There is a great deal of warmth in his strategy, so that we come to know Sarita, Nakul, Kalia, Uttam, Sudhanva, Moloyashree and others as complex human beings who come from disparate classes and are yet joined by activist theatre (they are not all on the Left, as Sudhavana tells Vachani, for “no precondition is being laid down” when they join Janam). Vachani’s earlier films introduced us to Kali and Sandeep, two people whose situation leads them to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and to the Hindutva Right (this is the political formation of the Right that emerges with full force in the 1980s with a hierarchical and culturally cruel moral project with no discord with the neo-liberal state). The Janam actors often have similar stories to tell, but their political orientation takes them elsewhere, to a political space that is not about regimentation (the *shakha* of the RSS) but about cultural development (the rehearsal space of Janam). But there is a curious undertone in Vachani’s film, a wishing almost that we could have these same people do this same kind of theatre, but without the politics, without the red flag.

Moloyashree, perhaps responding to this sentiment, tells Vachani, “I want to join the struggle, but I don’t want to have the red flag. It’s your choice. Not mine. My choice is to have the red flag. Janam’s choice is to have the red flag. The red flag is the worker’s struggle. The flag which is soaked with the blood of the workers.” Sitting at home, with Charlie Chaplin behind her, Moloyashree underscores her point, “The revolution to me is not a dream. It’s reality. It’s *yakeen*. It’s conviction.”

It is this conviction that is not ancillary to the work of groups like Janam, but is indeed their life-blood. Without this conviction, they would not have been able to do 8,500 performances in 140 cities and towns over the course of their history. Post-modernist theory rigorously denounces teleological thinking – that human beings strive for autonomy and freedom, and that this striving in a collective fashion leads to a just future. Instead, the post-modernists tell us, history is far from logical, and that the linearity of teleology is more misleading than it is helpful. But from a political standpoint, teleology is indispensable. Without something to hope for, even if it is provisional, there is little incentive to act in a way that is not simply selfish. If there is no good to come in the world, then why not simply take care of oneself. The conviction of a better world is what drives groups like Janam; why would its members sacrifice their evenings, drive across Delhi’s vast expanse to do two or three plays a night? For the play itself, for the audience’s reaction, but also for the social, political and cultural changes that such work might produce.

* * * *

STRUGGLE FOR A NEW CULTURE

Sudhanva Deshpande’s edited volume is published by Janam. This is not unusual. Janam, from its inception, involved itself in theoretical work about its own practice and that of the theatrical and cultural world around it. Safdar wrote a column for the *Economic Times* in the 1980s, where he produced criticism about Delhi theatre, of cinema and of the trends in cultural activism in general (shortly after his death, Moloyashree collected these columns for SAHMAT into *The Right to Perform: Selected Writings of Safdar Hashmi*). Janam publishes a regular journal *Nukkad Janam Samvaad* and it holds periodical seminars and talks that take theatre and theatrical theory seriously. In 2000, Janam devoted its journal to a compendium of important Marxist thinkers on culture, such as Plekhanov, Gorky, Lu Xun, Gramsci, Mayakovsky, Piscator, Utpal Dutt, Cabral, and of course Bertolt Brecht. Brecht is the patron

saint of radical theatre in India. But for Janam it is not Brecht’s plays or even Brecht’s concepts themselves which are of central interest; what is Brechtian about Janam is the scrupulous attention paid to public theoretical self-assessment of Janam’s cultural practice and cultural impact. The writing about what they do is as important for a Marxist theatre troupe as their plays.

Vachani’s documentary sees Janam’s politics as principally in the issues taken up by the plays and by the formal affiliation of the group with the CPI-M (and the trade unions). But Janam’s politics are also to be found in the *form* that the collective takes, in how it functions, how it writes its plays, and how it interacts with its audience (one of the exceptions in the scholarship is the





new Ph. D. by Arjun Ghosh entitled “Idiom for Change”). These elements are essential if Janam is to actively create a democratic cultural space out of the bourgeois one that envelops us. And it is this democratic theatre that is far and above Janam’s *raison d’être*. Only superficially are Communist groups like Janam “street theatre artists.” What is far more important to them is not their main theatrical location (the street as opposed to the theatre) but their notion of art. As Safdar wrote in one of his insightful pieces on the theatre, the “definitive and unresolvable contradiction between the bourgeois individualist view

of art and the people’s collectivist view of art” is far more important than anything else. The point is to both draw people into the struggle, to *allude* the real, but also to challenge the bourgeois idea that art is an escape from reality. The bourgeois theatrical space, Brecht wrote in 1948 (in a piece republished by *Nukkad Janam Samvaad* in 1996 and 1997), transforms human beings into “a cowed, credulous, hypnotized mass....How much longer are our souls, leaving our ‘mere’ bodies under cover of the darkness, to plunge into those dreamlike figures up on the stage, there to take part in the crescendos and climaxes which ‘normal’ life denies us?” The alienation of the consumer-spectator is to be undone by a new kind of ethos, one that promotes collective work, both among the artists themselves and that draws in the audience to both shape and be shaped by the play.

The collective ethos is evident in the way Janam interacts. Vachani’s film has some wonderful scenes of the troupe on the road or in hiatus as rain clouds threaten their performance, or again, as they rehearse in one of those wonderful colonial central Delhi homes given over by a Communist parliamentarian for useful work such as this. The easy camaraderie, the gentle way in which people interact is deceptive; when it comes to the rehearsal the question of quality is not to be squandered. Good politics does not make good art. In his edited collection, Sudhanva Deshpande includes one of his many essays on the mechanics of playmaking (this one originally published in the Kolkata-based *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, September 1996). He walks us through the collective process by which Janam crafts one of its many plays: a “fighting organization” invites them to perform at a particular function or

else an event of importance takes place; Janam members gather, discuss the issue, perhaps even call in an expert to give them a seminar on the matter; they think of characters and of short skits that might or might not work; they try them out; it is then given over to one or another of the members to knit together these scenes and characters, as well as draw from their studies of the matter, to write a play; they workshop the play, find what works, and what doesn’t; friends who are song-writers give them a few songs on request, which they incorporate into the play; when they have a working play, they try it out on other friends, whose input is crucial; the play is performed, and at each performance, the members try to cull input so as to continue to shape the play. Sudhanva describes the way Janam created a play to depict the horrors of work in the National Export Promotion Zone in NOIDA, Delhi. I don’t want to repeat his story; it is well-worth the price of the book.

The collective ethos is not only within Janam, but also in its close association with the trade unions, the student organizations, the neighborhood associations and on. They “commission” the plays, and sometimes their members offer expert advice on the issue. Of course, this input is not capable itself of making the art; just as the plays only allude to their reality, so too does their theory about their struggles only hints at its theatrical possibility. And finally, Janam is also actively part of the community of actors and of spectators: the public space created by its journals and books, by its seminars and performances allows it to risk its ideas and to receive constructive criticism. The unions and the women’s organization are not theatre critics whose perch is the Sublime; they see the plays as their plays as much as Janam’s, and so they have a vested interest to make them better (or more effective, which is not always the same thing, since effectiveness for a fighting organization might mean more didactic).

One of the more astounding passages in Vachani’s movie is Janam’s performance of *Yeh Dil Maange More, Guruji*. A reaction to the criminal massacre of thousands of people in Gujarat (2002), the play is spectacular. It opens with the cast reading some of the most heartfelt and earnest Hindi poems written shortly after the enormity of the anti-Muslim pogrom was known. Then, they walk out from the center of their circle bearing placards upon which are mounted photographs of the carnage. This is all heavy stuff. But it is the bookend for a remarkably farcical show about the twin forces of neo-liberal capital and theocracy made manifest by stock characters and a humorous scenario. Guru Golgangol and his two *chelas* (disciples) Buddhibili and Baahubali are on a quest to create the Hindu Rashtra, and we follow their

ridiculous adventures, which is a summary of India's recent history. The farce and the tragedy coexist, and heighten each other, so that it becomes harder to see the ridiculous in the spoof and the overwhelming solemnity of the poetry and images are broken when we realize that the perpetrators of these crimes are ridiculous (in his essay in *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* in late 2002, Sudhvana Deshpande recounts what worked and didn't work and how an industrial worker in Faridabad pushed Janam to make the play more political).

To compare Janam's approach to communal fascism with that of the films of Anand Patwardhan is instructive (Patwardhan's 'considerable work has been given a very sympathetic review by *Critical Asian Studies*, with a multi-part study by Mariam Sharma, Bhri Gupta Singh and Ashok Bhargava in 2002 and Linda Hess in 2003 – these brief notes should not in any way take away from the judgment in these other, fuller statements). Patwardhan's three films that track communal ideology and violence (*Ram Ke Naam*, 1992; *Father, Son and Holy War*, 1995; *War and Peace*, 2002) are richly documented and lushly filmed. Vachani's two small canvas films on the RSS are a good complement to Patwardhan's large canvas, almost sprawling epics. But a viewer who takes in Patwardhan's films is left with a sense of gloomy futility. The documentaries pound on and on with image and fact about the desolation that is Hindutva. This, to my mind, is a consequence of two problems: first, that an independent leftist, such as Patwardhan, makes films as politics, and therefore mixes the very different forms of art and of "science," of the representing of problems and the resolution of them. When the art form is to carry the enormous burden of political theory and of praxis, it is diminished. There is room here to question the lack of gap between art and politics, not to champion art for art's sake, but to maintain the distance between what art can do and what "science" can do. One gets this sense when Vachani turns to the departing audience after Janam's agit-prop election play and asks them if this play will change their vote (as if the show itself is sufficient). The second problem is in the gloomy response of the audience who now sees what they are up against, but has not the means to take these allusions to reality and find the mechanisms to thwart Hindutva. Without fighting organizations of heft by one's side, the aesthetics of the independent leftist is consequentially morose. Janam is saved from the latter problem, because it is linked to trade unions and the Communist movement (so are Patwardhan's movies on the fisher workers, on slum dwellers battles and on the Canadian Indian farm workers fight to create a union). The first problem is often circumvented, because the plays are only one part of the ensemble of ideas presented by Janam and its movement to the people. Janam can afford to be satirical, even humorous when it depicts the Hindutva Right; it can even make us

laugh in the wake of Gujarat. This humor, the spoof, draws us in, and even if it does not explain every element of Hindutva, the laughter empowers the audience to feel that he or she can vanquish theocracy and neo-liberal globalization. And when they feel this, the fighting organizations are nearby. That's the consequence of Janam's commitments. ✱

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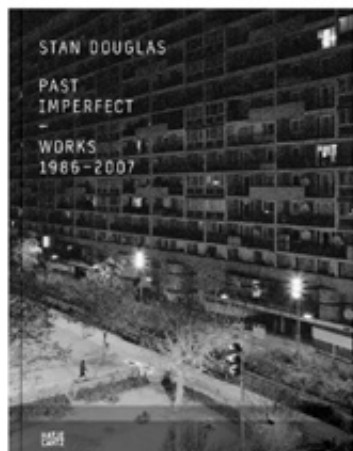
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