The Complex Answer
On Art as a Nonbinary Intelligence

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Doctoral Thesis

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On Art as a Nonbinary Intelligence

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To all those who believe the future is a social project and education is fundamental to realize it

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PREFACE

This thesis presents the reader with a series of chapters—from 2010 to 2021—that introduce an exercise in how a practice of art and exhibition making has been influenced by philosophical thinking. One form of thinking oriented towards the production of an epistemological space where art is not illustrating ideas but enacting thinking and activating experience as an epistemological force that slowly erosions and, eventually, erases the culture-nature divide.

All the chapters are based on texts that have been published before and yet—for the sake of creating a dramaturgy and stressing the thesis—they have been reedited and partly rewritten. They want to enforce the idea that art is an intelligence that is influenced by ideas and the emergence of new notions but also thinking through experience. An experience that is aesthetic and epistemological in equal terms.

Part I, "Quantum Arts—Art Beyond History, Art Beyond the Line," revolves around the notion of artistic research as a method to break up times and orders and introduce nonsense, humor, and maybes.

PART II, "Curatorial Entanglements—How the Ideas Became Form," encompasses several texts that define a practice of artistic production, exhibition-making and writing dedicated to present the embodied thinking of Part I. Can artworks and exhibitions be more than the mere

exposure to individual practices, cultural trends, or taxonomic orderings of contemporary patrimony? It seems fundamental, in reclaiming the relevance of contemporary art and contemporary artists, to introduce a reflection about the making of exhibitions as a space for a complex philosophical experience to which art-making greatly contributes. A change of paradigm needs experience to reach language. Art acts in the experience of an intelligence that enhances a comprehension of nature that will influence future political forms, future science, and future technology.

PART III, "Thinking Metamorphoses—Overcoming the Cartesian Divide," returns to the ideas presented in Part I with renewed arguments. To define a philosophical language capable of encompassing an experience of art that goes far beyond the historical definition of the aesthetic, we need philosophy. The texts presented here argue for the exercise of conceiving art as the substance that enables a new turn of practical philosophy. One that is first speculative and then political, defining a commonality between art and the human, the human and nature, and art and nature; that enables the possibility of extending the rights of citizenship to sentient nature.

PART IV, "New Institutions at the Horizon—How the White Cube Turns into Nature," reflects on the need to invent new institutions. A new human behavior demands a new foundation. In its purposelessness, art—and by extension art institutions—can adopt several functions depending on the historical conditions. An art institution cannot have a steady and fixed form,

cannot remain cubical or white, cannot be a vessel forever. It needs to morph and adopt forms that breath intelligence into our future political organizational forms.

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202 **PART IV**

New Institutions at the Horizon—How the White Cube Turns into Nature

While Raphael Montañez Ortiz proposed to place a rainforest inside a white cube, I wonder how to overcome the white cube altogether and replace it with nature, in its vastest and least domesticated form—the ocean. This approach is linked to my effort to instill education in exhibition making.

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INTRODUCTION

The Age of Love: Notes Toward a Nonbinary World

I remember a team meeting at MACBA—it must have been around 2010—in which the question of a museum journal was addressed. I could not really articulate what the content of such an endeavor should be, aside from repeating like a mantra that we needed a new body of references. "No more dialectics! It must be another way of understanding thought besides the Hegel-Marx-Adorno axis!" At that time, and in that context, my interlocutors understood that to move away from the canonical and political-pedagogical framework could be very dangerous. What was I really saying? To move away from certain conceptual premises and say goodbye to the intellectual cosmos of the left could mean embracing empty artistic productions just for the sake of an audience or, much worse, for the sake of pleasing the market. True. Yet it seemed very hard to endure the aesthetic and ideological premises of politically committed conceptualism and its blindness towards gender equality, intersectionality, and its own Western whiteness. Could one justify the risk of abandoning tradition just to embrace the unknown? And was it really an unknown? Or did we just need to carefully revisit the past and reassemble the materials, voices, and works that would embrace the cosmos of care? Perhaps the time was right to replace philosophy with poetry, without any fear of those other disciplines disappearing. Oh! Suddenly I felt an energy emerging around a contemporary art invested not just in opening up meaning but also in opening up the experience of art as an overarching experience of love. Slow as I am, I was unable to articulate this. But I sensed that the words of artists I cared for—from Joan Jonas to Ida Applebroog to Nancy Spero—would show me how to embrace the question of love as the question of life.

I also felt a heavy burden—of both my education and my ignorance. My education was the result of me wanting to be thought of as equally valuable to the field as any man. What else would explain my decision to study philosophy? And yet that choice—as I suppose has happened to many women artists—was very strict in terms of forbidden experience, personal experience, and identity. These three areas were the source of the problem. What problem? The part that was never addressed. It was as if we were engaged in the ritualistic avoidance of some taboo. All my teachers—male philosophers—stressed the importance of the critical tradition. A tradition that stresses distance, logic, and separation. Binary logic seemed to be the only ground where objective truth could grow. I could do that! Coming from a poor rural background, I was the perfect subject to perform its avowal. Looking for a subject on which to write a graduate thesis, I found the perfect material: I would discuss Suzi Gablik and her quest for the re-enchantment of art. I still remember my defense tribunal. I critiqued her work as an attempt to weaken the fundaments of aesthetic theory and judgment through the reintroduction of a cooperation between aesthetics and ethics that "could end with us going back to the religious Middle Ages!" Is it possible to use a piece of writing in a platform like this to deeply apologize for my inability to find the incredible wisdom in her writing? I do apologize. The good news is that something in the attitude of my teachers drove me towards her—an author unheard of by them and the sacrosanct tradition of the Adorno school. I never abandoned her writings. In her book *Has Modernism Failed?* she wrote: "Aesthetic autonomy is a deeply rooted idea—autonomy implying moral and social separateness as the condition of art-making."[1] Gablik argued that we must abandon this idea in favor of a unified vision of the world in which art and ethics would not

[1] Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1984).

only coexist but cooperate. I had never considered the immense importance of thinking through these two notions very carefully: coexistence and cooperation. Autonomy, suddenly, appeared before my eyes like Empire. Experience, however, emerged as a substance able to create the conditions of mutuality and care: coexistence and cooperation. The religion I wanted to fight in my scholarly, academic numbness was not embodied in the poetic language of Gablik—and so many others—but in the radical institutionalization of autonomy (and its essential qualities) as a key instrument to colonize culture and perpetuate the difference between the colonizers and the oppressed.

And yet, it seemed so difficult to flood the institutions with this experience. What if they—the critical voices that support certain accepted views on the function of art and artists—would dismiss it all as a weak attempt to gain the heart of the audience without giving it further consideration? Oh, suddenly, the art world was possessed by concerns about organization: display systems, participation—all translated to the granite of form and function. The white cube —its negative traits and claims to neutrality—was again important. How then to create a different experience? One so big, so powerful, that the Western world might forget that template for a while—or, better yet, forever. And, again, the museum! It seemed as if we were discussing the formatting options provided by Microsoft to create a new text document. It was probably at this point that I felt that performing artists offered the energy that could rescue us. Moving, dancing, creating rituals, invocating and reprograming the conditions we may need for a radical transformation towards social justice. Alongside performance, technology also entered the stage, and so did all artists invested in nature, in indigenous epistemologies, in care … Little by little, the words that were spoken, the research that was made, all that for decades seemed ordered in

clusters—such as feminism, ecology, activism—started to come closer and touch each other. Not that it is happening in the programs, not yet, or truly reflected in the structures of the art systems or even in art education—that much is still ahead of us. But I really feel that the meaning of a nonbinary world is starting to form. What does it say? It expresses the possibility—without a drop of utopia—of living without the violence imposed by binary separations. Living without violence: isn't that what art is all about? It may depict it or address it, but its ultimate purpose is to keep it outside the realm of the real. A new era demands a new human: a human capable of a description of the world without disaster, without the duality between heaven and hell, humanity and nature. The exercise of adapting—our minds, our bodies, our cells—to an interpretation of life as a practice, a practice of mutually productive relations of knowledge, thought, and care giving forms within shifting relations of power. This, it seems to me, is the biggest contribution of art and artists. Inventing and practicing new forms of inquiry reveals the inadequacy of our institutions. More importantly, the role that the senses play in making language can enable an epistemological transformation—one that entails an ethical metamorphosis of knowledge, thought, and care.

PART I

Quantum Arts—Art Beyond History, Art Beyond the Line

Clandestine Happiness: What Do We Mean by Artistic Research?

Thanks to a high-intensity laser, Anton Zeilinger was able to teleport light particles (photons) for the first time in 1997. The laser shoots photons in different directions, and the photons then form pairs called "quantum entanglement." In this binding, the union of the photons is stable regardless of the physical distance between them. When Zeilinger, in his experiment, changed a quality of one of the particles, the twin particle immediately and spontaneously underwent the same change. Teleportation is based on the physical property that allows information to be exchanged between two particles, once they have been entangled quantumly, at a rate faster than the speed of light. Although science neither thinks nor expresses itself in these terms, we imagine that within a few decades it will be possible to teleport a microorganism and, soon thereafter, objects and, finally, human beings.

The mere statement of this astonishing discovery so crucial to quantum physics whets the imagination not only of physicists but also of laymen who know nothing of matter. The fact that the finding is called *teleportation*, a name taken from a literary genre—science-fiction—is also significant. The choice of that word set the details of the experiment traveling through worlds beyond the laboratory. Teleportation incites curiosity and manufactures the fiction of an almost intuitive understanding of the experiment's logic: one word suffices to join the familiar and the strange. The fortunate choice of this term cannot be attributed only to the desire to communicate the news, though of course that played a part. It reflects, mostly, the need to produce osmosis

between knowledges of very different natures, and it posits that generating communicative forms of meaning is key to future discoveries.

Much contemporary art shares this intuition. And the oft repeated but poorly defined expression *artistic research* is the term that best describes the precise and acute movements between areas of knowledge, between the senses and understanding.

In answering the question "what is realit?" Zeilinger says:

> That which we can agree on. We need to undertake a thorough reconstruction of the basic concepts that we use every day—reality, time, matter, space, light—so that we can use them to define new situations both inside and outside the laboratory. We live our lives immersed in categories. If we want to use categories to interrogate reality, just as a lawyer interrogates a witness, we must understand what they mean at each moment. And that's where philosophy comes in; it is what best explains the historical dramatization of those categories.[1]

Artists, like scientists, are pioneers when it comes to creating new forms of connectivity between worlds that seem to have nothing in common. They embark on writing novels, conceiving

[1] Quote from a conversation that took place at Traunsee Akademie in Austria on July 21, 2010. Anton Zeilinger is a professor of quantum physics at the Institute for Quantum Optics and Quantum Information, Vienna.

treatises, discovering archives, devising therapies, and choreographing bodies, that is, on the endless study of everything that contributes to different formulations of what we call *reality*. It would be banal to describe all that as mere play. We find ourselves, rather, before a strange form of research that is more aware than ever of the parallel between producing art and understanding the world.

Since Marcel Duchamp, and perhaps much earlier—indeed, perhaps forever—art has been eager to house a knowledge different from academic knowledge and to provide the ultimate reason for modifying that academic knowledge. Much contemporary art attempts to develop works and situations that make it possible to read the past freely, to take flight and approach the unknown.

There is a paradox that cultural studies and the heirs to critical theory consistently deny because it does not serve their purposes: artistic practice is temporal and atemporal at the same time. Art and culture must necessarily situate themselves in this contradiction in the attempt to be within history while escaping it.

Cultural studies recognize that they cannot be conceived in terms of progress, that there is no single modernity but many, that universals are now always in the plural. Nonetheless, contemporary art runs the risk now more than ever of turning into a secondary source. Art and artists know themselves to be subject to a series of textual and institutional logics, and one of their achievements has been to reveal that fact in the sphere of artistic production and reception.

Artistic research names the effort to recognize the importance and explore the consequences of the following statement: meaning does not emerge from history but from fiction. This names an effort, not a method. When we speak of artistic research, we are not speaking of the fact that many artists engage in exhaustive research before making a work. We should also not confuse artistic research with contemporary art's proximity to the social sciences and their methods. The term has been coined, rather, to alert us to the fact that art has also become a quantum phenomenon.

That is, the principle of indetermination is also operative in the social sciences, aesthetics, and philosophy. In the very act of observing, we alter what we have observed. Neither theory nor philosophy nor criticism can aspire to determine what art is. It is simply ridiculous to question whether art exists or not, but forcing it to speak a single language, that of historical reconstruction, is sadly impudent.

The traditional hierarchical distinctions between theory and action, between criticism and creation, are sterile. There is an obvious need to think of a more eloquent way of conceiving the aesthetic-cognitive back-and-forth between the production of art and the grammar of theory. Contemporary art practice has invited itself to the party of those who assume the complex mission of generating tools to grasp the world.

Taking artistic research seriously means accepting disorganization in the relations between the disciplines that deal with contemporary art. The rise of cultural studies, critical theory, and the many variations of post-Marxist understanding of the relationship between art and economics is fruit of an ungrounded—though perhaps historically necessary—confidence in the possibility of first unraveling and then stabilizing the meaning of what happens in a work of art, as well as the "creative" process as a whole.

Meaning cannot be explained by its context, though the context may help with its historical interpretation. If this were the case, the effort of art and artists to avoid juried shows and art academies would be pointless. Interpreting is not the same as understanding. Too often, the description of the codes that constitute a system, of the relations that act on a work of art or any other cultural fact that can be reified, is geared towards passing judgment, to determining whether we are headed in the right direction. If contemporary art has strived to do anything, it is to *teleport*: to change green into red, to turn around the rules of the game to be freed of the constant allocation of meaning and thus "unexpress the expressable."[2] For a long time, philosophy has been saying that there are no outstanding rewards and no certainty waiting around the corner. Yet, both criticism and the exhibition apparatus are determined to contradict this as they strive to render the notion of history plural.

The new importance of philosophy and the social sciences in the sphere of contemporary art is related to an essential discovery: art today is located in a space uniquely productive for the

[2] Roland Barthes used this phrase frequently.

interrelation of knowledges that would otherwise never intersect. This is similar to what Gaston Bachelard attempted to describe in the introduction to *The Poetics of Space*.[3] Space appears where the logic of causality ceases and another principle takes hold, mainly the principle of reverberation. Stating that space does not emerge because of laws of causality means that the public sphere is not constructed by merely ensuring a series of conditions, just as the existence of a parliament or alike does not guarantee that debate will take place. Something else must happen, and that is what Bachelard calls *reverberation*. Practice proves that transparency is not enough, that a system of logical argumentation does not necessarily unleash the will to change, let alone change itself.

Bachelard looks to *reverberation* as an image that expresses the movement between logics of thought and methods of work that have nothing in common. The possibility of different thinking depends on this so very abstract and difficult to define mental operation. Contemporary art attempts to exist in this space of reverberation, rather than in the work-commentary equation. Art is not a pretext for thought, but rather a thought that operates by means of the constant exchange between different systems that vacillate between the abstract and the concrete, and that make us vacillate between them as well.

Nothing productive emerges from translating ideas into images. The attempt to establish a correlation between ideas and their representation denies the unexpected and, hence, the hope for change. Reverberation names something quite different—and more complex—than

[3] Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958). First published in English (London, 1964).

interdisciplinariness, or the borrowing of ideas and concepts between sciences. Artistic research understands that artistic practice generates concepts because of intuition and that the challenge lies in their formalization. That amounts to affirming that art's relationship to theory should not obey a cause-effect logic. To be truly modern, theory cannot assume the role of the eternal mediator between the work and the viewer; it cannot limit itself to speaking after the fact. Locating thought outside artistic practice means accepting that history is the final instance and judgment the only way to relate to culture to ensure that the last horizon is always normative; it means that there is only room for the dialectic between good and bad. There are countless examples of interpretations of cultural production on these bases.

It is necessary to think and express oneself in other terms. To walk down a different path, we must unlearn the learned and attend to concepts neglected by critical theory. The mission is not to renovate thought, but to venture into other logics and place them at the core of artistic and cultural thinking. Sustaining, like Gilles Deleuze, that meaning emerges from fiction implies realizing that it is not philosophy that makes an emancipated viewer possible, but rather an artistic practice that has made an unprecedented effort to understand itself before the figure of the viewer. And that understanding implicates us all.

That is what artistic research consists of, and that is why an institution that wants to think through, rather than from, art is now inconceivable. The production of space is an act of trust, of futureness.

According to Bachelard, the mental function that brings us closest to the enigmatic vastness of what's to come is daydreaming. For philosophy, it is a fundamental exercise. Daydreaming is a way of creating access to grandeur, that is, to a sphere radically opposed to the domestic and different from the social. It empowers an attitude so very exceptional that it takes the daydreamer outside this world, to another world that bears the mark of infinity. It points in the direction of a vital multiplication of mortal freedoms; it builds world and counterworlds. Daydreaming is a constitutive space that suggests the ability to imagine consciousness itself.

I Celebrate Myself and Sing Myself: Anachronism as a Method[1]

Providence is the reason that man himself sometimes reappears in different centuries.

Honoré de Balzac, *Letters*

In the last decade, we have seen how historians, curators, and institutions have subjected contemporary artistic production to a reading defined by the philosophy of history, thus making works conform to history and systematizing the experience of them according to the illusion of supposedly objective parameters. This approach is mediated by the primacy of the question of *theme*—that of which art speaks—such that "theme" and "meaning" become synonymous, making us forget that there are other ways of signifying. Herein lies the reason for the renewed interest in the notion of anachronism and its potential as a method that could allow us to escape the omnipresence of hermeneutics.

The anachronic designates a situation where the analysis of rhythm replaces the analysis of duration as the sole form of grasping time. Rhythm is tempo: power, drive, vibration, movement; duration, however, is the melody of history.

1 The phrase "I Celebrate Myself and Sing Myself" is taken from the first line of the poem by Walt Whitman "Song of Myself" (1892).

Insofar as the understanding of history means delineating a chronological axis upon which events are ordered, the sole task of the historian is to ceaselessly insert the stories that have not yet been included in that great continuous narrative. Meanwhile, the institution (where an exhibition is understood as a way of institutionalizing a material) is reduced to the place where the legitimacy of a right acquires a public form. The fact that the exercise of revision and the recovery of things forgotten provoke unanimous respect proves that a fitting vocabulary has been found, one that serves solely to avoid the unpredictable function of experience in art.

Furthermore, the impact of this rewriting resembles the relationship between a text and a staggering number of footnotes that interrupt the reading to remind us that writing eludes the author, and that countless parallel actions take place and have taken place synchronously with that great text. Those actions were hidden, but the time has come for a reordering, and that means finding a hole in the diachronic axis upon which history is written. The "well of the past," to use Thomas Mann's phrase,[1] blossoms on the surface and drowns it. Nothing exists in the singular any longer. We can no longer speak, for instance, of a modernity, but rather all its multiples. Yet, contemporary art seems to continue to be indivisible (perhaps that is the first symptom of its anachronism). Alongside this endless search for plurals, in the bosom of history there lies another one: the search of those individuals—artists—who seem to be strangers to time, who escape the wanderings of the present. In the last decade we have seen a heightening of the sensitivity to the exceptional in art, to those who, at least apparently, remain inflexible to the logic of globalization. The proliferation of projects on *those others*—those who think and act without us, so to speak—also forms part of this operation of recovery, which no longer symbolizes justice,

[1] Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939), trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter from the German original: *Die Geschichten Jaakobs* (Berlin: Fischer, 1933).

but the vast seductive power that myth, archetypical being, and the genuine still hold in our culture. What these projects evidence is our fear of entering into a state of permanent instability.

The political importance of recovery as a tactic is directly proportional to the impossibility of formulating a more complex statement of the relationship between contemporary art and a discontinuous conception of time, that is expressed in rhythms and cannot be represented as duration. In other words, a way of understanding time that is indifferent to the idea of progress and is therefore relieved of the imperative of innovation. This understanding of time has no qualms about repetition, about imitating what has already taken place. Generating doubt about these constant reincarnations and about the spontaneity of the contemporary would provide a way around the supposed sincerity with which it is believed that art and culture—but not, for instance, science—must speak.

In this dialectical interplay between great narrative and academic appendixes, the past and history are manifested as a new facet of culture and of its present power: this is not the power to delve into adventures of logic that might lead to a new *episteme*, but rather the *de facto* ability to include or exclude. Nonetheless, this explosion of voices and points of view has contributed to maintaining a degree of confidence in public opinion thanks to the constant effort at ceaseless expansion implied by historiographic revision and its relationship to contemporary art. The worst enemy of the enthusiasm inspired by the possibility of intervening in, interrogating, interfering with, modifying, amending, taking back, and affecting hegemonic narration is the tendency to endlessness. Each footnote serves both to clarify and obscure in a new way, one that, rather than

providing a new consciousness of the issue at hand or of contributing to an understanding of the relationship between contemporary art and time, between production and the inextricable complexity of the contexts in which it appears, places us before endless windows through which we peer; always under the promise of completing history. We can assume the risk that disconcertion brings. What is harder, though, is to face the fact that there are those who attempt to replace this strain of research not by adopting another logic but by emulating this effort and reducing it to a mere gesture that credibly illustrates the choreography of this explosion of histories within history.

The problem lies in the fact that the politically correct is not a method, but rather a strategy to avoid confronting a technical difficulty: the understanding of times that cannot be reduced to duration, the grasping of rhythms that do not give rise to a continuity, that operate outside the melody of history. The desire to avoid incoherence by abandoning the philosophy of history stands in contrast to the need—one upon which Schelling insisted long ago—to delve into other languages that formalize art objects, their ability to become facts and the role that individuals play along lines that distance us from the predictable; an exercise still more complex at a time when citizen-spectators are more passive than they are liberated in relation to what they expect from art.

The language that has contributed to producing what is socially known as contemporary art partakes of the lyrical genre. It is a language geared towards creating enthusiasm, not method; a prose characterized by the careful choice of terms that defend the importance of teary eyes, the choreography of agency, the value of the hand on the heart rather than in the pocket. The inquisition of feelings—even "good" ones—is as much a part of the totalitarian world as the

global economy, but it is cloaked in good will while, with true disdain, it attacks the *null* moments of life.

How to find a way out of this *melodic* way of understanding history without losing sight of rigor or responsibility? The *null*, that which seems to have strayed from meaning—idiocy, nonsense—merits our attention as never before. In these forms of absentmindedness lies a new imagination of the private, a way of resisting the power of empathy in all its strains, whether real or virtual. Mistrust of a thoroughly defined present allows a part of artistic intelligence to elude the desire for art and institutions to be able to respond eloquently to their times. In other words, it allows an escape from responsibility understood as the imposed need to answer for, to clarify and not to expose ourselves to the exuberance and lightness of thought.[2]

This insistence on placing art and culture in the present runs the risk of turning objects and ideas into a mere support of the ghosts that fill in the empty place of a time lacking in resources, exhausted from having repeated the obvious so often. Too much preterit—as Georges Didi-Huberman says[3]—runs the risk of being nothing more than "residue," regardless of how positive it may be. And it is impossible to speak of the future since, despite a different rhetoric, it is a symmetrical form of the past. Hence, the importance of the extemporaneous, of that which is *not relevant*. While anachronism is not the solution to our problems—how to escape from "historical

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[2] Nietzsche said that those who defended the notion that thinking was an arduous task should be attacked.

[3] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps. Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images* (Paris: Minuit, 2000).

culture," from "the fever of history"[4]—it does formulate a possible means to a different method, to a logic that, though still incipient, can put us at risk: disconnection and a skewed time.

Any question of method becomes a question of time, that is, a question that must truly consider a term largely forgotten in philosophy and art theory: rhythm. The anachronic names a different rhythm, the possibility of straining an analysis of meaning from a different angle that forces the subject and the context—whether institutional or not—to review the conditions from which it puts forth the experience and the interpretation of artistic production. I purposefully leave out art itself, since no art can be considered "contemporary"; that is an institutional consideration, not a question of practice. Indeed, the thesis would be that art is always anachronic. And "what must

be reconstructed is the very idea of anachronism as error about time."[5] One of the ultimate aims

of artistic production is to transform our idea of time. The anachronic implies accepting the importance of rhythm as fundamental to understanding the relationship between matter and energy. "Rhythm," here, has no connection whatsoever with the virtual or the cosmic. In relation to art we, like Gaston Bachelard,[6] should speak of a *rhythmic realism*: the introduction of material and conceptual parameters geared towards freeing us from the need to construct cultural identity in terms of the philosophy of history.

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[4] An expression used by Nietzsche in the prologue to his *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2nd ed., trans. R. J. Hollingdale from the German original: *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (Leipzig: Verlag von Fritzsch, 1874).

[5] Jacques Rancière, "Le concept d'anachronisme et la vérité de l'historien," *L'Inactuel*, no. 6 (1996): 53.

[6] Gaston Bachelard,"La rythmanalyse" (on the analysis of rhythm), in *La Dialectique de la durée* (Paris: Quadriage/ PUF, 1950).

Insisting that the anachronic is not an aberration but a need means that we must distance ourselves from a method of reading and interpretation dominated by the notion of duration, and instead delve into another method, into a contingency of heterogeneous times that provide other keys to pursue the question of meaning.

Duration implies order: rhythm, intensity. This difference has epistemological consequences: it means forgetting hermeneutics, putting away philological tools and inventing a new critical imagination. Hence, the assertion that the anachronic entails a risk (a challenge that art faces) means rejecting a whole set of conceptual exigencies to be able to express oneself in a foreign language, to introduce another rhythm and to generate a strangeness that forces us to reassemble the *current* unease. The question now is if academies and institutions are willing to give up the ironclad alliance between time and space and to assume once and for all that leaving the system behind is not synonymous with chaos.

As Little Time on the Ground as Possible: First Attempt on the Possibility of Artistic Significance Beyond Philosophy of History

In the last decade, we have seen how historians, curators, and institutions have subjected contemporary artistic production to a reading defined by philosophy of history, thus making works conform to history and systematizing the experience of the works according to the illusion of supposedly objective parameters. This approach is mediated often by the primacy of the question of theme—that of which art speaks—such that themes and meanings become synonymous, making us forget that there are other ways of signifying ideas and concepts. Herein lies the reason for the renewed interest in the notion of anachronism and its potential as a method that could allow us to escape the omnipresence of hermeneutics.

The question of the subject is a crucial one. It implies that the world of things and matter is ready to tell us something, and that the message could be collected by us. Moreover, it implies that the way art, its objects, and its many practices create a cognitive situation is a steady process; that is, not only do the writer-curator and historian-critic come after a subject; but also art itself. If this is the structure we want to act, with the help of language, there is no surprise that language then is conceived as the tool that allows us to record, on the one hand, the distance that separates the human and the objects of art, and, on the other, to interpret this distance by inserting it into a timeline narrative; into (h)istory. There is, in this insistence, in the existence of a message that art

carries and that language tells us something of the humanist communion between people and things (a twisted comeback of solidarity as well as a stubborn reminiscence of the traditional hero); the writer, the storyteller, which believes that the reason is there because it needs us, or that it is there to be conquered. So the writer's task—and here the theorist is the writer—is to interpret and project the values of a certain community onto it and the moment of glory that this perspective has on things resides in the possibility of stating that also the real (whatever this may be) wants the same as we want. That things, facts, and events dream with the same perspective as we do. And therefore, what happens is that the success of the project coincides with the triumph of the spirit of individualism.

The way language is conceived is crucial. This new objectivism believes in description, because it believes that the world is already there, which exists before we can talk about it. Historians and artists then can describe what is already there, and the work and the text become a strange sort of engraving. In this picture human memory is a recording machine and art as well can find a new form of representation; the recalling and the telling of what has and is still happening. A description that implies, as well, the vision of the writer, the curator, and the theorist as being able to answer in real time to what is happening, which assumes a certain quickness that is needed otherwise it may be too late. Urgency resides then in both the outside and inside of the text. But what if the world is not a noun to be told about, but an adjective, for example? Or if the task of language is in relationship to the real and is not to state that there is anything to say. Or if the role of theory would be to introduce slowness, to mediate very slowly, to experience, not the distance with the world, but its innerness, its inner immensity. Which kind of discourse would we then have? What kind of politics could be addressed from an unhurried and slow utterance? If

there is nothing to say, no message, no moral prescription to be taken from the message, no commitment, no worldview, no sort of truth that needs to be communicated, an ulterior significance, that means that we need to reinvent the whole task of language in relation to objects and images if we do not want to remain silent or to appear as if we want to avoid rigor.

The obvious answer to objectivism is that the world is created along with language. That there is no purpose in objects, that their necessity has nothing to do with utility—and even less with ideological utility—that they do not express anything but themselves and therefore that no form of causality exists. This thinking that science after the disjuncture occasioned by the replacement of Newtonian physics by Einstein's theory of relativity and quantum mechanics shares with art, has been continuously forgotten by art writing and by curatorial practice and exhibition making in the last few decades. This issue of subjectless-ness poses a greater problem to critical theory and cultural studies, both modern to the core and faithful to the modern understanding of time and language. A "discontinuity"—a term later translated by Louis Althusser as "epistemological rupture"—that art has always been all knowing and constantly sharing with us, stating and restating that no knowledge is immutable.

Language performs reality; however, this statement is not an answer, but an enigma. So, language is the substance that deals with secrets not with subjects and this implies a concept of the real completely at the other end of the one at work in what I call the return of objectivism. A "real" that is never quite there and is also not there to provide us with proof or meaning, which escapes "significance."

Also, the hero, the writer, or the curator rebels against this reality. How come reality is not there? How can someone dare to say art is not made of historical substance? How can someone deny that the aesthetic experience is not the ultimate form of the ethical spirit? The doubt—a doubt that has many times been elaborated in philosophical language, in quantum mechanics—has never properly reached art theory. Its shadow, though, has been there for almost a hundred years or more, and could have been the cause of Hegel wanting to kill art before killing language. An act of despair that has affected, not art, but language by introducing a new form of empathy between subject and object. The avant-garde's greatest challenge is that of creating a language which is capable of dealing with a secret or embodying it; the response has been many times to fall back into a form of lyricism that rehearses feelings, or the norms and values that rule individuals' lives. A new noise has been slowly taking its place in the core of theory, the ideological, and political warmth has taken the place of the philosophical task of not dealing with (h)istories but first, with language itself, with the possibility of exploring different kinds of thinking; logics capable of merging us with the substance of art, instead of placing us at a critical distance from it.

It is important to see how the rise of a new objectivism, and the lyrical language that deals with it, is not independent from genre structures and the development of its discourse. The rise of noble forms of ideology and its speakers creates a strange twist of the plot, where the masculine hands open to the audience while his voice speaks about the many plurals of history, the many values at stake. A new displacement of the feminine has occurred in public and it is difficult to address it properly.

Can the World be Possessed by Shoegazers? The Limits of Lyricism, the Potential of the Tragic

"Aren't we living in a world where headless men only desire decapitated women?"

"Aren't we living in a world"—the poet says, full of empathy for himself—"where headless men only desire decapitated women? Isn't this a realistic vision of the world full of the emptiest of illusions? Aren't your son's childish drawings much more truthful?" says Jaromil, the protagonist of *Life is Elsewhere* by Milan Kundera,[1] a passionate supporter of the 1948 communist revolution in Czechoslovakia and, not incidentally, a lyric poet. There is a natural affinity, it seems, between revolution and lyric poetry: "Lyricism is intoxication, and man drinks in order to merge more easily with the world. Revolution has no desire to be examined or analyzed, it only desires that the people merge with it; in this sense it is lyrical and in need of lyricism."

He is one of those individuals who prefer wet to dry eyes, who talk with a hand close to their heart and despise those who keep them in their pockets. He, the young poet living on the edge of times transforming, embodies the syntactical mode of addressing the world coined by André

[1] Milan Kundera, *Life is Everywhere* [1969] (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000).

Breton: "Beauty will be convulsive or will not be at all."[2] Radical or nothing, transparent, readable like the tears indicating that the man is feeling, like the open expressing a desire of embracing the world and making it a home, real like the people not marvelous, immediate not erotic. Hannah Arendt's claim that "what makes a man political is his faculty of action"[3] seems undeniable. Who would be in favor of the ugly idea of non-agency in times of urgency, who would not see a danger in those who, in the name of privacy or withdrawal, would privilege a sense of autonomy and then, perhaps, keep their hands in their pockets, or just move their eyes from the crowd, elsewhere. But how to understand what seems to be a disparate for the common sense, that is, that action could somehow be understood as a faculty separated from the realm of the "empirical society," a term used by Theodor Adorno,[4] the real world where everything seems to have a direct consequence, where revolution coincides with a growing awareness of an inability to change the social, where powerlessness just becomes the privileged object of a guilty self-reflection, that, in its turn, has marked the refoundation of a new twist of critical thinking. Art's and culture's reflexive preoccupation with their own powerlessness and superfluity is precisely what makes them capable of theorizing powerlessness in a manner unrivaled by other forms of cultural praxis. However, to become one with the exercise of describing one's own position, with the rehearsal of the despair provoked by restricted action, seems a sad near future.

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[2] André Breton, *Nadja* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), trans. Richard Howard from the French original: *Nadja* (París: La Nouvelle Revue Française, 1928).

[3] Leroy A. Cooper, "Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy: An Interpretation," *Review of Politics*, vol. 38, no. 2 (April 1976): 147–76.

[4] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 225.

Where to look then? Do we need a "prophet of unfeelingness," as Jung called James Joyce?[5] He wrote:

> We have a good deal of evidence to show that we actually are involved in a sentimentality hoax of gigantic proportions. Think of the lamentable role of popular sentiment in wartime! … Sentimentality is the superstructure erected upon brutality … I am deeply convinced we are caught in our own sentimentality … it is therefore quite comprehensible that a prophet should arise to teach our culture a compensatory lack of feeling.[6]

Prophets aside, his words open a different space between passivity and action, making the un-feeling as a different way of acting, moving away from the paranoia that interprets the lack of movement, of the immediate release of a sentiment ignoble.

Movement

But the inexpressive, the inert, the unnervingly passive poses many problems to our modern understanding of the political. The hands in their pockets in terms of revolt, the lack of "movement"—action—is perceived as ambiguous, as equivocal because it is antipodal to our will of synchronizing with "our times." The dysphoric provokes antagonism, it is not there with

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[5] Milan Kundera, "The Total Rejection of Heritage, or Iannis Xenakis," in *Encounter: Essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011).

[6] Carl Gustav Jung quoted in ibid.

the rest of us, opening the private into the public, keeping away a space that belongs to us, circulating the same information as the rest, stopping the circuit, or transparent. It is the negative pole of empathy. For the lyric soul, for those who "burn with indignation" while witnessing the over-all proliferation of injustice, their hands in their pockets, or just elsewhere, painting monochrome surfaces on canvas, for example, are often seen as expressing a form of resentment, but why—would they not otherwise engage with what needs to be done? Why would they pretend they are living in different times?

Even Michel Foucault, who vehemently rejects the idea of a sovereign, founding subject, a subject capable of experiences, of reasoning, of adopting beliefs and acting, outside all social contexts, even he preserves a form of sovereign autonomy under what he called the "agents." In contrast to the modern misunderstanding of the autonomous subject, he defends that agents exist only in specific social contexts, but these contexts never determine how they try to construct themselves. Although agents necessarily exist within regimes of power/knowledge, these regimes do not determine the experiences they can have, the ways they can exercise their reason, the beliefs they can adopt, or the actions they attempt to perform. Agents are creative beings—like Jaromil, lyric—and their creativity occurs in a given social context by which it is influenced.

So, not even Foucault dared to go for those not "attempting to perform."[7] Foucault went even further by arguing that we are free in so far as we adopt the ethos of enlightenment as permanent

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[7] Quoted in Colin Gordon, "Governmental Rationality: An Introduction," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 8.

critique. Therefore, we assert our capacity for freedom by producing ourselves as works of art. As such, we are again faced with a more complex, more eloquent, form of lyricism, where the goal is, after all, not only to be capable of producing sensuality of expression, but also for the self to become a sensual subject.

Therefore, the problem is not only that we identify action with the vivid, with life and that we want to be part of it, seeing withdrawal as a form of enfeeblement, a defect in affection that makes individuals step away from the stream of life. However, the question of lyricism points towards something much more important, methodologically speaking. It moves towards something that surpasses the aesthetic dimensions of our well-rehearsed ideological training: the possibility of conceiving time, historical time, as non-durational, and therefore breaking with our need to not only properly answer to what seems to be required by the force of the present, but also with the nervous tic of wanting to represent it.

What Is the Future of Art? If the Future Is Not Enough …

The future of art must be, because it is cynical to state that art has no future. Art having a future means that art has a continuity, which is different from saying that art is the producer of a future, of its idea. As notions, future and utopia are not even friends. The main trait of utopia is that everything is subordinated to conscious human will. Utopia is the longing for the realization of the perfect time as messianic eschatology: an ideal vision of rightness realized in a perfect space —as utopia.

The future is a completely different question. It does not require a perfect time and space, but the production of the very fabric of time. The future of art is, therefore, related to the question of duration, to the conditions under which art is continuously made, to its history. The future of art is the same as its end, a matter of language.

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Hegel and his thesis of the end of art have been extremely popular. It seems obvious because, logically speaking, all that starts may end as well. However, what really appeals to critics and

people interested in the future and the end of art is not art, but the future. That is, to be able to anticipate the future, to see beyond the present.

“The end of art” is one of my favorite statements. Every time that one gets enthusiastic about art and waxes lyrical about the fact that not only are there great artists, but the real revolution of human sciences is happening now and through art, another voice pipes up that art already ended. But why would one want to collapse the future of art just because it ended? The same logic would suggest that all that ends can start again, and that there is no necessary causality. Art, indeed, needs to end. Certain parts of our logic, our language, and our discourse are unable to deal with art. Truly of a nonsensical nature, art poses active resistance to description and to interpretation. In front of the impossibility of total inadequacy between the language and the things, language kills the matter.

To declare the end of art is an exercise in foreseeing. Stating it before it happens—art ends and ends, and yet it continues to be there—is a trick of the mind. This mind trick is always exposed to the dangers of animism, of having to deal with specters, of not having an object before the eyes, of losing its power in front of the material world. The mind is a magician and, even when it dies, art remains part of the show.

Art is the world talking back. But not everyone is ready to listen, or even to notice this. In certain moments of history, words are unable to follow properly the order of the disciplines to which

they are submitted; they also seem unable to properly deal with the exercises in matter, form, experience, and thought that are happening inside the substance of art.

This made art invisible for a while, not for all, but for those looking for sameness. And these same people mistook its inevitable mutation for death. However, the mutation *is* death, since certain traits ceased to be there, and others appeared. Nothing is more fantastic than imagining the future of art, and nothing seems more necessary to avoid the routine attacks on it and the recurrent dangers it is exposed to. To work in peace, art needs to move away.

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If one asks "What is the future of art?" the answer is a tautology: "The future of art is art. The future of art should be art." Ad Reinhardt wrote it clearly: "Art is art and everything else is everything else."[1] So "what" is clear. "How" is another question. But even more important: Who poses this question? Art does not. Art is art and is not concerned with its own future. Why should it be? The question of the future is one of continuity, and therefore of systems and structures that make continuity possible. Art is not an apparatus, but surely is also "there." The end of art has happened many times, and so has its future.

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[1] Ad Reinhardt, "Art As Art", *Art International*, vol. 6, no. 10 (Lugano, December 1962).

Hegel was mandatory. One could not study philosophy and skip the Hegel course. When I studied philosophy, there were only six of us enrolled on the course that year, so it made sense to open up some seminars to students from other departments. Hegel was the "art guy," and the two semesters dedicated exclusively to the reading of the *Phenomenology (of Spirit)*[2] were also highly recommended for art history students. Only male students were concerned with Hegel and enrolled on the seminar. And since there were only two female students in philosophy, the class had a nice, strange tension. I landed at the Facultat de Filosofia UAB Barcelona after an intense year at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Madrid, where I had also been "reading" Hegel. The institute was next door to the famous Residencia de Estudiantes, the locus of the intelligentsia during the short, epic Spanish Republican era. The Institute of Advanced Studies in philosophy attracted researchers who were concerned about the future of Spain, of the country getting to "know itself," and so they spent the days also reading Hegel. The three volumes of the *Phenomenology (of Spirit)* were yellow and my eternal question before leaving home every morning was if it made sense to carry all three to the institute. The philosophers there were very pleased by my attitude (I was mute for a year) and recommended that I study abroad. Meanwhile I was sent by my faculty members to Barcelona, where I was to "read" Hegel again—this time with many future art historians. I bracket the verb "read," since "reading" in this context was synonymous with "holding" the book with a certain style, making sure to follow the tutor's instructions as to which part of the text to engage with. He also announced that if we are interested in reading about art, we should get another book: the collection of lectures on

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[2] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), trans. Terry Pinkard from the German original: *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Bamberg/Würzburg: Verlag Joseph Anton Göbhardt, 1807).

aesthetics Hegel gave in Berlin between 1818 and 1826. It is these transcribed lectures that deal essentially with his idea of the "death" of art.

The silence in the room was, as always, a constant. Nobody says a word in these contexts; it is very difficult to articulate oneself correctly. The tutor rephrased his comment: please raise your hands those who want to learn about Hegel's art theory. The "mass" decided for art. And the fun also started there.

I noticed in the teacher the same joy as in his Madrid colleagues, and how he hurried to arrive at the jolly conclusion of the death of art. The professors all belonged to the same generation that spent their youth in an oscillation between total impossibility and complete openness, and all wanted art to be dead. No one had any doubt: Art was dead like Franco was dead. Even if it lasted longer than expected, it finally happened and, with it, came the time for something else, obviously. The conversations in the Madrid seminar were like those among relatives around a corpse. One could sense that the "death" they were talking about was a recent one. Clearly, they all thought that art could not be the last thing at the pinnacle of transcendence. True, it seemed important, but also too mundane in its institutions, as Hegel had already pointed out. Art was too explicitly dependent on the structures that socialized it, and too irrational to provide the expression the highest form of the spirit needed. For those professors, it seemed so necessary to be Hegelian, to acknowledge the death of the most important thing, art and culture, to properly renounce the limits and bonds created by tradition. True newness is not possible if one still

enjoys painting, literature, poetry; if one perceives the past embedded in objects carrying previous identities.

The Barcelona seminar was a little different. It was not the mourning of an old and dear relative. Here the tone was different. The teacher always smiled when announcing—probably years after he had for the first time given the same sparkling, eventful declaration—that art is DEAD! He said this while staring at the art history students, so we would all turn our heads towards them. What sense does it makes to study a discipline that has no subject? The first premise of philosophy is that it is purposeless and, after this, nothing can go wrong. For the art historians the case was different. If Hegel was right, they had been maintaining a discipline with a dead substance. The art history students did not seem to care about this. They looked back at us, probably thinking that one trait of philosophy is to try to abolish anything that could potentially turn into a subject. Nothing tangible should be the correlate of thinking; thinking could never be about something. If art was just pure speculation, the philosophers would claim it as philosophy; if it involves matter and form, then it needs to perish. It seemed true. One could see the teacher's happiness in his rigorous avoidance of being distracted by any toy.

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But whatever quarrel took place on the disciplinary and post-disciplinary thinking of philosophy towards other forms of knowledge, the fact was that the death of art was a political murder. Not in the hands of Hegel (even considering that he was a contemporary of Napoleon, a fact that also

opens up a possible reading of his statement). But in the hands of the Spanish philosopher the words of Hegel were rehearsed with a bitter sense of not being part of life anymore, with an acute sense of a new separation between the generations, provided by art. Art must be dead. He could not imagine himself being part of the huge movement of renewal that was taking place in the country after the death of Franco—all these proliferating multiplications of gestures, forms, voices, and most of all expression. No, Hegel had said, and so that is the way it was.

My teacher was an ex-seminarist, like many other philosophers of his generation. Families with no means or from a rural milieu used to send their kids to the seminary to study, to become a priest or eventually to rejoin secular life under another form. In his case, he reentered society as a philosopher. He was a true Hegelian. Democracy is one thing, another is a passion for art—contemporary art, they called it now. The word "contemporary" was even more irritating to him than "art." It was contemporary art he really needed to kill. Art was anyhow dead, since nobody but he and his friends were interested in touring to see the Old Masters. His colleagues in the Kantian seminar tried to critically address this notion of the "master," but everyone knows that Kantians sell out quickly to all new trends, even in academia. He was convinced of a huge difference between what art was and what it had become. However, even his summer excursions were changing, with the grand-tour cities slowly being replaced by Paris, first, to see the Pompidou, and then New York, a biennial in one of the summers in between, and then London.

This became an obsession and my teacher started to call other "witnesses" to the case of art's death. He heard I knew somebody in New York who was also a big defender of this thesis. And

he started reading Arthur Danto. Even in English. Danto was also convinced by Hegel: art had come to an end. Art resembles life so well that it is life itself. All these Brillo boxes that one cannot tell apart from those in the supermarket—they all confirm that art is over!

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Sitting twice a week in that seminar, witnessing his brave attempts to kill art, I was beginning to be convinced. All through Europe, and especially in Spain, new spaces for contemporary art were created day after day. What was he saying, then? Was it a strange form of post-traumatic denial, this continuous negation of art? What were these spaces containing, if not art?

The public arena was taken by what seemed to be a new interest in contemporary art, in how it could produce social interaction, experience, economy, knowledge. It all looked like a sudden transformation, but it was not. The institutional life of art, as well as all the discourses in favor of or critical of it, were capable of functioning as both signs and organizers of democracy in the face of post-capitalism. The institutional life of art performed the duties of the system. Values such as transparency, citizenship, and knowledge were working as performers of a system capable of critique, of self-reflection—all of which point towards the future. Art institutions became the new technology, and art the new science of the social. Unlike in past art institutions, the historical transmission of certain knowledge was not at stake, but rather the very act of instantiating the future, that is, rendering it present, giving it a concrete form. The contemporary art institution was a space for a particular form of rehearsal, a place where the visitor, the

"everyone," could afford these collective rehearsals, and thus to engage in an anticipatory futuring of the self. Seeing the future was not interesting anymore, when one could perform it. The practice of a technology focused on organizing new forms of participation, in the social and in the political realms, took over as one of the main functions for this public space. Art spaces became plazas for an advanced, interactive leisure technology of experience, functioning less as representation spaces than as instruments of self-fashioning for what one was to become. And the same was true of the anti-institutional voices. It was all part of the same dialectical exercise oriented towards a rhetoric of politics where the system's limitations could be played and their bad features uncovered, the double moral of continuous growth. And so emerged a movement against the undifferentiated time/future of corporations, or the flow of capital, claiming the new art institutions as constructions of a more local, differentiated time with which one could be connected. Cities also saw the opportunity to future themselves, by being both local and by catapulting themselves ahead of the national time. Cities became the loci that signified the world, the nation, and the local and, at the same time, signaled that the "international," in the form of contemporary art, had arrived.

And yet Danto was insisting on the death of art. He could have been just another reactionary voice, saying "who needs art if one has economy," but this was not the case. He was neither interested in art nor a detractor of it. He was just trying, through the Hegelian mantra, to understand the culture of transformation. And, as with a self-fulfilling prophecy, art, and the voice of the artist, started to disappear. The discourse that was taking place had generated around policies, the different ways art and artists performed in power, in the market, inside structures or in the inside/outside relationship with structures.

The futuring of the self needed strategies and certain aesthetics, as well as ways to represent these, to make them visible, and the contemporary provided expectations to a sensuous form, a form of the time.

Art was dead only insofar as its social, political, and institutional circumstances were part of the discussion, ensnared in a sentimental form of empiricism. Hegel, in fact, never said that art is dead. This is a detail of no importance, but it is true that he did not use a biological metaphor. He claimed something more interesting: that, eventually, it would come to an end. And he needed to reach this conclusion to resolve the conflict between the bourgeois subject's drive for freedom and its desire to express unity with the world. The more autonomous the subject grows, the less it can justify its existence; the more full-bloodedly it realizes its essence, the more alienated and contingent it becomes. And so, the radical liberty is radical homelessness.

Hegel, of course, never thought that art could think, and that its thinking could be the same as he was expressing for the human, for the spirit. One may think of the overcoming of the human and its institutions in order to become radically free, to realize its dream of pure productivity without a product.

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After some months of listening nonstop to the compulsory attempts to kill art from a growing group of Hegelians, I understood that it was love, and not hate, that drove them. Fearing that he could be mistaken for a resentful, midcareer male philosopher unable to be rid of his old values he started to invite friends to conferences and events. He sent a letter to Danto, who accepted his invitation to come to Barcelona to discuss his views. Danto's books were not translated into Spanish, nor were they about to be. His coming to the faculty, an ugly concrete university building, was anticipated like a "second coming."

In 1953, in the hardest years of Franco's regime, Luis García Berlanga made the most amazing movie I have ever seen, *Welcome Mr. Marshall!* In the movie, Villar del Río is a small town some hours north of Madrid. Somebody working in an office in the big city hears that American diplomats are about to visit Spain and pass through the town on their way to the capital. They conceive of a plan. They will disguise this Castilian village into an Andalusian one. They will wear Andalusian costumes and hire a prominent flamenco performer to impress the Americans. Flowers in their hair and full of hope for benefiting from the Marshall Plan, they learn to sing a song: "Americans, we receive you with joy, Americans, you come to Spain healthy and good-looking!" [*¡Americanos, os recibimos con alegría! ¡Americanos, vienen a España guapos y sanos!*]

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The appearance of Danto had that Villar del Río effect on us. The letter was written by one of the students, whose mother was from the United Kingdom, because the tutor had, suddenly, realized that he did not speak English. He was in a panic and dedicated another class to the all-encompassing hegemony of the English language: an imperialist discourse, deaf to the achievements of thought in French and German as well as to the intelligent reflection on the human condition carried out by Spanish literature. However, true or not, his English remained the same. He subsequently called on another prominent philosopher, who had spent two semesters at Harvard, to address the Hegel question and determine if any of the mute students were fluent in English. He was a man of the world, this thinker, who was, in fact, better known as a writer because of his incredibly acute sense of humor. He started the class in English right away, imitating an American accent and screaming: "Art is dead, isn't it? And now, young people, what is going to become of you?" "Think—he continued—that the only genre we master is disbelief. We are not good at producing anything, so we must doubt with style what everyone else produced." And then he tried to continue the class in English. The scene was incredibly funny, but nevertheless useless to provoke any English-speaking proficiency on our part. Danto was arriving and the only remaining option was a translator.

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By then it was not necessary to promote the event. A photocopy was posted on the door of the main aula of the so-called Faculty of Human Sciences, and a couple of telephone calls to the

neighboring departments would guarantee the attendance of no less than 400–500 students and staff. The most active ones were the "pre-capitalists," what in other countries were known as archeologists, who were always attending every lecture to check if it was politically correct. The day arrived and everyone was there, dressed casually. The pundit of "metaphysics," normally wearing a bow tie, was wearing a turtleneck under his jacket, and women faculty replaced their flat shoes with salon-style heels. The philosophy and art history students of the same course were the first in line. We were also kind of nervous, since we had been asked to bring "a good example of art" for Professor Danto to analyze after his lecture.

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After our teacher finished his introductory speech, Danto started a lively lecture. Art came to an end with Pop: a nice coincidence that the embodiment of American art was also the end of art. Art merged with the real in such an intelligent way that it was impossible to tell them apart. If the main goal of art was getting to know the nature of reality, then it was suddenly achieved when soup cans and washing powder boxes were declared art. We all felt that even if a soup can was now art, nothing was proved but an interesting twist in realism. The argument was catchy, made for those who like surprises in the museum galleries and were wondering if, after the overquoted *Fountain* of Marcel Duchamp, something of the kind could still happen. And surely, the boxes and the cans did their part. Art never claimed any ontology to state that it could be more real than the real was, for that matter, otherwise all marble statues could be claimed to dream of being

flesh. Accordingly, all these cans were happy being real cans, they were as happy as stone objects being real stone objects, or metal sculptures being metal, or wooden art objects being wood. True, a can representing a can could be taken for a can. But so what? It could also be a sign of the end of cans, not of art.

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However, sitting there listening to him was reassuring. Yes, he was so pleasant, smiling at us all and wearing the headphones through which he could hear the simultaneous translation, reacting to arguments and jokes with a lag of just 30 seconds. We all smiled with the eyes, and we all secretly loved that Mr. Marshall for a night. Sure enough, he seemed as reactionary and incapable of thinking outside dialectics and philosophy of history as our teachers were. But he seemed happier, without shadows, ready to encounter our young souls. We all wished he could take us to New York to tell us more about how the world would talk, think, look—after the end of art. He stopped talking. Big applause. Even the pre-capitalist students clapped their hands. The head of the art history department said that the lecture was exceptional and that we needed more lectures like this one. Questions? Silence. Mr. Danto observed that this was already a sign that we all recognized that art had come to an end. Laughter. Our teacher said that the class had prepared a question. He made a gesture with his hand and I moved towards the VHS, the projector was on. The color code appeared, an acute sound, the timer, and then the image. Title in black background: *Acción 1. Orinando (Pissing)*, by Itziar Okariz. Then the image. A woman in

the middle of the pedestrian section of one of the Manhattan-Brooklyn bridges, pissing. A good-looking woman with a black dress and black sneakers, in daylight, in the urban landscape, pissing. Silence.

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The students were now all looking at the philosopher. The philosopher was looking at me. I was looking at my teacher. He smiled, our guest. Finally, he said that it was indeed very interesting and that his first reaction was to think that this was, indeed, a very good example of art or an "art hangover" after art had died. He asked me why I had chosen this example. I said that it took me a long time to think of an example that would not be an object, that would refer to a different form of being art. But also, that I wanted to find something that would be as similar as possible to the can, to the object being both for real and a fiction of art. The translator tried his best. He made a strange face, such as when one listens to an unpleasant family surprise over the phone. That kind of a grin was in his face. He said he did not understand what this example had in common with the soup can. What was the similarity? Everybody in the room turned their heads, and there was a noise of bodies moving over the wood-furnished aula to see me when I answered. I said, I thought this was not an object but an action identical to another very well-known one of a man pissing in the street. I thought—I said—that it was interesting that only the refusal of sitting down made the image so powerful, a young woman standing on the street pissing. Suddenly, like the can, she recalled an everyday reality, not that found in a supermarket but of the bad habits of

some people, recalling as well some gender patterns. But she was not claiming that pissing in the streets was coming to an end. Moreover, this gesture—like the can—was not killing but revitalizing art. He started laughing and said he never understood why these things—pointing to the image projected—were so popular nowadays, but that perhaps there was something to it. Yes, this will be my next book, one needs to talk after the end of art.

"Thank you," he said, "to all of you, it was lovely!"

I was also relieved. I was not worried at all about the end of art or its future, since that is art's concern and not ours. I did, however, need a letter of reference to go abroad to study, and I felt a bit like I was in the Berlanga movie, risking my hope to be rescued by the Marshall Plan.

The Great Game to Come: An Introduction to the True Inhabitants of Mars

1.

A young tuxedo-clad man in his thirties, or perhaps even younger, is looking straight at us. He rubs the polished wooden surface of a pipe on his face, leaning forwards so that he, for a short while, comes closer to us. He sits straight again, gaining distance from the camera lens. He turns in his chair, showing us his left profile, plays with the pipe for a few seconds before putting it to his lips and, expertly packing it with tobacco, lights it with a match. He turns again in his chair so that now we can see his right profile puffing slowly and rhythmically at the pipe. Suddenly a melody can be heard. The pastoral sound of an oboe adds a mood to the almost anthropological character of the images we have seen until now. A woman is now in view. She stares at us as if she were looking in a mirror. She holds her hair; plays a little with the idea of having it tied up at the back of her neck, then tilts her head so she can see if this is what she wants. She lets her hair fall out of her hands. It is beautiful and dark, long and silken. The man fastens his belt, the woman retouches her make up. A male voiceover intones with a Scandinavian accent: "Here is the human. Here is the human. Here is the perfect human."

The Perfect Human ("Det perfekte menneske") was filmed in 1968 by the Danish filmmaker Jørgen Leth. Throughout its 12-minute duration, a man and a woman enact the perfect human. The perfect man and the perfect woman find themselves in an empty room brightened by sunlight. Dressed in the simple sophistication of good taste both are the sole inhabitants of an

endless new world; self-contained and controlled, far away from the ever-evolving political realities, they concentrate merely on themselves. They move in the room, skipping and jumping, reveling in the absolute stability of their situation. "We see the perfect human functioning"—that voice again—"but what are they thinking? How can the world emerge from such an airtight space?"

Nonetheless, existential possibilities abound. The perfect human is a self-proclaimed metro man: he is cooked, cultivated, and takes the usual itineraries of the civilized condition. He knows and loves the codes and at the same time they bore him. The perfect human is not the average man; he is not at the mercy of the world's every destructive whim or the nonviolent social control of media. This individual knows about the unseen pressures of the market forces; the ideology of unrestricted competition; the plunder of natural resources; the massive poverty and malnutrition of one third of the world's population; the exploitative practices on low-income labor and other vulnerable groups, and so on. However, to singularize his existence, he has returned to a state of saturated unconsciousness, eerily silent and with an acute sense of attitude. Perception turns inwards and registers intactness; "For the attitude born of this sense of inviolability some Americans have used the word 'cool'."[1]Attitude is a rhetorical form because, unlike personality, attitudes conform to experience. Around the same time the movie was made, a contemporary of Leth, the writer Hans-Jørgen Nielsen stated: "There are no value systems, but there are points of value that connect one situation to the next, from one attitude to the next."[2] But how do all these points of importance connect?

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[1] Alexander Trocchi, *Cain's Book* (London: John Calder Publishers, 1963), 11.

[2] Hans-Jørgen Nielsen, *Spillets regler. Til attituderelativismens psykologi* (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968).

This fantasy of the self as inviolable should not be mistaken for misanthropy. The empty room where the perfect man lives and moves is his privileged antechamber from where terrestrial life can be rehearsed and analyzed. He takes this room to be an antidote to the media-manufactured dispositives that produce subjectivity. However, the room is a phantom, and so is the perfect human. In his book *The Three Ecologies*, the French thinker Félix Guattari described the situation:

> Capitalist power has become delocalized and deterritorialized, both in extension by extending its influence over the whole social, economic and cultural life of the planet, and in "intension", by infiltrating the most unconscious subjective strata. In doing this it is no longer possible to claim to be opposed to capitalism power only from the outside, through trade unions and traditional politics. It is equally imperative to confront capitalism's effects in the domain of mental ecology in everyday life: individual, domestic, material, neighbourly, creative or one's personal ethics.[3]

The perfect man created his phantom space because of an endangered life. Unable to step into the public domain and search for a consensus, he decided to retrieve and cultivate a singular production of existence. The perfect human is in a state of diastolic closure, a state of necessary inhibition that enables him to get in touch with himself again.

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[3] Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 50.

One distinction is very important to make: the perfect human is a trope that stands for the private intellectual, a cultivated man for whom it has been made impossible to act in the public domain. He is in his bright private room, not addressing an audience in an auditorium, not glad-handing voters in the street, or presiding an intellectual discipline before the community. He cannot participate in the real, because he does not accept the premises of societal consensus; but in his mind he rehearses the public domain, thinking towards it all the time. He has no public life, not yet. He is hope set aside. The problem is to find a new criterion of relevance to invent a new contract of citizenship: how to become a voice in the public realm, how to become a public intellectual. Many other isolated singularities may need to be activated; many micro-political and micro-social formations will need to get back on their feet, "working for humanity and not simply for a permanent reequilibration of the capitalist semiotic Universe."[4]

2.

In a text that is half reproach and half factual account,[5] Luís Felipe Noé outlines in a few pages the life and work of the legendary Alberto Greco, one of the most influential artists in Buenos Aires in the 1960s. This text was written on occasion of a commemorative exhibition in the Carmen Waugh gallery in 1970, five years after the artist's death. Greco committed suicide in Barcelona in 1965, but before so doing he wrote the word *FIN* ("the end") on his left hand, and took note of the details of his death agony on the label of an inkbottle. Apparently, Greco had

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[4] Ibid., 51.

[5] Luís Felipe Noé, "Alberto Greco a cinco años de su muerte," in *Mi viaje—cuaderno de bitácora* (Buenos Aires: El Ateneo, 2014).

already announced on several occasions his desire to make death his masterwork. Perhaps the most appropriate reference here would be a survey carried out in 1960, in which leading members of Buenos Aires's artistic community were asked about their projects for the coming year. Greco's reply was unambiguous: "To commit suicide." No one knows what caused him to undertake such an ambitious project, but his declaration leaves no doubt as to the importance he attached to it, not only within the inescapable dialectic between life and death, but in the context of his artistic practice. Like many of his compeers, Greco was perfectly aware of the postmedia condition of contemporary art. If modernity had striven to define and proclaim that which was specific to the medium par excellence, namely painting, that same endeavor had opened the doors to the negation of what is essential and the adoption of all that is general; of that which belongs not only to art but also to the larger sphere of life. The metaphor of an indivisible unity, intrinsic to and constituent of a unique experience it is impossible to capture from any other medium, had been historically called into question as never before.

Alberto Greco could therefore posit his suicide as a legitimate artistic act that should not be considered merely a personal act of despair. At the same time, it was a demonstration of the power of this metaphor, of the echo, the strength of the historical tradition in and on the artist's premeditated, instigatory act. Any gesture or theory that points to the existence of a protected "interior" alien to an "exterior" is a metaphysical fiction. Whether it is the "interior" of a work of art opposed to its context, or a vital moment of lived experience opposed to its repetition in the memory or in signs, it is a fallacy in either sense. The idea of that which is, of what is authentically intrinsic, cannot be given. Greco's suicide takes this suspicion to new extremes. Nothing seems more one's own than one's death; the identity principle seems to be proven in this

terminal moment of experience, untransferable and incommunicable. Greco performed his death as a representational act, not one to be followed by others. Since nothing is identical to itself and all interiority is constructed from exteriority, this death, contextualized within the corpus of this artist's mythic career, became an act of subversive appropriation designed to implode the theory of the specificity of artistic media.

Greco faced the greatest problem of the perfect human, namely, how to challenge the fiction of the empty room where the perfect man lives and moves, by identifying principles on which a new contract with equals can be made. Greco, like the perfect human, disbelieves participation. Or better said, it is another phantom, an illusion mobilized by the market forces and encouraging a perverse sort of regressive adulthood. The matter is complicated since the terms of the invitation to participate are not acceptable. Participation is a ceremony, a therapy to ease the apprehensions of ordinary existence by modeling it through myths and narratives. Of course we can eternally play with the fiction that we are playing and interacting, however there are no easy ways out here: "Emancipation," wrote Ernesto Laclau, "means *at one and the same time* radical foundation and radical exclusion; that is, it postulates, at the same time, both a ground of the social and its impossibility."[6] To leave that bright, empty room, to continue playing the game of consensus and participation without at least announcing the necessity of a radical reform (since the allure of revolution seems vain and destructive) would be like reading the "modest proposal" of Jonathan Swift literally, as an invitation to ease the economic troubles of Ireland by selling children born into poverty as food for the rich.

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[6] Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 6.

Understanding has a transformative effect. Rosa Luxemburg said: "Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently,"[7] the emphasis of which the French philosopher Alain Badiou provocatively shifted into "Freedom is freedom only for those who really think."[8] Art can do both; it can stop before really thinking, but also continue a little bit further.

Performance art explores primarily the nature, conditions, and limits of the agreements made. To apply for one's own suicide is a little like a live TV broadcast, a reality promise that could be fulfilled. In real-time TV, real time has been agreed on: everyone knows what is going to be said and how to react to the "real." In January 1972, Chris Burden broke one of these agreements by hijacking a TV station. He was invited to participate in a local TV program and, after some back and forth about the best way to contribute, he agreed on an interview format. In his own words,

> I arrived at the station with my own video crew so that I could have my own tape. While the taping was in progress, I requested that the show be transmitted live. Since the station was not broadcasting at the time, they complied. In the course of the interview, Phyllis asked me to talk about some of the pieces I had thought of doing. I demonstrated a T.V. Hijack. Holding a knife at her throat, I threatened her life if the station stopped live transmission. I told her that I had planned to make her perform

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[7] Rosa Luxemburg, "The Problem of Dictatorship", in *The Russian Revolution* (1918), trans. from the German original: *Die russische Revolution* (first published in 1922).

[8] Alain Badiou, "Politics—A Non-Expressive Dialectics," lecture at Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, (London, November 26, 2005).

> obscene acts. At the end of the recording, I asked for the tape of the show. I unwound the reel and destroyed the show by dousing the tape with acetone. The station manager was irate, and I offered him my tape which included the show and its destruction, but he refused.[9]

Fiction, reality, and the agreement on it get confused here. Watching real-time TV, one does not know if it is staged—if they had all agreed beforehand, you cannot believe it is true when Burden puts the knife to throat of the speaker. Nobody can be sure about the terms of the contract anymore. One cannot participate if one does not know if there are previous agreements, since then you may look like a fool, taking part in a fake reality, a fake drama, or a fake joy.

3.

Like Greco—another inhabitant of Mars—the perfect human can in this way help us rethink the paradoxes of the terms of the contract that social parties establish and of which art is also part. Greco, the self-proclaimed perfect arrogant man, was one of those who believed in the radical power of words. Therefore, he was also fascinated by what could not be said, by staging an act that forces us to wish common words would have a new meaning. By achieving what he set out to do, he touched upon questions of agency and why not, participation. The very moment he enumerated his own death among other projects for the coming year, he established a contract with his audience. In this, he was a genius and an idiot at the same time, because he fulfilled the

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[9] Chris Burden quoted in Peter Noever, ed., *Beyond the Limits* (Ostfildern: Cantz Verlag, 1996), 132.

conditions of the contract—he did what he said he would do—but he also broke it, since art operates by moving the mind without taking lives.

Truth should not be misunderstood as a matter of any actual correspondence between beliefs and the actual state of affairs but rather be perceived as a trope. Truth is a construction, an architecture made by a mobile army of ironies, metaphors, metonymies, and antropomorphisms that shape our views of the world. A trope is a figure of speech, an attitude of language. It is not suited to formulate a systematic proposal, but it provides a vocabulary to convey the mental images that may activate the desire of change.

To avoid the dangers of the contractual gap, Leth's perfect human simply went home and suspended action. The inviolable man has radical and continuous doubts about the language he uses to justify his actions and his beliefs: the words he employs to praise his partner, his friends, to pour contempt on his enemies, to describe his long-term projects and hopes. But he is also a man impressed by other vocabularies, by the possibility of playing them off against one another rather than being seduced by the logical flow of arguments. His method is redescription, not inference. He is fascinated by the possibility of making sense of one's world, of one's own terms. This suggests the potentiality to empower all that is being redescribed, and that thoughts and subjects could be explicated in a better correspondence with reality. The new, if such a thing exists, does not result from unveiling the real or from substituting one powerless world for a utopia machine. On the contrary, it comes about by exploring the perfect human's "skill at producing surprising gestalt switches, by making smooth, rapid transitions from one terminology

to another."[1] The perfect human has "dropped the idea of getting at the truth, in favor of the idea of making things new"[2] at the end of this laborious process. In his exile from the world, he is thinking the world from anew, rehearsing the conditions. This moment of isolation and privacy is the necessary condition prior to a future reengagement with public life. This is his possibility for becoming public again, for shifting the terms of acting. He is aware that we need to invent a new form of being, and that cannot be done without great effort.

[1] Richard Rorty, Contingency, irony, and solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 78

[2] Ibid., 78

PART II

Curatorial Entanglements—How the Ideas Became Form

How a Tadpole Becomes a Frog: Belated Aesthetics, Politics, and Animated Matter Toward a Theory of Artistic Research

1.

Central to the inquiry into knowledge has always been the principle of skepticism. Unlike ancient skepticism, which was based on the variety of sensible appearances, modern skepticism —at least since Michel de Montaigne and David Hume—has revolved around the status of relations inside understanding: the need to understand not only what passes through understanding but also what forbids understanding by withdrawing sense. Here a new interest in the nontransparency of language appears, in its incapacity to fulfill the task of expression and communication. And this produces a paradox: the relevance of grasping the reverse of knowledge, and the role played by humor as well as fiction as practitioners of (non)sense. To ask not how knowledge is produced, but what supports the myth of a language capable of expressing this, is one of the possible tasks of a documenta where genres are inextricably mixed with their opposites, where the strong perlocutionary effect of the "maybe" is ascribed to a strong affect: the need to understand.

To inquire into knowledge implies the effort to formulate—through logics and languages that surpass disciplines—how inextricable relations among things, language, matter, form, sense, are possible. It means to account for the terms, the possibilities as well as the circumstances, in which the principles that associate the animate with the inanimate, or objects with memory, or

animals with other animals, or seeds with art, or theory with the logics of politics, or poetry with knowledge, occur. And, therefore, it cannot come as a surprise that imagination is a central principle in the invention of the knowledge that takes place in art—a task that does not mimic an activity of academia but that, in an excessive and subversive way, produces time and space for it, constituting a new "culture." The main trait of fiction and imagination is their potential failure. They do not serve as solid ground for a speech act; they are an interference in the logic of an intentional assertion of meaning. Art has retained this inversion of the relationship between meaning and saying to overcome the traps of consciousness, the transcendental principle that rules the modern conception of the individual, that defines the political as an unambiguous text marked by intention of meaning and able to produce and reproduce a very definite sense of empathy. This exercise of accepting the riddle of ambiguity, the constant alteration of the relations between matter and words, time and meaning, defines a research manner that calls for a radical reconsideration of the role of language, of straightforward conceptions of how things interact, as well as the inventory of monologues produced by serious forms of meaning.

And this is how the "maybe" comes into play. The "maybe" is a non-concept; it is a modifier. It denotes the attempt to introduce a difference into the relations that define knowledge, the limits of language and the event of thinking in art. At first sight, it could be mistaken for a noun, indicating disenchantment, a relativist position. Yet soon, positivity creeps back in; the "maybe" is the verbal expression of a movement. It names a tension, a state of imagination aiming towards the potential reorganization of the structure of the known and those who think they know. The "maybe" is the emblem of attention, a positive form of privation—the privation of certainty, of the statement that forms a conclusion—that introduces not only fiction but a dimension of

theatricality, since it puts all elements into play. So rather than a quest for the void, the dance introduced by the "maybe" can be taken as a journey that introduces us into the realm of artistic research as an active reconsideration of certain representations of knowledge in the context of art. By asking "What is the reverse of the known?" the form of inquiry that takes place in art amounts to an intuitive grasp of a philosophical and political problematic that defines not only what culture is but what it may be in the future.

"Artistic research" is an awful term; it is confusing in its similitude to "research" as we know it in academic fields. However, this misunderstanding produces an interesting awareness of what is proposed by its utterance. This conceptual diptych does not compromise any of its particulars. More than anything, it "entertains" a paradox: the possibility of a nondeliberate system or discipline at the core of the deliberate ones. "Research" here does not name the embodiment of any particular form of academic training, but the gesture of placing the "maybe" at the core of the real. And this causes something very simple to occur: knowledge vacillates. This permanent oscillation between positioning us here—isolating some features of the real, performing representation, giving form to matter—and, at the same time, taking us far away from the present time, is what I understand by "artistic research."

The "maybe," then, is a marker, a tool to register these plausible operations that art makes from the inside of knowledge: matter, language, images, form … All tilting from the inside. This is, in other words, a different way of naming the challenge that art poses to the problem of coherence, to the possibility of responsiveness, to demonstration, and therefore to institutional legitimacy.

This oscillating movement embodies an ongoing performative speculation about ways of affecting and being affected, about ways of naming—a language, a place, a time. The viewer is then obliged to find a language, to imagine a place, to conceive a time, and to surpass the identification with all these—and at the same time produce a faraway from all of it.

This vacillation—caused by the artistic method of conveying research into the real, into an artwork—has the virtue of perceiving the unknown without its being transmitted into communication by the superficial sociality of the discourse. To refract the unknown without syntaxes, without the movement of displacing the known and replacing it with a new known or the other known: this momentary forgetting of the syntaxes implies a momentary forgetting about learning—that is, it can carry the unknown into a form, a formulation, that will allow the inconceivable to be conceived. And, in not knowing about syntax, it is imaginable that the topology of the subject could be another, and thus in its nature able, if only for a second, to listen to a plant, an animal, or a drawing. And so the "maybe" comes also to name the possibility of discovering unsuspected positions between the animate and the inanimate as well as among the many forms of life; an imagination capable of conceiving an act of knowledge among those who live beyond language.

This simple, tantalizing vacillation is the opposite of the narcissism of the reinstitutionalization of knowledge and culture that transforms artworks into cultural products, and exhibitions into ideological demarcations of experience. It is also the opposite of the demand of contesting

acculturation with the demand of art to be significant, to deliver what we can call a situation of reading, extenuating meaning, and memory to the point of a sterile void.

The “maybe,” therefore, is not a lack of certainty, but is a virtue. Even if this reading of the notion may appear completely abstract due to the refusal to engage in an analysis of the concept in favor of presenting it as an intuition, the fact is that the “maybe” has the virtue of giving itself the possibility of reversing order from inside order, language from its inside, power from its core. This murmuring doubt is needed to challenge all forms of institutional sufficiency that populate culture and lodge comfortably in the grammar of common sense. If knowledge is not to be owned, not to be produced, it is also not to be distributed and consumed. Intelligence, then, needs to take another form in language, another symbolic form that credits its function in art and in the social besides a vulgar play with the eloquence of the industry—a play that has its origin in impatience, in gaining quickly and effectively a language to grant art the role of an interlocutor. If art could gain a language of universal pragmatism, it would then achieve a communicative force and power in the social, a form of consent and dissent. However, one might ask whether this excess of speech is not sweeping away some propositional instances needed to think further about the significance of art for life.

So the “maybe” is a virtue, a doubt capable of taking the form of a dramaturgy inside a context where art occurs every five years, documenta, a manifestation of the act of disowning knowledge. To disown knowledge is completely different to refusing it—as all sorts of totalitarianisms do. To disown knowledge is not an absence; it is not ignorance that is praised

here. It is the presence of the undone, of the still possible. And this enacting the possible is knowledge imagined not as a product but as an event or, even better in the context of art, an advent, a manifested form of ideas that do not find a stable meaning but have significance. This knowledge, difficult to express, difficult to present as a new science of the creative, able to enter both political life and commercial circuits, is a function that provides clues towards a mystery, that is: how to live in a groundless world.

In *Notes to Literature*,[1] Theodor Adorno states that the essay is the form of writing that best suits thinking, since its attribute is to be groundless, not limited by historical transmission or etymology. "Groundless" is the opposite of "motionless." And therefore, in deciding what text could accompany an exhibition driven by an inquiry on the importance of artistic research and on its politics, the notebook series *100 Notes—100 Thoughts / 100 Notizen—100 Gedanken* possesses an adequacy in relation to the project that surpasses that of the assignment, or the task normally asked from a text. They are as much part of the movement, of the research, as all the other elements active inside the exhibition, artistic or not. Notes are unmannerly, or post-disciplinary, to use the words of academia. Notes are "maybe" texts—not fragments, not in a relation of weakness to any whole, just not yet at the service of illustrating any argument or philosophical conclusion known in advance. Using the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, we could say that they are primary wisdom, primary wisdom being intuition, "while all later teachings are tuitions."[2]

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[1] Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), trans. Shierry Weber from the German original: *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1961).

[2]Brooks Atikinson (ed.), *The Complete Essays and Other Writings by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 155

Notes, like art, are prolegomena, the possibility of a time that is always preliminary, of a language that maintains itself partially unknown, outside the realm of mediation. The preliminary-ness suspends to allow the subject and the social to find not only a voice but a tonality.

2.

The "maybe" also implies that method is not at work or, better said, that the method is not a method yet but can become one. Imagine a movement, a force, traversing the whole project, its materials. It is probable that only at the end will you see some sort of method at work, something that only *a posteriori* one could call a method. The principles at work emerge through the diverse logics, the materials, artistic or discursive, the languages. This is completely different from a tactic; if the inquiry is a genuine one, a space is produced in which all the elements can name themselves, rather than being called up in advance, by sitting at a table and drawing up a plan. There is an important distinction to be made between hypothesis and intuition. To say that an exhibition is neither driven by a concept nor has a hypothesis is not equal to simply praising the process per se and accepting that the different movements produce a result, and that unpredictability is a value in itself. An exhibition of the scale of "dOCUMENTA (13)" starts with guiding themes. Notice that a theme is also different from a subject. These guiding themes could be called intuitions, following Emerson's definition. An intuition is not an epidermic feeling; it has a history, it appears when certain conditions, the reception of certain artworks, readings, ideas, views, and so on, have already occupied our minds. However, a hypothesis and an

intuition are two very different things. A hypothesis requires evidence and must state what constitutes that evidence. In the case of an exhibition it states, for example, the selection process, the choices, which could be understood as a matter of collecting the evidence—artworks, but of course also documentary materials—that determine the working premises, that are able to reinforce the statement at the origin of the display but also of the commissioned texts and so son. An intuition—let's say artistic research, that is the way artistic inquiry has created a space inside art for thinking, for philosophy to live longer—does not require (one could even say, does not tolerate) evidence but, rather, an understanding. So an intuition places a demand on us, not only to inquire further into it but also to find a way to make it understandable. An intuition does not belong to the realm of the merely subjective; it has a function that surpasses the personal, even if it is true that one of its qualities is partiality. An intuition is nothing but partial and therefore has no claims to universality or neutrality; in other words, it is the opposite of a principle, a norm, a rule, a premise.

This distinction between the not-knowing of a hypothesis and the not-knowing of intuition helps us to understand why a project like "dOCUMENTA (13)" is not a thesis-exhibition. The importance here is placed on listening more than on writing, listening to those elements that have a "unworldly" eloquence. The project is placed both inside and outside the language game. In one of his lectures, the German philosopher Christoph Menke referred to Adorno's idea of imagining a taste capable of stating and hating itself simultaneously—that is, capable of producing an identification with the viewer and, at the same time, being able to surpass it. This image is useful when one recalls the absence of a method, for example, or the notion of intuition versus the hypothetical. The whole project can be seen as a language that did not exist previous

to the exhibition and is capable at the same time of emerging and elucidating many aspects and questions—the memory of matter, the relationship between historical and ahistorical time, the number of wisdoms that inform what we call knowledge, the many intelligences that constitute life and their intra-activity, the role of the disciplines that inhabit art, like art history or philosophy, the million forms of fiction and meaning emerging from it. The exhibition can produce a cognitive situation where to grasp these questions, instead of translating them using ordinary criteria to produce an "opinion" on the matter, can make all these epistemic relationships turn, can set them in motion again. This is a journey in skepticism, or an understanding of criticality in the field of art.

It is complex because it does not facilitate any conclusions; it is not possible, in such a context, to "arrive at any conclusion" regarding any of the guiding themes mentioned. The "we" of a civil society based on consensus needs to disappear from the arguments or show itself vulnerable to suspicion. To return to Adorno, to care again for civil society, art, as well as its institutions, should conceive itself as a community capable of "hating itself," so that it can constitute itself for culture and go beyond the dream of arriving at any form of consensus through it. One can accept, skeptically, that art is both norm and exception, and not part of what can be regulated. It is also possible to imagine that the interest in the question of animality, or in the question of the memory of objects, relates to a struggle about how to bring the world back to life from an angle different from just the judiciousness of the social theory perspective. A bold desire to overcome the hyperbolic separateness of realms of reality without falling back into a variation of idealism, or into a conceivable animism, points to an eloquent form of after-modernity theory.

With the increasing velocity in the age of technology, knowledge is conceived under the aegis of a dominion. Concepts have become a material, and the concern regarding "having a concept" to work from has too often turned into a question of possessing a thing. This new materialism of the immaterial cannot, though, be contested by dissidence since the very concept of dissidence is part of the same system. This cognitive trade runs in parallel with the blind strategy of a mind devoted to the old values of resistance that are retold from inside the system where the fantasy of an outside is continuously recreated. Nothing but fiction can escape this logic.

Here it is useful to return to the question of intuition, to the reception of the sensuous that demands a form of understanding but that, at the same time, remains partial. How is this condition of being partial to be read in a productive and critical manner? In his introduction to Adolfo Bioy Casares's *The Invention of Morel*,[3] Jorge Luis Borges writes that the future of the novel is the detective genre. He addresses two main traits of the genre that support his statement: first, the production of clues; second, the existence of a mystery. The clues maintain a relationship with the mystery and are produced as an antecedent to its resolution. Yet they are not essentially connected with the mystery, neither even are they connected to one another; it is the mind that reads them as clues, that sees what may be a relationship. They produce an understanding of the mystery, of the mystery being mysterious, and they are partial to the very limit of the notion. All the fragments together may reveal a form of knowledge regarding the mystery, but they are never equivalent to it. The status of the clue is interesting, because a clue is different from information, and it is not yet a form of knowledge. It is an epistemological entity, because it acts in knowledge, but you cannot define it except as a clue. The clue alludes to a

[3] Jorge Luis Borges in his prologue to Adolfo Bioy Casares, *The Invention of Morey* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2003), trans. from the Spanish original: *La invención de Morel* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1940).

basic expectation of fulfilment—the clues are there to solve the mystery. This is just an assumption, since nothing says they necessarily will; their presence is an acting of intelligence in the game of fiction. But it is the mystery that activates all elements, that keeps the dance in motion. The relationship that the guiding themes and the intuitions have with the whole that is "dOCUMENTA (13)" can be read in a similar way, as clues hinting towards a resolution of a mystery.

3.

This question of the clue allows for the introduction of another notion: memory and its role in the development of art theory during the past decades. Equal to the importance of gaining a notion of knowledge that is freed from the perils of a language of production and trade, is the task of returning memory to the realm of imagination. The history and the role of taste—not only as a social tool but also as an entity that embodies the highest danger for a judgment based solely on consensus, that is, the equivocal—has provoked an intriguing shift towards another faculty of the mind: memory. Also equivocal, memory can, however, be more subject to training, tamed by a good method. The way in which language is conceived is crucial. This new objectivism believes in description, because it believes that the world already exists before we are able to talk about it. According to this, historians and artists can describe what is already there, and the work and the text become a strange sort of engraving. In this picture, human memory is a recording machine, and art as well finds a new form of representation: the recalling and the telling of what has happened and is still happening. This is a description that also implies the vision of the writer, the curator, and the theorist as able to answer in real time to what is happening, which assumes that a certain quickness is needed or it "may be too late." Urgency resides, then, both inside and

outside the text. But what if the world is not a noun to be talked about, but an adjective, for example? Or if the task of language is in relationship to the real, and is not to state that there is anything to say? Or if the role of theory is to introduce slowness, to mediate very slowly, to experience not the distance from the world, but its innerness, its inner immensity? What kind of discourse would we then have? What kind of politics could be addressed from an unhurried and slow utterance? If there is nothing to say, no message, no moral prescription to be taken from the message, no commitment, no worldview, no sort of truth that needs to be communicated, no ulterior significance, if we do not want to remain silent or to appear as if we want to avoid rigor, this means we need to reinvent the whole task of language in relation to objects and images.

Language has a very strong relationship with memory, and it is memory that needs to be liberated—liberated from its conception as a tool, a mechanical device that allows us to record, remember, and correct. We can instead envision higher tasks for memory, seeing it as a faculty directly connected to imagination and therefore being on the same terms as invention—in order words, inventing and recalling as being part of the same process. And this, of course, implies that the whole theoretical language, not just the similes and the metaphors but also the logic of the thinking and of the text itself, must be reformed. What I am saying is that we can look at the world, but that does not necessarily imply that the world looks back to us, which precludes any symbolism or transcendence.

Perhaps there needs to be a form of language that could also be less anthropocentric, less neurotic about the "E / Erga kaí Hēmérai / Works and Days,"[4] to quote the famous poem of Hesiod about the works of man and the logic that these works, and ideas, follow. And with this the point is not having anything to say. What remains is the way or manner of speaking, which presents another source of problems, since to be alone with language is one of the most complex things. Insofar as the understanding of history means delineating a chronological axis on which events are ordered, the sole task of the historian is ceaselessly to insert the stories that have not yet been included in that great continuous narrative. Meanwhile, the institution, the museum, where an "exhibition" is understood as a way of institutionalizing a material, is reduced to the place where the legitimacy of a right acquires a public form. The fact that the exercise of revision and the recovery of things forgotten by institutions provokes respect proves that a fitting vocabulary has been found—one that serves to avoid the unpredictable function of experience in art.

The importance of recovery and reconstruction of art-historical narratives as an institutional tactic in art is directly proportional to the impossibility of formulating a complex statement about the relationship between contemporary art and a discontinuous conception of time that is expressed in rhythms and cannot be represented as duration. In other words, it is a way of understanding time that is indifferent to the idea of progress and is therefore relieved of the imperative of innovation.

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[4] Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, ed. and trans. Glenn Warren Most, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 57 (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

4.

The no-concept concept. The question of the correspondences between experience and words, perception and theory, inside the context of the exhibition is relevant today. Therefore, to state that an exhibition has no concept is to name the conditions that are at the limit of the logic of equivalence between experience and logos, the conservative relation between practice and discourse, that assumes stability among the terms.

To claim that an exhibition has no concept is a much more complex proposition than saying that the "works speak for themselves." Because even if works could speak for themselves, the disciplines ready to listen would need to rely on stable behavior between the senses and the notions producing the equivalence of the unknown into the known. A non-concept is not the same as a lack of notions, ideas, or words to express the expectations of an exhibition. It is more of an event, an occasion to reformulate the sense of continuity between experience and language, to question the necessity of constructing a theory, an ideal discipline, that the works will then implement, or to see them as a cause that forces us to produce an equivalent language, able to describe what seems to be happening in the situation called an exhibition.

It is not a lack of concept that it is announced here, but the consideration of initiating work in such a way that no concept will be in a relationship of exteriority with any other material, art or science, alive or inert, human or nonhuman. This is a provocative statement, not because it denies the importance of conceptualizing, of finding clear and distinct ideas, of listening to all that may appear silent, but because it questions the way in which art exhibitions contribute to

defining the relationship between art and culture. In an exhibition of such a large scale, to turn the whole into an expression of an argument, or an idea, would run the risk of becoming lyrical, of ruining complexity by turning art into an explicit substance at the service of a too timely discourse.

Take the "no" here, attached to "concept," as one takes the notion of carnival: it embodies the negative prefix, it says "no" locally and temporarily to order and an idea of hierarchy, of the serious. "dOCUMENTA (13)" shares this classical way of reversing sense, to gain it under a different form, and proclaims a certain carnivalesque method for it: topsy-turviness, eccentricity, mismatching, and some sort of profanation. Multiplicity is to be at work, but not as a subject; the project is not about polyphony. The other way, a dominant proliferation of styles, manners, logics, languages, is to be seen as building materials to become the locus of a dialogic activity between art and its way of inquiring into the nature of knowledge.

The new importance of philosophy and the social sciences in the sphere of contemporary art is related to an essential discovery: art today is located in a space uniquely productive for the interrelation of knowledges that would otherwise never intersect. This is similar to what Gaston Bachelard attempted to describe in the introduction to *The Poetics of Space*.[5] Space appears where the logic of causality ceases and another principle takes hold: the principle of reverberation. Stating that space does not emerge because of laws of causality means that the public sphere is not constructed by merely ensuring a series of conditions, just as the existence of

[5] Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958). First published in English (London, 1964).

a parliament or similar body does not guarantee that the debate will take place. Something else must happen, and that is called reverberation. Practice proves that transparency is not enough, that a system of logical argumentation does not necessarily unleash the will to change, let alone change itself.

Reverberation as an image expresses the movement between logics of thought and methods of work that have nothing in common. The possibility of different thinking depends on this very abstract mental operation. Contemporary art attempts to exist in this space of reverberation, rather than in the work-commentary equation. Art is not a pretext for thought, but rather a thought that operates by means of the constant exchange between different systems that vacillate between the abstract and the concrete and that make us vacillate between them as well. According to Bachelard, the mental function that brings us closest to the enigmatic vastness of what is to come is daydreaming. For philosophy, it is a fundamental exercise. Daydreaming is a way of creating access to a sphere radically opposed to the domestic and different from the social. It brings an attitude so very exceptional that it takes the daydreamer outside this world, to another world that bears the mark of infinity. It points in the direction of a vital multiplication of mortal freedoms; it builds worlds and counterworlds. Daydreaming is a constitutive space that suggests the ability to imagine consciousness itself.

Nothing productive emerges from translating ideas into images. The attempt to establish a correlation between ideas and their representation denies the unexpected and, hence, the hope for change. “Reverberation” names something quite different from—and more complex than—

interdisciplinariness, or the borrowing of ideas and concepts among sciences. To be truly modern, theory cannot assume the role of the eternal mediator between the work and the viewer; it cannot limit itself to speaking after the fact.

The mission is not to renew our thinking about art, but to venture into other logics and place them at the core of artistic and cultural thinking. Maintaining that meaning emerges from fiction implies the realization that it is not philosophy that makes an emancipated viewer possible, but an artistic practice that has made an unprecedented effort to understand itself before the figure of the viewer. And that understanding implicates us all.

That is what artistic research consists of, and that is why an exhibition that wants to think through—rather than from—art, is now inconceivable. The production of space is an act of trust.

Unexpress the Expressible

Art cannot be reduced to some external meaning or truth that we know in advance. Art is thinking but it is not theory. The world's reality resides in art, and it is inseparable from art's investigative procedure, which seeks to expose how the forces, the different compounds of elements—material and conceptual—interact to produce a certain effect.

The Realm of the Public

The nineteenth-century invention of the constitutional state was an attempt to link the public sphere to an idea of law. It guarantees its citizens certain basic rights—something that amounts to establishing the public sphere by way of identifying the public character of every act of reason. By linking law to rational debate in this way, the idea of the state as a top-down dominating force is abolished.

The bourgeois public sphere depends on particular social and economic factors that are unique to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Jürgen Habermas borrows the term "civil society" from Hegel[1] to denote the sphere of production and exchange of goods that forms part of the private

[1] Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit—Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991).

realm and is distinct from the state. Hence, civil society is essentially the economy: it operates according to its own laws, but it is able to represent its interests to the state through the public sphere, whose lifeblood it purports to be. Actions that were part of the private, of the *oikos*—the house—started to be part of the public domain as activities formerly confined to the household framework emerged into the public sphere; the economic activity of the civil society was oriented towards the public commodity market, and hence both internal and external to the state.

"Public" relates to public authority, the state; "private" relates to the economy, the society, and the family. "Public" and "private" are defined and separated in terms of law and institutions. The public sphere exists as an extension of the private world that in this way moves into the public domain. "Public" relates to the state but also means "open to all." This amalgam, then, somewhat paradoxically transforms the public into a critical judge that regulates access to, and the constitution of, its principal inclusivity.

Rational-critical debate occurred in the eighteenth-century public sphere between members of a property-owning, educated, reading, and reasoning public. It centered on literary questions and on political issues, like the public authority of the state. The key shift in the modern world is the loss of apparent distinction between the private and public spheres: only with the development of a modern state and economy did public and private assume their currently recognized forms. Interest groups on both sides started to operate together, resulting in a societal complex that, following Habermas, reduced the possibility of a true public debate. The decline of rational, meaningful argument is among Habermas's major criticisms of the modern state.

The Word and the Sense

One can argue that one of the main historical traits of documenta is not only to act in the public sphere and to play a fundamental role in its structural transformation after World War II but also —and more consciously so since Catherine David's "documenta X"—to constitute itself as a major tool in the questioning of the public sphere and of the role that artists and their work have been assigned to play within it. An exhibition that emerged in a place and a time of one of humanity's greatest crises has mankind's struggle for self-renewal ineradicably imprinted on its DNA, while at the same time it must struggle with the collapse of public and democratic reason. In this way, documenta constitutes an examination of the social dimension of art, and therefore of the conditions of life, inside and outside the cultural context.

Against a consensual choreography of practices, objects, and ideas aimed at stressing a certain notion of the political, "documenta 12" tried to draw attention to the necessity of a new form of empiricism—one that would force us to forget what we already knew about good politics and agency in order to create a temporary regime that would escape the show as a communication or information machine and allow for a commentary on social behavior. In short, the project did not center on a political debate, but revolved around the civil society as a social group.

From a certain perspective, the history of documenta goes hand in hand with the development of the history of Western political theory, with the Aristotelian notion of man as a political animal, with Western thinking about sovereignty (whether of the king or of the state), with the ethico-

political constitution of the social and its conclusions concerning the place of the individual within it. If we accept the hypothesis that the exhibition is based on a critical relation to the naturalization of these parameters, then we can also understand that the proliferation of discourse, text, and talk at the core of the exhibition is not an annoying addition to the work shown here, but an underlying structure and a result of research—artistic research—that in the past decades has been occupied with an inquiry into the nature of subjectivity, and its battle to access singularity and difference, variatio, and metamorphosis.

The distinction that consequently opened up between visual and discursive formations has been put forward by art itself. Art wants to know what makes language live. By investigating what it is that language produces through visible things, forms, proportions, perspectives, it offers a reflection on the nature of intentionality, for example, and on how phenomenology should be transformed into epistemology, into knowledge. To see and to speak is thinking. It is an irremediable double.

Again, it is art itself that has initiated this fundamental inquiry into language, and into the languages used by various disciplines to address the world and its objects, the latter having gained a form of efficiency and instrumentality that collapsed the speculative force residing in the so-called human sciences. On its side, this efficiency was a result of the transformation of the public sphere, as described but also proscribed by Habermas: a decline of a productive form of debate in favor of institutionalized discourse oblivious to singular idioms.

Art embodies and explores the otherness of institutionalized thought. If there is a trait that distinguishes the evolution of art practice since the end of World War II, it is its attentiveness to the limits of the disciplines and its willingness to create the conditions for a productive indistinctness to erupt in a zone where inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, cannot be kept apart. To paraphrase Michel Foucault, seeing and speaking are folded onto one another, and this juncture is the fabric of philosophy. We do not see what we are speaking of in the same manner that we speak of what we are seeing. As Gilles Deleuze sums up Foucault's position: "All knowledge runs from a visible element to an articulable one, and vice versa; yet there is no such thing as a common totalizable form, not even a conformity or bi-univocal correspondence."[2]

Nothing can precede or antecede knowledge: the problems begin when this insight is denied, language uses art as a pretext, and art uses language to produce an even stronger form of representation. Speaking and seeing must be conceived independently of the subjects who perform speaking and seeing, in private or in public. This is, of course, a very difficult exercise. It is almost counterintuitive since it claims that the dimensions of language and seeing belong intrinsically together, but also that the knowledge it produces is different from hermeneutics, from the interpretation of art through language. This premise also has a temporal or chronopolitical vector: art is the future of knowledge because it is understood that no discipline can act on it as a passive object, and therefore it preserves the potentiality for knowledge outside its rules, for speculation in the most powerful sense of the term.

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[2] Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* [1986], trans. Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 39.

And so the fashionable phrase "Art is the production of knowledge" hides a truth—though hardly the causal and productivist one that is hereby implied. Art bears a strong relation with knowledge because thinking takes place in art, in the interstices of visibility and discourse. But this is different from being a site where arguments are produced, proof is developed, and conclusive evidence is given. Thinking makes seeing and speaking reach their limits. A certain problem, though, has appeared historically as to how we may understand the epistemological condition of art. This trait—of art being knowledge—undoubtedly appears able to establish a privileged relationship with power and subjectivity. And often this has led to reading knowledge as an institution instead of as a condition in which art is determined by relations of force—of affect and power—at a given historical moment, and singularity is established as the place where knowledge passes through the self.

The Art and the Inquiry

The ideas for shaping thinking and the world do not—cannot—come from civil society but from a community of artists. Attempts to institutionalize art's knowledge imply a belief in the existence of a message that art carries in the public realm and that is given to the civil society for critical judgment. So, the question is twofold: on the one hand, how does one disentangle art and artistic practice from the functions and the organs of the state? And, on the other, how can we create a forgetting—for a moment, at least—of the "economy," that is, of the civil society?

To extend these questions: how can we also initiate a quest for a new language that reflects a less anthropocentric world? To remove art from the realm of the civil society that centers on the

human is, of course, an exercise, a fiction. One could imagine an exhibition that forgets what the roles are, that cannot feed expectations prior to the real encounter with the works; an exhibition where the viewer is truly invited, but where no necessity or utility may or can be fulfilled. Being truly invited would mean that the exhibition would offer viewers a perspective where they are not part of the civil society, and not part of the norm and of the rulers that demand sense-making operations (in which the exhibition itself is necessarily involved qua its institutional existence).

Drawing on the sovereign status of the exception, one could maintain that to stress the importance of locating a community formed by artists at the center of the project constitutes a claim for the importance of exploring the potential of those who cannot answer to normativity. This exploration preserves the space, the time, the language, and the experience to renew our sense of self, of politics, of nature. To place this nonsensical community at the center of art's knowledge means to declare that the object of a show is not the institutions of this world, but instead, to contradict the language of universal pragmatics, which is based in a concept of truth defined as neither adequate nor coherent, but merely consensus. A kind of nonsense is necessary.

A community that produces nonsense and that makes errors persist, that is emphatically unclear and opaque, is at the same time the most expressive of all communities and the least so, since it is not trying to express itself. Most important, however, is that the community of consensus and the artistic, nonsensical community are not sharing the same temporality, and therefore, the obliviousness of the one to the other is perfectly legitimate. Nonsense is far from meaningless, far from incapable of engaging with one's historical time or one's society. In this sense,

"nonsensical" means being capable of suspending our conventional notions of time (in particular, historical time), to blur the question of origin, to be unoriginal and therefore free to be attentive, to be able to perceive the equivocal as a manifestation of the possible as a way of bypassing essentialism. In short, to be able to be more than a reflection of the world. The critical placement of this community and its doings also implies the placing of its research at the core of our concerns. "Artistic research" names the effort to recognize the importance and explore the consequences of the following statement: meaning does not emerge from history but from fiction. Because, in the context of nonsense, reality and fiction are joined.

Again, this names an effort, a force, a movement, rather than a method. When I speak of artistic research, I am not speaking of the exhaustive research undertaken by artists before making a work. Nor should one confuse artistic research with contemporary art's proximity to the social sciences and their methods. Instead, the term has been coined to alert us to the fact that art is also a quantum phenomenon—a principle of indetermination and complementarity that is operative in aesthetics as well as in social sciences and philosophy. Art acts according to at least two staples of quantum physics: it alters what it observes, and accepts that reality is compound, just like the seemingly incommensurable insight that light consists of particles as well as waves.

Neither theory nor philosophy nor criticism can aspire to determine what art is. It is simply ridiculous to question whether art exists but forcing it to speak a single language—that of historical reconstruction—is impudent. Taking artistic research seriously means accepting disorganization in language itself and in the relations between the disciplines that organize

contemporary art. If art has striven to do anything, it is to turn around the rules of the game to be freed of the constant allocation of meaning; this is the only way to unexpress the expressible.[3]

[3] Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays* [1964], trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1972), xvii.

The Politics of Attitudes: On the Relationship Between Attitudes, Skepticism, and Disengagement

Words and their changes in meaning are a challenge for those who try to interpret them. Attitude is a key notion of the past century. It names an age famous for the great and strange revolutions that have happened in it. What is present in the word is a sense of the personal, of the individual reaction to the circumstances. But attitudes are also the production of a "poor exile," a form of reacting to the impatience of history, to produce thinking through a gesture of withdrawal, of skepticism, and critical disengagement.

I return to two examples, one the late Alain Robbe-Grillet, the other the suicide of Alberto Greco, to complement a reading of the word "attitudes" in the title of Harald Szeemann's exhibition. Attitude understood as a change of position, a shift in commonsensical understandings of the idea of personal engagement: a radical introduction of attitude as a superstructure that surpasses the actual writer, the actual artist, and encompasses a fundamental call for an "unrepresentative" form of culture. One that would be able to experience the social differently, being against the established order but avoiding the lyrical fight between individuals and the world.

In returning to an exhibition, one tries to restate its relevance, not only revisiting the works, but its intellectual, artistic, and political contribution. Why has the title of this exhibition such a powerful appeal? It is just an extraordinary lucky combination of notions or does it contain an intuition on a radical change in the way individuals engage with the real? Did artists grasp something about the importance of producing a "cold" mood, a distance, a freedom that is radically different from traditional notions of engagement with the social, with the subjects, with life?

It would be important to investigate the relationship between attitudes and a need for disengagement as political force. It is not a coincidence that curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, while claiming that Harald Szeemann was a great influence, tried to situate skepticism at the center of the debate. Attitudes becoming form may have been another way of naming an engagement that happens outside the realm of psychology, a "cold" attitude towards "psychological attitudes" and their power in controlling individual behavior and in shaping the language of politics.

In 1935 Gordon Allport wrote a text called "Attitudes."[1] He started by saying attitudes should be considered a central concept for social sociology. He defined an attitude as "a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive and dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related."[2] The text

[1] G. W. Allport, "Attitudes", in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. C. Murchison (Worcester: Clark University Press, 1935), 798–844.

[2] Ibid.

tries to describe the many functions that could be ascribed to attitudes as cognitive structures. Attitudes could be seen as a strange kind of memory, a stable report without words, about the way an individual perceives and evaluates a situation. Attitudes are the expression of an accumulating body of empirical knowledge and information. An attitude always remembers itself and reports—in the form of response—about the real as perceived, as having an effect in the individual. And, conversely, an attitude is the production of an affect, a way of influence that is feature-based, theatrical, non-explicit, indirect, personal but oriented towards the others. Jung, in his *Psychological Types*,[3] written in 1921, described two types of mental functions (attitudes): the introverted and the extroverted one. He pointed out something interesting: that for a type to operate in a different attitude, an expenditure of "energy" is needed (emotional energy), and that to operate in our "natural" attitude means the contrary, to replenish with energy (we could say here, enthusiasm). But Jung himself was very aware of the danger of attitudes becoming, not form, but sentiment and very soon he was talking about those, like James Joyce, moving away from any form of psychology towards something he, Jung, called unfeelingness. About this, he wrote:

> We have a good deal of evidence to show that we actually are involved in a sentimentality hoax of gigantic proportions. Think of the lamentable role of popular sentiment in wartime! … Sentimentality is the superstructure erected upon brutality … I am deeply convinced we are caught in our own sentimentality … it is therefore

[3] Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychological Types* (New York: Routledge, 1921).

> quite comprehensible that a prophet should arise to teach our culture a compensatory lack of feeling.[4]

The prophet was James Joyce. Joyce opened, at the core of literature, of language, the possibility of a new "form" or abstraction—he reinterpreted the way we respond to others and the real, and saw the immediate release of sentiment as ignoble. Unfeelingness was the attitude, the new form of the political.

How Attitudes Produce Form

In a lecture held in San Francisco in 1989, the French writer and literary critic Alain Robbe-Grillet mentioned the "literary scandal" sparked by his new interest in the autobiographical. It seemed, he said, that he should not have written about his own life. "Why," he asks, "is it a problem to write about one's own life?"[5] He had been writing novels for more than thirty years and every one of his books presented a new challenge to the reader and provoked a new scandal among the critics. However, it was his prevailing interest in the autobiographical that seemed to upset the commentators more than ever before, generating a fresh wave of criticism. The same shift, continued Grillet, had been noted by the critics in the works of other practitioners of the Nouveau Roman, including Nathalie Sarraute, who had published her memoir *Childhood* in

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[4] Carl Gustav Jung, "Ulysses. Ein Monolog," *Europäische Revue*, nos 8/9 (September 1932), 547–68, translated as "Jung's Essay on Ulysses," accessed May 1, 2022, https://jungcurrents.com/jungs-essay-on-ulysses.

[5] Alain Robbe-Grillet, lecture at San Francisco University, California, April 1989, accessed May 1, 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYhfREWj-hg.

1983,[6] and Margeurite Duras, whose *The Lover* of 1984[7] was also based on personal experience. The question asked by Robbe-Grillet was why the authors of the Nouveau Roman were not considered as having the right to explore their own lives and experiences, when other writers could do so with impunity. It is, of course, related to the first difficulty that his early work ran up against—that is, the common perception that it was concerned with a sense of "objectivity" or even "objectivism" (a true interest in objects, in describing them as they are).

The critics responded to his writing as if the narrative had not been produced by a human being, but rather an objective writing "machine." Clearly, such a form of literature would not have been readable, but as Robbe-Grillet pointed out, at this time, in the 1950s and 1960s, when he was truly *en vogue*, nobody read him. And since nobody was reading him, it was entirely possible to believe the critics' theories that his writing was indeed done by a machine, and that he was completely insane. This idea—that he was mad—seemed to stem from the fact that he removed humans from the narrative and replaced them with objects. Even if such a simplistic interpretation of the work is absurd and surprising, it went through. The fact that in his novels there is always a narrator, one that is so deeply involved in the story that he is telling that he is always disrupting the tale, did not matter to the critics. They never "perceived" the narrator because they could not identify with his voice. In other words, Robbe-Grillet's narrator is always radically unobjective and yet the voice he uses—despite having no interest in objective narrative—has an attitude that truly becomes form, that chooses literature, above empathy, expression.

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[6] Nathalie Sarraute, *Enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), translated as *Childhood* (Nueva York: Georges Braziler, 1984).

[7] Marguerite Duras, *The Lover*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Harper Collins, 1985), originally published as *L'Amant* (Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1984).

Robbe-Grillet does not try to bridge with the reader, his literature preserves its freedom through an avoidance of psychology. However, the critics persisted, their answer to this obvious flaw in their theory being he was a writer who indeed tried hard to be objective but, *bien sure*, had not quite managed it yet! But what is the source of such a big misunderstanding? And why is Robbe-Grillet so important, in my view, to the introduction of an idea of attitude that is that was, for the first time, hinted in Szeemann's exhibition?

The misunderstanding in Robbe-Grillet lies in how he presents the struggle between subjectivity and objectivity, in how his work questions the reader's expectations of language, of the genre itself. He tries to simultaneously be radically subjective and objective. He plays with the novel as being historically tied to the "subjective," and as being produced by artists as a form of self-expression. The radical exercise of Robbe-Grille does not lie in denial. He is not contesting the subjective or proclaiming the objective but stating that the only possible relationship between these two poles—to avoid dualism—is to make one, the subjective, pose as the other, the objective. His radically subjective narrator is also making a radical effort to appear objective. And only then a new form arises, a new form that the novel can adopt, a form that is born of an attitude. It is as if the narrator—often a criminal or an obsessive personality—is trying to hide his guilt by presenting a narrative that will make him appear innocent, for example. It would be completely wrong to say that these books are only subjective or only objective, since they are both at the same time. This contradiction is at the core of modern French literature, a fact that has often been misinterpreted by literary critics. What Robbe-Grillet is proposing is a literature full of traps, never transparent, never promising to be only there for the reader's sake. The narrator may say a thing when he is thinking something else, the text does not translate the author's

intentions. One is forced to pay attention, not only to what the text is saying but, even more so, to all that the text is not saying.

Form Defeating Life

"Steal ideas from me? If everyone dares, I'll sign." These were the opening words to a lecture that Alberto Greco gave at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella before he left for Paris at the beginning of the 1960s.[8] In a text that is half reproach and half factual account, the artist and writer Luís Felipe Noé outlines in a few pages the life and work of the legendary Greco, one of the most influential artists in Buenos Aires in the 1960s.[9] The text was written on the occasion of a commemorative exhibition in the Carmen Waugh gallery in 1970, five years after the artist's death. Greco committed suicide in Barcelona in 1965, but before doing so he wrote the word *FIN* ("the end") on his left hand, and subsequently noted the details of his death agony on the label of a bottle of ink. Apparently, Greco had already announced on several occasions his desire to make death his masterwork. Perhaps the most appropriate reference here would be a survey carried out in 1960 in which leading members of Buenos Aires's artistic community were asked about their projects for the coming year. Greco's reply was unambiguous: "To commit suicide." No one knows what caused him to adjourn such an ambitious project, but his declaration leaves no doubt as to the importance he attached to it, not only within the inescapable dialectic between life and death, but in the context of his artistic practice.

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[8] "Vivo-Dito Manifesto," in *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde*, ed. Andrea Giunta and Ines Katzenstein (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 38.

[9] Luís Felipe Noé, "Alberto Greco a cinco años de su muerte," in *Mi viaje—cuaderno de bitácora* (Buenos Aires: El Ateneo, 2014).

Like many of his compeers, Greco was perfectly aware of the postmedia condition of contemporary art. If modernity had striven to define and proclaim that which was specific to the medium par excellence, namely painting, that same endeavor had opened the doors to the negation of what is essential and the adoption of all that is general, of that which belongs not only to art but also to the larger sphere of life. The metaphor of an indivisible unity, intrinsic to and constituent of a unique experience it is impossible to capture from any other medium, had been historically called into question as never before. Greco knew this and could therefore posit his suicide as a legitimate artistic action that should not be thought of as merely a personal act of despair. At the same time Greco's act is a demonstration of the power of this metaphor, of the echo, the strength of the historical tradition in and on the artist's premeditated, instigatory act. Any gesture or theory that points to the existence of a protected "interior" alien to an "exterior" is a metaphysical fiction. This is something we have learned from Jacques Derrida, who knew how to formulate it in the context of a time that suspected it was so and acted accordingly. Whether it is the '"interior" of a work of art opposed to its context, or a vital moment of lived experience opposed to its repetition in the memory or in signs, it is a fallacy in either sense. The idea of that which is, of what is authentically intrinsic, cannot be given.

Greco's suicide takes this suspicion to new extremes. Nothing seems more one's own than one's own death. The identity principle seems to be proven in this terminal moment of experience, untransferable and incommunicable. Greco's death was thought in order to be thought about, not to be recreated as an experience by others. Nothing is identical to itself, and all interiority is constructed from exteriority, so that this death, contextualized within the corpus of this artist's

mythic career, is an act of subversive appropriation designed to implode the theory of the specificity of the artistic media.

If there is one thing we can demand of the writing of art today, it is not an affirmation of the qualities of what is artistic, but an exploration of the various fronts opened by the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s. The case of Arthur Danto is highly illuminating here. The American philosopher and critic has specialized in disquisitions on the stance that theory and writing should adopt "towards" contemporary art, always from ontological parameters. The greatest concern of philosophy, and of much critical thinking, is still how to determine the nature of the thing as such, be it art or not. On the one hand, art is a phenomenon that has never ceased to exist and, on the other, philosophical theory does not know how to address the question of the end of art announced by Hegel. Danto has found a response to the problem, the first part of which reconciles the inescapable reality of the practice with the inoperancy of a discipline that expresses it. Art, Danto reveals, has not come to an end. What has come to its end is its historical form. What we have exhausted is the "ontological" model that explained art in relation to reality. This is what enables us to declare, according to Danto, that what we have is a posthistorical art. So far, so good, apparently. But the worst is still to come.

What characterizes this new stage is the indifference, the impossibility of privileging anything over anything else. This is synonymous not with bad art, but with a practice whose motor force is entropy, not genius, nor the urge to assume control of the third space between reality and fiction, as in a glorious historical age. I have chosen Danto as an example here because he exemplifies a

significant moment in the crisis of the relation between art and writing. Danto is aware, in the same way that Greco was, that we cannot turn to the power of metaphysics to explain the changes and transformations in art and in the social function of art. And, like Greco, Danto also opts for suicide after making it clear that he has understood it. What neither of the two seems to accept is the self-imposed limit of the classification. The function of art is not to produce objects that are ontologically differentiated from the rest of the objects in the world, and the function of writing is not to establish a classification in this curious sphere. The aspirations of writing on art have far more to do with the theory of knowledge than with traditional metaphysics. The notion of "quality" has been displaced by another category: that of relevance. What really ought to have a bearing on writing is the specter of the interaction between mental conceptions with which art works, the attempts to represent these, and the cognitive systems that make their structuring and communication between source and receiver possible. Defining is only a tiny part of all that remains for us to do. In fact, the point of departure is not the security of knowing that I am writing about art but the ambivalence that comes from writing today about a complex practice in which consensus is just as important as the antagonism it generates. The investigations of criticism and theory should seek to elucidate the way in which artistic practice converges with or diverges from our social imaginaries, how the art object "institutionalizes" certain aspects of these imaginaries, and the various ideological and socioeconomic cartographies that set out, from inside and outside of art, to represent what we think of as "the world." Writing ought to be able to constitute itself as a third space other than the space of legitimation or of pure verbal representation, as a sphere in which to explore the families of references that we have traditionally employed to explain, illustrate, and corroborate what was going on around us.

We have inherited a discipline and a realm with its courtesans; if the 1960s and 1970s were characterized by a serious attempt to set up a republic, we need now to study and contrast effectively the relation between past and present explanations, the system of desires that we communicate every time we quote. The proposing of works that are critical in this sense, that are grounded in the history of the effort of cognitive experimentation with which any work of contemporary art worth citing confronts us, is, it seems to me, the best way of bringing to light what criticism still has before it.

As a Way of Conclusion, How to Connect Attitude as a Necessary Un-Feelingness in the Current Times

There is a radical political message embodied in the mere idea that "attitudes are becoming forms." In stating that artists are aiming towards a radical exercise of transforming a highly capitalized and vulnerable notion of the personal and the individual into a much more complex abstraction, into a form. A form that encompasses much more than a left-alone individual, a form that transcends the person and in so doing, becomes really able to support the person. Against the raise of the sentiment, of a vocabulary sweetened by all the promises of direct interaction between individuals, by the new mandate of engagement, of commitment as the new way to measure the loyalty of people to the system, to its value system, art, and literature—mostly or more obviously after the early 1960s—start to promote and research another reading of the "attitude." An attitude being something different from a psychological category, as Allport was stating at the beginning of the century, or as a gesture, as it could be easily misunderstood, but as a form.

The Complex Answer

My disinterest in institutional critique probably has the same roots as my indifference to psychoanalysis. Digging into the limits of a given frame seems to me like investing in building a sanctuary for a cynical life. The cynical quest for a shortcut to a virtuous existence is in direct opposition to what the cynics considered the uselessness of philosophical speculation.

It took me time to understand that the quest for relaxation in the Western world has to do not only with the anxiety created by capitalist labor and social structures but also with the possibility of producing an alternative to the etymological trip that drives methods of critique and psychoanalysis. The images created by analysis to understand the possibilities of changing our future by controlling our past are imposing. All those millions of humans in therapy constitute a sort of human wave, a movement that marks the limit of psychoanalysis. All those millions of humans in different postures on rubber mats—liberating energy, trying to make their minds go blank, listening to their bodies—defy the supremacy of linguistically deconstructed traumas. All those closed eyes, and the voices of yoga instructors trying to find the right tone to insist on remaining still, on controlling breath, on being there, are a collective manifestation of the rejection of the order of the body-mind relationship.

I do think there is a relationship between lovers of institutions and critics, between psychoanalysis and cynicism. This is an observation, not a critique. There is no point in criticizing a method of reading the relationship between memory and the past and its connection

to order and space. Institutional critique uses the white cube as its metaphor; Freud used the head as the place to rehearse our memories—our personal collections—and to exhibit what's possible only in relation to the given, to the past. It is this very classical idea of space—as a temple, as a form that can be seen and described and is contained—that gives both these systems of reading a dogmatic trust in reason, self-sufficiency, and freedom. This trust surrounds the whole problem of the modern thinking apparatus, which is incapable of allowing us to abandon the rehearsal of what we know without losing control. It insists that change is possible only if we take all the undercurrents to a place where there is light, where we can see them, become conscious of them, and consequently act. And it is here, in this insistence, where I see the end of the possible.

Exhibitions are becoming an impossible format because they continue to premise these inherited institutional and cognitive settings. This is not only because of the public's power to trespass on the private but also because these etymological apparatuses block the imagination from creating new forms. We are so bad with hybrids, yet everything stable, steady, and self-contained is uninteresting, stopping the flow and travel of thoughts through bacteria as well as the possibility for the senses to become brain. We invest so much money in technology, yet we fear deskilling through machines and software just as much as we desire it. Dreaming of enhancement through artificial life is all still very much part of the modern system, while the true merging of two entities has nothing to do with one entity becoming a tool for the other or one suffering because of the other. As I alluded to above, cynics despise speculative thinking, which has only one goal: to explore hybrids. The hybrid is often confused with the parasite, a condition that plenty of philosophers have analyzed out of fear that the future is about us suffering under ourselves. This is probably also why it's difficult for us to think about new forms of production.

At an art exhibition we expect an art exhibition. We have seen so many interdisciplinary forms, collaborations, and syntheses, yet we remain skeptical of polymorphisms. We have said so many times before that there are no hierarchies of knowledge, but this is not true. Nothing is feared more in the art world than being embarrassed by that which is "allowed" to enter its whole epistemological apparatus. Some still see such "things" as trends … trends! It took ages to digest the fact that those without a formal education can create art and thousands of years to allow these "things" of different orders and cultures to get near to the point of sharing the status of the art we learn to produce. We have such a problem with the coexistence of codes and the intermingling of orders that it takes centuries to accept alterations.

In 1988 philosopher Vilém Flusser visited the Ars Electronica festival in Osnabrück, Germany. He gave an interesting interview for the occasion,[1] in which he tells simply how words cannot describe the world anymore. Flusser explains how the alphabet was not only a radical invention that—more than 3,500 years ago—provided a code to describe reality; it was also the genesis of our notion of "historical time." The line of the text and the timeline are analogous and, over centuries, the logic of reading became the logic of the sequence of events. We are, says Flusser, in a revolution of thinking and communication, since neither text nor image alone can sufficiently describe reality. The "new" reality, or time, so to speak, needs a language that measures as well as maps, describes as well as depicts. There is no single language, discipline, or realm of knowledge that alone can handle the task of dealing with the world. Information

[1] Interview by Miklós Peternák in Osnabrück, European Media Art Festival (September 1988), accessed May 1, 2022, https://red-thread.org/en/about-technical-revolution/.

technologies, he continues, have tried for years to produce synthetic codes that help us to define the tools of the near future.

After Flusser, I would say that one of the main tasks of art today is to teach the nature of this new time and to develop the capacity to grasp its multiplication of synthetic realities. In the interview Flusser mentions very few positive examples of formulating the "good practice" of such a task. We should therefore first address the complex architecture of today's forms of knowledge.

If any structure has been dealing with practice and production, on the one hand, and an intense respect for the line and historical time, on the other, it is exhibition-making. Within the spatial parameters of the white cube, one could say the exhibition is designed as a book. And, as Flusser further mentions, it is the book we need to leave behind; that is, the linearity of art's presentation and explanation, its inside/outside logic. This is, of course, very difficult, since it demands a completely new trust both in ways of making as well as in the discovery and performance of space under these different premises. The current interest in different types of exhibitions—from fair presentations to the innumerable postures of art inside and outside the frames of institutions to exhibitions of science and natural history—reflects a need unfulfilled in terms of figuring out how to deformalize the production, presentation, and reception of art. More than an "after form," our time demands a graspable method for an "un-form." It is known that we need to collapse the core premise of "aesthetics"—the distance that separates art from institutions, viewers, and artists themselves. However, this implies a nearness, or unprecedented fusion, of substances having remained apart for so long that it would demand new organs; that is, a whole new theory

of the relevance of senses in an epistemology to come. It is for this reason that I believe in both a return to experimental conditions as well as an abandonment of the "middle class" as the universal receiver of our acts. The first is easy to name yet very difficult to put in place, because we are more interested in defining the steps that lead to results than the educts, the forces that motivate the experiment and make it possible. I think art should be the place for the continuous effort that creates these experimental conditions. And I am also positive that "presenting"—curating, if you will, with all its cuteness and horrors and rigor and humbleness—is the right way to challenge the "book" presentation. Facing the hybrid is a great first step towards change.

The second premise—the abandonment of the middle class—is a little bit more polemic yet even more necessary than the first. Do not understand abandonment as disregard, or a lack of love. Rather the contrary, it is the heavy weight that democracy has placed on the "middle," on the citizens, that we need to lighten. This implies the development of projects that actively look to a different kind of relationship between society and art other than one of legitimation. Lately I have been thinking about two possible methods that could be put in place. One is to engage more actively educational facilities—labs, campuses, and centers—that serve society with no expectation of a direct consensus between an activity and its reception. The second method is to develop projects with artists and cultural agents that will use the given structures to work together with the youth and children, who also form the social. One radical way of un-forming our inherited institutional structures will be to challenge them with radically different uses and to inhabit them with working methods that are unprecedented but that may turn our models of exhibiting and participating in the production of culture into more productive ground.

It has been said over and over that we should not expect a conventional exhibition. Does this attempt to excuse the process or tempo of the works, which may not coincide with your time or your visit? The unconventionality that appears again and again in press texts refers to materials that are too slow or too conceptual to fulfill the expectations of the senses, which are not defied in any way. By announcing that the exhibition format is over, we renew its importance. It is only boldness and a weird, surreal emergence of production that can collapse the format. Only by showing the work of the "wrong" ones can we produce a truly speculative exercise.

It is a funny coincidence that the etymology of the word "cynic"—*kunikos*—means "dog" and that the main posture in yoga is the "downward-facing dog."

PART III

Thinking Metamorphoses—Overcoming the Cartesian Divide

Aesthetic Consciousness

1.

I would like to start by reproducing the definition of "aesthetic" given by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

> Introduced into the philosophical lexicon during the eighteenth century, the term *aesthetic* has come to be used to designate, among other things, a kind of object, a kind of judgment, a kind of attitude, a kind of experience, and a kind of value. For the most part, aesthetic theories have divided over questions particular to one or another of these designations: whether artworks are necessarily aesthetic objects; how to square the allegedly perceptual basis of aesthetic judgments with the fact that we give reasons in support of them; how best to capture the elusive contrast between an aesthetic attitude and a practical one; whether to define aesthetic experience according to its phenomenological or representational content; how best to understand the relation between aesthetic value and aesthetic experience. But questions of more general nature have lately arisen, and these have tended to have a skeptical cast: whether any use of *aesthetic* may be explicated without appeal to some other; whether agreement respecting any use is sufficient to ground meaningful theoretical agreement or disagreement; whether the term ultimately answers to any legitimate philosophical purpose that justifies its inclusion in the lexicon. The

> skepticism expressed by such general questions did not begin to take hold until the later part of the twentieth century, and this fact prompts the question whether (a) the concept of the aesthetic is inherently problematic and it is only recently that we have managed to see that it is, or (b) the concept is fine and it is only recently that we have become muddled enough to imagine otherwise. Adjudicating between these possibilities requires a vantage from which to take in both early and late theorizing on aesthetic matters.[1]

2.

How to regain a notion of aesthetic as a useful one in the current debate around artistic research? True, the term aesthetic does refer to a relationship with experience and to the possibility of gaining a consensus on how certain types of objects—and later non-objects—are at the origin of that particular experience. However, I cannot think of this term without its very precise historical life in art and art theory contexts—even if expanding its meaning may be interesting; even if pointing to other terms and therefore problems concerning experience, knowledge, and thinking in relation to art may be equally important.

[1] See http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetic-concept/.

Is it still productive to consider the aesthetic a valid concept pointing to the "processes of understanding signification?" And, if so, how? The term, even taken in a more experimental, expanded, or redefined way, refers to the experience we do find in what we call the "I." The "I" being a human or a bat—I am not going to make any distinction here, since it is possible to imagine that all animate matter could possess a sense of the I, even without a language to tell us about it. However, my first reservation pertains to the confidence the term aesthetic implies: a very compelling trust in the cause-effect relationship between the mind and the outside-the-mind situation. It is difficult to think about the term aesthetic without implying a dualistic model of mind and nature and the "lucky" psychophysical laws enabling the happy connection between certain types of objects/circumstances and the experience we have of them. Traditionally art theory depends very much on those dualistic explanatory models. Art and some "parts" of nature are understood as having rare physical properties that play a causal role in the mind perception. Those properties trigger the lucky correspondence between what is outside and what we sense as "inside." My argument rests on the claim that these properties cannot be known, neither through perception nor through introspection. However, that does not rule out the possibility that they might be known.

3.

In searching for a concept, what we do is look for a better, more complex way to define a problem. Artistic research means many things at once. It would take too long to discuss the two terms separately. It is worthwhile, though, to devote some time to describing the nature of the ambition that married the two terms. Artistic used as an adjective is already a strange and tricky notion. In the coupling of terms, it is unclear whether research happens in a playful, non-

tructured way or if it is at the core of doing of art. Too often artistic research entails an ideological statement. That is, even if common sense says art happens first and foremost in the realm of the unconscious, it is still considered research, thus, a conscious pursuit towards an "engagement with processes of understanding signification." Artistic research comes to be, then, a statement about a very particular type of thinking, isolating the two cases "thinking in art" and "thinking through art." Furthermore, in being made a first cousin to the aesthetic, the term artistic research implies that such a particular case study in "thinking" also produces a particular experience with an "I." In my opinion, that emphasis in artistic research just stresses once more the historical problem of coming to terms with the mind-object issue. The mind cannot consciously create the object that produces an experience escaping any straightforward decision-making process able to be replicated with the same effect by anyone. Only artists can produce art. Therefore, the type of consciousness that produces art cannot be followed or easily be explained as an intention to produce an effect. Self-reflectivity and signification is reached unintentionally. Whether art addresses politics or issues of form or material, the aesthetic—more than political or cultural theory—defines the kind of processes that happen in the minds of viewers and in their experience of works of art. If consciousness is what we call thinking, we need to explain how thinking happens in art, assuming that art is not a conscious decision everyone can make.

For me, the term "artistic research" is a composition that designates a temporary solution—and so does the notion of aesthetic. Aesthetic is the name philosophy gave to a problem that corresponds to the philosophy of mind, to the question of how experience generates thinking and how art—its making and its understanding—like no other realm embodies the incredibly deep

complexity of the relationship between thinking/sensing/feeling. Artistic research as a term is a bricolage not used to point to art as thinking, but to indicate our impossibility of grasping how art is thinking. Both terms express the need for more, for a language capable of new ways of addressing art's contribution to knowledge of a mind active in the nonhuman realm; for a logic that will bring us to understand social and political philosophies—not in rehearsing inherited terms and theoretical apparatuses but by venturing new ones as Michel Serres or Alain Badiou do.

4.

The notion "consciousness" is used in many different ways. It is sometimes used for the capacity to discriminate between stimuli, to report information, to monitor internal states, or to control behavior. We can think of these phenomena as posing the "easy problems" of consciousness. In principle, there seems to be no profound problem in assuming that a physical system could be "conscious" in the senses and there is no obvious obstacle to an eventual explanation of these phenomena in neurobiological or computational sense. But how and why do physical processes give rise to experience? Why do physical processes not take place "in the dark," without any accompanying awareness of experience? That is the central mystery of consciousness.

However, not all we know about consciousness is deducible from physical phenomena. Therefore, we will always be unable to fully understand consciousness when departing from physical states. Traditional notions of aesthetic experience all have an epistemic basis—and I would say that aesthetic experience as used today in art contexts very much depends on that.

They all assume a gap between the real and the mind, between physical and phenomenological "truths." In other words, they all seem to derive from a Cartesian way of presenting the divide between anima and non-anima realms. The aesthetic paradigm is still a reductionist one.

Consciousness is connected to the human mind, a mind affected by the real, a real that does not possess any form of consciousness. The aesthetic depends on a materialistic way of reading the relationship between human and nature. It is hard to believe how materialism can still be held as a true way of presenting human versus nature or explaining a particular case in experience—but materialism must be true since alternatives are unacceptable. Thus, we should dedicate our research efforts to produce alternatives for preeminent worldviews—not only affecting how we read art and its effects, but also able to transform traditional ways of understanding experience, art, and politics.

As argued above, we have good reason to believe that consciousness has a fundamental place in nature. In the light of all relevant philosophical and scientific developments, we need to explore how this may trigger a new science for thinking about art and art's thinking together with a new set of terms and logic—only then can we proceed, from a point of view of an "art-I" rather than merely a "human-I," to discover a truly new way of being part of art.

The Octopus in Love

The octopus is the only animal that has a portion of its brain (three quarters, to be exact) located in its (eight) arms. Without a central nervous system, every arm "thinks" as well as "senses" the surrounding world with total autonomy, and yet, each arm is part of the animal. For us, art is what allows us to imagine this form of decentralized perception. It enables us to sense the world in ways beyond language. Art is the octopus in love. It transforms of our way of conceiving the social as well as its institutions, and also transforms the hope we all have for the possibility of perceptive inventiveness.

Parts Being Totals

Let us now imagine an institution composed entirely of well-functioning parts of other institutions—a strange new form of urbanism that takes the shape of a gigantic museum. Parts, as well as departments, would coalesce into a gigantic yet identifiable choreography, recognizable as an "institution"—defined as a behavioral pattern so powerful that the viewer could easily embody the sense of interiority such institutions create. The image I am trying to convey here is not that of an institutional "quilt"—of several well-functioning parts spread over a territory and dependent on a larger bureaucratic container centralizing all assorted activities. Rather, this is an image of a formation, a system that unravels multiple codes simultaneously. All these systematics would be invisible at first. We would not be able to name any of these parts as such; to us, they would appear and function as totalities. The simultaneity of these multiple meanings

—forms of understanding art and practice—and the simultaneity of languages that present the heteroclite nature of art both today and in the past, would render the structure that holds them together innocent or even absent. And so, these different institutions—or better yet, organisms—in their natural way of inhabiting a coordination and even successfully broadcasting it, would render insignificant the prototypical academic prejudices of level, character, or style. None of these organisms—our former museums, art centers, art projects, art societies, *Kunsthallen*, and so forth—would be arranged in a hierarchical formation. At the same time, it would be difficult to claim that the equality of these organisms is determined by any standardization of working codes. None of these parts or totalities would be embedded in a didactic form of organization.

The Rainforest

To present a rainforest inside a white cube is impossible. A rainforest is the radical other of a white cube: the opposite of culture, the opposite of an exhibit, the contrary of scale, the opposite of legibility, the opposite of ideology, order without subject matter—or rather, without any subject matter other than life in itself.

In a conversation we once had, the artist Raphael Montáñez Ortiz, who founded El Museo del Barrio, said that when the museum was conceived, he thought that all its exhibitions should start with a rainforest. Or rather, that the preamble of any form of art presentation should pass through a rainforest. He did, in fact, collaborate with the American Museum of Natural History to this end, by creating a rainforest room with their help. Unfortunately, no images of it have survived.

After telling me about his idea of the rainforest, he stared at me and asked: "Do you understand?" I did not—or at least, I did not at that moment.

For a long time, I have been wondering what he meant—surely not that one should reproduce nature or a representation of nature inside the gallery. I remembered the title of his two-volume dissertation, *Towards an Authenticating Art*, published in 1982.[1] The book is an exhaustive account of his growing interest, from the late sixties on, in psychic healing therapies and rebirthing. He coined the term "Physio-Psycho-Alchemy," a physical reversal that can be carried out by means of the mind and its alchemic power. A rainforest at the core of an institution is also a reversal—an alchemic reversal of the institution, turned first into an organism so that later, a "room" can host art, artworks, and artifacts.

Claude Lévi-Strauss was also fascinated by the potentiality of reversal. He often wrote about chiasmus, a rhetorical figure used masterfully by Shakespeare. A chiasmus is a reversal that produces a total confusion of identity that aims, later on, to reestablish that identity under a renewed contract, so to speak. The Museo del Barrio—invented, created, and developed by Ortiz under the special circumstances of diaspora and the civil rights struggle for equality—may have been disguised as a rainforest before it was able to emerge as an institution at all. How else could a museum for a still-forthcoming community be possible? Disguised as a rainforest, the new organism could convey both the monumental importance of the project and the futility of presenting itself as "alternative." The transformative language that is required to change the art

[1] Raphael Montáñez Ortiz, *Towards an Authenticating Art (vols I and II)* (New York: Columbia University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1982).

historical canon demands a radical metamorphosis—like that of becoming-nature—and not only a modulation in the narrative, or new additions to that canon. This museum of a certain future, which still needs to flourish under a yet-unknown relation between modern aspirations and vernacular language, was forced to appear as a rainforest first, before becoming an institution. The rainforest is the beggar that will become the sovereign. What, then, is the question? How will this presentiment of radical transformation find its fulfilment, or, at the very least, its mode of performance?

I then recalled the distinction between game and ritual in Lévi-Strauss. As Boris Weisman explains, Lévi-Strauss defines a game as a structure that produces symmetry among the players through its rules:

> An essential principle of every game is that the rules are the same for everyone; the starting point of every game is symmetry. The end result of a game is intended to engender asymmetry by producing a winner. This asymmetry is the product of non-structural factors: individual skill or talent, chance, or accident—in other words, an *event*.[2]

Another kind of event—namely, death—is what gives rise to rituals:

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[2] Boris Weisman, "Claude Levi-Strauss, Chiasmus and the Ethnographic Journey," *Arachnofiles*, no. 2 (Autumn 2001).

> Death … brings about an asymmetrical relationship between the living and the dead, the sacred and the profane … The purpose of the ritual is to perform a series of pre-ordained "actions" (which are different from the "actions" or events that make up a game; since they are pre-determined they constitute an integral part of its structure), and thereby ensure that all the participants to the ritual end up being w*inners*.[3]

In the historical horizon of the museum-as-artwork that Ortiz proposed, it makes sense to believe that the rainforest provokes the institution to take ritual as its structure. The logic of the ritual may remedy or otherwise compensate for the social imbalance—disruption—that gave rise to the ritual (the rainforest/museum). If the modern institution is one whose structure is closer to the logic of the game, in 1968 the emerging museum embraced the ritual.

This play of inversion between game and ritual—the chiasmic logic—is intended here as a means of reconciling the vernacular and the modern: both can be used as models-for-thinking to address social and aesthetic paradigms. The former should no longer be regarded as belonging to an earlier, prescientific stage in an evolutionary process that invariably leads to the latter. Rather, both models must find a way—through art—to reflect one another in such a way that the vernacular provides a kind of inverted mirror image of the modern way of structuring and interpreting the real. The Lévi-Straussian message—channeled here through Ortiz's rainforest/ museum—is that the force separating vernacular from modern worlds is not time, or history, but

[3] Ibid.

rather, as Weisman puts it, “a synchronic system of symmetrical relationships of correlation and opposition.”[4]

There are many ways to interpret Ortiz’s vision of the rainforest as the preface to every exhibition. To put it simply, I think his rainforest introduces a very novel element into the existing discussion around the politics of the white cube. The debate has been a notably hard one, either taking architectural perspectives (as related to modernity) or flowing freely and responding to active discursivity and project-oriented energy (as in the late-nineties and the first decade of this century). Amidst all this, what the white cube discussion has lacked is precisely a rainforest: a principle that, in its radical otherness, defies the container, since the life force represented by a rainforest cannot be contained.

I still do not know exactly what to do about this incredibly beautiful image of a rainforest installed at the core of an art institution. It embodies all the difference in the world, separated from human agency and ideology, yet it also encapsulates the source of all that. It differs from the conventions of neutrality, and through its scale and its very nature it escapes from any formal canons. It compels a form of intelligence without consciousness to erupt into the white cube. “The rainforest,” as Ortiz has said, “is an element that really helps us to think about class and labor and autonomy and dependency, just introducing a radically different viewpoint, the viewpoint of the rhythm of moisture.”

[4] Ibid.

In short, it seems very fertile to picture art that is outside the notion of culture. Can you imagine a white cube adopting a rainforest?

The Invention

The rainforest marks one of the multiple ends of the era of critical philosophy. Critical philosophy seeks necessary conditions or general foundations to determine possible relations. Instead of casting solid architecture, it casts doubt—an enormous parenthesis that allows us to avoid entering into the details of things. A museum emerging from a diasporic community that suffers from social and legal inequality could not possibly start by presenting itself as an "alternative" to modern institutions. There were no shared general conditions that could produce a "new modern Museo"—not enough social, political, or aesthetic consensus. Thus, in 1968, the museum was not an alternative art space, but rather, through the rainforest, a true invention. This idea of invention is given the greatest importance by French philosopher Michel Serres. He defines philosophy as aspiring to give birth to a world of politics and professional ethics, rather than remaining crouched in an immovable position from which it either approves or condemns modernity or rationality—or the clarity of all discourse, for that matter.

In philosophy as in life, and in life as in the sciences, I personally prefer invention accompanied by the danger of error, rather than rigorous verification paralleled by the risk of immobility. As Serres has pointed out:

> All around us, language replaces experience. The sign, so soft, substitutes itself for the thing, which is hard. Yet, I cannot think of this substitution as an equivalence. It is more like an abuse—a violence … The sound of a coin is not worth the coin; the smell of cooking does not fill the hungry stomach; publicity is not the equivalent of quality; the tongue that talks annuls the tongue that tastes or the one that receives and gives a kiss.[5]

It is very complicated to give an exact meaning of the word "invention," or to apprehend the central role that the senses play in Serres's writing. He argues for a reinvention of the site of relations between law and science. To invent, according to Serres, means to abandon the notion that philosophy has the right to judge. In the process, philosophy regains its ability to create. To invent is to produce that which will foster production, to formulate and express a system of laws, to understand and apply scientific possibilities.

This simple mention of the rainforest represents the opposite of the critical project: a rejection of the narcissism that defines the reinstitutionalization of the forms of knowledge and culture that transform artworks into cultural products, and exhibitions into ideological demarcations of experience. It is also the opposite of the demand that art be significant, that it deliver what we could call a "situation of reading," of extending meaning and memory into a sterile void. The image of the rainforest embodies an ongoing, performative speculation about ways of affecting and being affected, about ways of naming—a language, a place, a time. The viewer must find a

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[5] Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 193.

language, imagine a place, and conceive a time, while at the same time producing a position far away from it all.

This, I suppose, is what we call invention.

Thinking Through the Skin

"For Serres," Laura Salisbury writes, "before language, before even the word, there was noise, a 'background noise, which precedes all signals and is an obstacle to their perception.'" She goes on: "This noise, against which previous philosophies have blocked their ears, is both the very possibility of language and also its interference; it is the multiple sound of the universe that 'the intense sound of language prevents us from hearing.'"[6]

"What is mathematics," Serres asks, "if not a language that assures perfect communication free of noise?"[7] In other words, as Salisbury explains,

> in order for these diverse systems of coding to speak to one another, the philosopher's work must establish pathways of communication between this network of systems; it must also read communication itself as an enactment of the turbulent

[6] Laura Salisbury, "Michel Serres: Science, Fiction, and the Shape of Relation," in *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 31, no. 98 (March 2006).

[7] Serres with Latour, *Conversations on Science*, 78.

> relationship between contingent pockets or figures of order and the swirling disorder that is its ground.[8]

Serres writes that "noise is the basic element of the software of all our logic, or it is to the logos what matter used to be to form."[9] In this vein, Salisbury notes that, for Serres,

> communication only emerges from background noise, from signs differentiated from an infinite cacophony of other signs and from the static that will not admit to being read as a sign at all … The analysis of the flows and thrusts, the prepositions that link together these turbulent systems, become, perhaps unexpectedly, part of Serres's project to construct "a decent philosophy of the object."[10]

Salisbury goes on to explain that, in his book *The Five Senses*, Serres "demonstrates that sensory embodiment renders it impossible to stand in front of or outside the world, to free oneself from its entangled networks and the multiple spaces and times traced by the circulation of objects."[11]

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[8] Salisbury, "Michel Serres."

[9] Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 7.

[10] Salisbury, "Michel Serres."

[11] Ibid.

This thought, however, is very difficult to convey. Serres rejects analytic philosophy, which he identifies with the critical school. But he also distances himself from writers such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. His thought operates within an intriguing and fascinating refusal of language. Salisbury again:

> Part of this refusal of language is a turning away from the discourse of phenomenology, which has a lineage that links the poststructuralism of Derrida back through Heidegger's fundamental ontology to Husserl. Serres tells Latour that the" return to things" always runs up against the barrier of logic within philosophy; phenomenology, in particular, always filters sensory experience through structures of language.[12]

Serres refuses this "agreement" on which language depends, an agreement that petrifies objects and suppresses the chaos caused by the senses. In place of this refusal, the embodied subject is shown to feel, think, and construct itself through the already multiple effects of information dispersed and condensed, as well as the centripetal and centrifugal forces that make both center and periphery impossible to locate. These forces and processes are the sensory body's work of self-making and self-transformation.

The Egg

[12] Ibid.

Federico Manuel Peralta Ramos, an Argentinian artist, created a large egg as his contribution to the final Instituto Torcuato di Tella show in 1965. The egg was entitled *We, The Outsiders*. Very little documentation remains of the original piece, although there are a few pictures. These black-and-white photographs show the artist and the egg on a thin plinth within a gallery. Dark areas in the plaster can be seen; the piece was not entirely dry at the time of the show. Peralta Ramos's few surviving friends who saw the piece recall that it was made in such a hurry that it broke immediately after the jury declared it the "winner" of that year's show. One of Peralta Ramos's relatives told me that the artist miscalculated the tension between the metal structure and the plaster skin—the piece imploded right after the prize ceremony. Yet there is also a picture that shows Peralta Ramos destroying the piece himself. Either way, the work, too large to be moved, was made inside the gallery space and was always fated for destruction.[13]

Over the years, and because it was his last art object, the egg formed part of the myth surrounding Peralta Ramos. Some say he abandoned art (he later became an important character on a late-night television show) but, in actuality, he did not. The egg brings to an end the anxiety of becoming a conceptual artist, a part of an international movement—a figure able to comment and contribute to a certain tradition. Like the rainforest, the egg is also an end of critical thinking. And also like the rainforest, the egg is an invention. It is an invention of a different kind: a more classical one, still organized around appearance and what is hidden—around enigma and truth. Unlike the rainforest, the egg depends on language; it establishes a dialogic form that calls

[13] Another, very unclear, image shows the piece as part of an ensemble that also includes a mural painting and an obelisk. Although there are no pictures of the obelisk, there is one of the painting, situated just behind the egg. The paint has the texture of molten rock forming a trail down the wall. The black-and-white image allows us to perceive the painting's dark colors, combined with brighter ones, but we are unable to imagine either its real tones or their effect on the adjacent egg.

attention to the physicality of the object—its texture, shape, and even its sound as a form that is hollow The egg speaks. It is the egg that says we are outside. The piece traces a clear correspondence between rationality (sense) as "outside" and irrationality (nonsense) as "inside." The momentum of meaning is delayed as the egg starts to fall apart, turning all possible narratives into debris. During this process of announcement, presence, and disappearance, a movement of another sort arises: not production but seduction.

In the years following the egg, Peralta Ramos devoted himself to living life to the full, giving parties with his grant from the Guggenheim Foundation, but also meeting friends in cafes during the day and at cabarets at night. He performed "living" as art, while writing maxims on bar napkins, paper, and canvas. Thus the egg was part of an avant-garde gesture focused on a personalized surrealist take on total autonomy, the destruction of art, and the overlapping of rules that separate form from content. But, apart from the obvious, the interesting part of all this lies in how Peralta Ramos ended up on the other side, so to speak. If we are "the outsiders," it is because he—the egg/the artist—is inside. He did not stop producing art; he just started making it from the other side. In this sense, the egg marks more of a beginning than an end. The egg—Humpty Dumpty—is, like Serres, tired of language, but still ultimately dependent on it. Like Humpty Dumpty, he and he alone can decide on the meaning of words. The egg can rename the world and invent it anew. However, since only he knows this meaning, the whole process may end up becoming a radically solipsistic effort. The world was invented that day. The egg stood in front of us all—people from the past as well as the future. Peralta Ramos transfigured the world, changed the rules, and altered the universe in Buenos Aires—an act similar to the Psycho-Physio-Alchemy of Ortiz. And then?

Like the Duc de La Rochefoucauld, Peralta Ramos took refuge in maxims. This is not mere coincidence. Similar to the French thinker, Peralta Ramos had intuited how to transform negativity—nobody but him saw or felt the world change—into a voluntary force towards good, towards living life as a second passion.

While living, he coined thousands of maxims full of "terse" wisdom: "Believe in an invisible world, beyond the fars and the nears"; "I am a start, since I only go out at night"; "I am a piece of atmosphere." People would visit him at one of his favorite cafes, looking for an aphorism, which he would often write down for them on a piece of paper. They called him a street philosopher at times, a pacifist scholar at others. The sayings are quite stupid, in the best sense of the word. He was stupid because he needed to embody the expression of refusal without defensiveness. This form of refusal is much more difficult to locate since it seems to appear as something not there or not understood or not contained.

Another way of interpreting this production is to read all these statements as maxims—as words that express the profound structure of a wisdom yet to come. His vast production of written messages, handed to all those who came to see him, express the vertigo of knowing that we can never give an ultimate definition of humankind. Their flow traces an endless trail of demystification. Without knowing Peralta Ramos, Roland Barthes wrote: "The infinite demystification which the Maxims stage for us could not fail to involve (to expose) the maxim-maker himself."[14]

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[14] Roland Barthes, "La Rochefoucauld: 'Reflections or Sentences and Maxims,'" in *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1980), 20.

It may be useful to recall here that wisdom is different to knowledge, in that wisdom is impossible to describe as being "produced"—a distinction that is very present in the thought of Serres. In a chapter entitled "Boxes" in *The Five Senses*, Serres states that the body "should not become a statue or tomb," because it "radiates wisdom." It is our duty not to "receive sense data as a gift, without reciprocating."[15] One could say, with Lauren A. Benjamin, that Peralta Ramos's maxims conceived of "a philosophy rooted in the experience of the world (with a deep responsibility for giving back to that world—in whatever form—in return)."[16] *Whatever form*, because the way the artist relates to the world is not as a participant, or a citizen, but as a visitor. Remember? He went inside the egg. The egg is a shell, like a spaceship, and spaceships often change direction while heading towards their destination. Like "Ulysses and Colombus, Bougainville or Cook," Peralta Ramos had, "together with all sea populations, the rare chance of inhabiting and travelling simultaneously."[17]

Of All Inhabitants of the Sea: The Octopus

The octopus is a very friendly monster. Though it is not so easy to convince a bunch of teenagers from a village on the Atlantic coast of Spain of this. They used to meet at breakwaters on the weekends, late in the afternoon. It was light enough to distinguish exactly who was sitting where

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[15] Michel Serres, *The Five Senses*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), 200.

[16] Lauren A. Benjamin, "The Sensory Philosophy of Michel Serres," *Pictures. Places. Things* (May 29, 2012).

[17] Serres, *The Five Senses*, 276.

and what they were doing. One of the village boys had an almost academic look, a remarkable trait in a group of school dropouts. They were all at the end of their teenage years. Their conversation oscillated between sex, death metal, family life, joblessness, and that octopus thing.

In addition to being a huge part of the gastronomic tradition of the region, octopi represent a kind of bridge between the inhabitants of the sea and the inhabitants of the coast. Not that they were treated in a particularly friendly way. It was not uncommon to see a group of women hitting octopi against the rocks. Their body fibers need to be broken, they say, otherwise they are inedible. Years later, it was said that freezing them was enough to guarantee a great texture once cooked. Two images were iconic for me in that remote coastal spot in northwest Spanish: three or four octopi cooling on the windowsill, with their heads on a glass; and a large freezer full of octopi. I remember no less than thirty or forty in my own family's larder.

After a while, everyone was talking about that academic-looking boy becoming friends with an octopus. They said that the animal came to shore every day at the same time to visit him. The boy took some photographs to prove to the others that the octopus had "stared" at him. He claimed that they sat together on a cliff every day for hours, watching the sun go down. I remember him talking about it nonstop at bars, discos, and all the other gathering places one finds in a boring village. I loved the story, but I lost touch with him, since I only visited my family from time to time.

I recently came across new research on octopi in an article in *Wired*, published less than a year ago:

> The octopus is weird; it has an eerily malleable body, sucker-studded arms, skin that can transform into a convincing facsimile of seaweed—or sand—in a flash. It can solve mazes, open jars, and uses tools. It even has what seems to be a sophisticated inner life. What's confusing about all this is that the octopus has a brain unlike that of almost any creature we might think of as intelligent. In fact, the octopus brain is so different from ours—from most of the animals we're accustomed to studying—that it holds a rare promise. If we can figure out how the octopus manages its complex feats of cognition, we might be closer to discovering some of the fundamental elements of thought and to developing new ideas about how mental capacity evolved. "Part of the problem in working out what's essential to intelligence in the brain is working out which are the features that, if you took them away, you would no longer have an intelligent system," says Peter Godfrey-Smith, a philosopher at CUNY who studies animal minds. "What's essential as opposed to an accident of history?" Think about it: chimpanzees are, like us humans, primates. Dolphins are mammals. Even clever crows and ravens are at least vertebrates. But our last common ancestor with the octopus was probably some kind of wormlike creature with eye spots that lived as many as 750 million years ago; the octopus has a sophisticated intelligence that emerged from an almost entirely different genetic foundation. If you want to study an alien intelligence, Godfrey-Smith says, "octopuses are the closest thing we have."[18]

[18] Katherine Harmon-Courage, "How the Freaky Octopus Can Help Us Understand the Human Brain," *Wired* (October 1, 2013).

I quoted this research somewhere and, in a recent visit to my village, somebody left a name and a number for me to call as soon as I arrived. I did. “It’s me,” a male voice said, “the octopus friend.” I recognized his voice. “You left your number?” I did not know quite what to say. “It is because of the octopus thing, you know. I saw you mentioned something, on Twitter. You know,” he was talking slowly, “it changed my life. The octopus, I mean.” Silence. “I was about to quit school, you know. But I decided to go on and do something after that summer. I was there sitting for hours and feeding that animal and I felt that I also should do something intelligent.” “Did you take him home?” I asked. I felt stupid, even girlish, asking such a question. “Home? An octopus? No. Never thought of it, actually. I just went to see him one day and he was not there anymore. I was shocked, but I guess it’s normal. But I think of it every day, you know, even today. And I decided to become an electric engineer.” I thought this was weird, but also the most logical conclusion in the world.

A large part of the neuronal mass of the octopus is spread throughout its eight arms. Unlike in humans, the brain of the octopus does not have a centralized encephalization, which shows that a centralized brain is not the only evolutionarily advantageous form of intelligence. The octopus’s unusual neuronal distribution allows for its eight arms to be “autonomous.” They can carry out activities on their own, or coordinate among themselves, without needing the head to be involved.

It is very difficult to imagine this. It is like thinking of fingers as being self-sufficient totalities, but also part of a body. It is like a small institution that is individually operated, but also an essential part of the cultural organism. This image shatters our notions of how information flows and how the senses think. It cannot yet be expressed efficiently in metaphoric language.

The Embrace

> [Aesthetic autonomy is] the idea that art has its own sphere demarcated from other human activities and determines its own principles or rules. Art cannot be replaced by other activities without loss. Aesthetic experience should be explained by aesthetic terms or attributes, and art should be valued by itself alone. The idea is intended to protect art from being assimilated to scientific, religious, or moral functions and to insist that art has a different domain from science and morality.[19]

This definition exposes a cognitive demand, a demand that serves as the basis for judgment. And so, the question is how to judge without judgment, how to think without the critical method, how to speak without creating an order that excludes the disorder created by the senses. Judgment and its exercise are so deeply embedded in our way of understanding art, culture, and the outside-inside relationship between thought and body, object and thought, body and touch, that it seems almost counterintuitive to take seriously the demand to leave it behind. The Era of Judgment is the home of our complex institutional urbanism of aesthetics; it believes in order, not chaos, as the principle that secures the preservation of objects and values. It also perpetuates a cognitive

[19] Nicholas Bunnin and Yiyuan Yu, "Aesthetic Autonomy," in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 15.

attitude that prevents invention. The Era of Judgment, to borrow an idea from the historian Henri Focillon, is marked by the flow of time, by consecutive-ness. But it is also an era organized around the logic of transcendence, the game of oppositions between death and life, creation and noncreation—a logic that philosophy has tried many times to contest, especially since 1968. But Foucault, in his critique of institutions and power, is more digestible and comforting than the later Deleuze or Serres on the matter of politics and invention. And art and artists have resisted the logic of transcendence, emphasizing, for example, the importance of not being creative—in other words, of *being* life without *generating* life, of being life without seeing an artwork as a "production."

Multiform and monotonous, repetitive of various forms of disorder, art since the mid-sixties—if not before—has sought ways to surpass the Era of Judgment, to find a path that preserves life and is able to transmute our sense of politics. Art, like quantum physics, looks towards photosynthesis to help in imagining new forms of time and perception. In other words, art tries to imagine the way it all connects, to preserve the values that we learn from our political past, but that are unable to define our future. It is a future that we cannot even call a future because is not ahead of us, but inside.

And this is how I came to think about this new demand to travel beyond judgment, like the rainforest and the egg. It is one among millions of other demands that ask us to *become life*.

Metamorphoses: Let Everything Happen to You

My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 1, 1–2

The recent philosophical and artistic interest in nature does not reflect a new trend but the necessity to expand our public space within it. This expansion is taking place not through the institutionalized presence of art and culture in public spaces, but rather through a transformation of what we imagine is possible and the development of proposals for the invention of a new ground for the future. The word "nature" embodies today a complete revolution in the way we relate to the organic and nonorganic, in the way we understand gender, generative power, and life.

It would be wrong to think of nature as a "subject." One could be as radical as to say that, today, to talk about "nature" is to talk about "art": art without the burden of institutional life, without the ideological twists of cultural politics; art as a practice that belongs—as it should be—to artists, but that needs to socialize with all those who care about life. In other words, to talk about "nature" is to replace the historical notion of the avant-garde with a mission for art that is not determined by form or by the invention of new gestures, but by a thorough investigation of the codes of life.

“Metamorphosis” is for all those directly interested in the processes of life, nature, and new forms of sensing from a nonhuman-centered perspective. But it is also for those who are not. And it is for all those who are interested in the limits and possibilities of the art exhibition and in the structure of our current public life and citizenship. Think about all the structures that currently constitute the art world, about the impoverishment of a language inherited from past Left and liberal social visions and the impossibility of reinventing these dreams under the premise of a late-capitalistic economic system. There is a need for a new sensorium to invent new notions, to build new sentences, to embrace a new idea of equality and social justice. If we believe this, we can see that to talk about nature is to talk about the expansion of museums, of the public space.

Nature is a source that reprograms our senses and entails a potential for transformation that may affect the future of architecture, of communications, of gender entanglement, of economy. And of art.

Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis stands for our fascination with transformation. No other era has witnessed our current need to address the desire to change gender, our refusal to be confined in one body; and yet we refer to this as a “trans,” as a passage and not a metamorphosis. My idea in this exhibition, and in this text, is not to discuss historical references to metamorphosis, from Ovid to Franz Kafka, but to position the notion as the possibility of a radical transformation of life. There is a reason why the notion of metamorphosis has not enjoyed a revival in Western culture: it is

associated with negativity, with a sense of loss, of a transformation that initiates a journey of no return from the "I" that constitutes identity. This is, of course, a simplification, but our culture is skeptical of becoming, of losing the distance that guarantees judgment. We lack sufficient references and opportunities to imagine the positive implications of a continuous flow of change, of shifting bodily and geographical margins. If there is a philosophical question that has troubled thinkers for centuries, it is that of transcendence and immanence: the possibility of a permanent entity outside of our bodies and minds, an eternal presence capable of responding to our prayers. Change, in the form of a fluid flow of possibilities, poses an enormous challenge to that very possibility. It would only be acceptable if the force that moved it, that initiated it, had its origins in that eternal presence. Otherwise—if change and transformation were self-originated, if they possessed the intelligence in themselves to know what this change was for—no transcendent powers would be needed to justify them. But we fear the monstrosity of being alone and—as humans—embedded in the same matter and logic as nature. Western philosophy is marked by the attempt to find a realm for humans and their logic that is different from the many other logics with which we coexist. We create culture for us, and nature for us, making nature exist outside of our selves. Our administrative mind is not quantic but rudimentary, counting each and every one as we are, as we were, as we will be, and thus remaining identical in memory to the representations in the records, in the archives.

There would be nothing more disturbing for our culture than to discover that the many artworks and treasures of the past are mutating while waiting to be exhibited. Imagine the long and tedious days spent by great artworks in storage, reduced to inactivity, not even being challenged by the climate (since climate-control also reduces any chance of change) or by our moody eyes upon

them. Imagine the bodies and the faces of the people in your family photographs changing in their albums. You might think it surreal or fantastic that I imagine the million changes of state that may have undergone. It looks like the hypothesis of a science-fiction film. But the possibility is there. It is only that we defy it—it is simply not rational to follow this path. But in the meantime, we are looking forward to the invention of new forms of wearable technology, of cell phones that will be able to bend and take the form of our hands. Is such a touch screen rational? You could say, "Oh, but this is a consequence of ergonomics, of the introduction of a better relation between us—as workers—and the devices that work with us, not only in the office, but in our everyday lives." And certainly, we have developed a togetherness with our devices that leads to the idea that technology could be a second skin, that we could integrate it into our body. This idea, however, is less a response to technology than to our need to expand our "substance," to use Baruch Spinoza's term, to express the possibility of enhancing the human through attributes that bring the species closer to eternity. There is something amazingly comforting about the fact that our devices respond to us. This trait of the new cell phone that will be flexible, that will bend and adapt to the shape of our hand, does not respond to its function, since the palm is not an ear that demands flexibility to improve hearing. But it does respond to our concern with what our palms touch. Donna Haraway starts her text "When Species Meet" with the meaningful question: "Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?"[1] This inquiry should be extended to all matter, organic and inorganic, not to enter a mystified world but to learn how to leave behind the great divides that mark our relationship with nature, and to enhance our possibilities of animating culture with a new experience of itself. It is not that we need to "redefine" culture—the task is far more complex than the necessary and continuous

[1] Working with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev at "dOCUMENTA (13)" gave me the opportunity to understand the crucial relevance of multi-species co-evolution as the source of new ideas and concepts that open up the perception and the role of artistic intelligence.

exercise of critique—but that we need to introduce new experiences inside the experience of culture.

Another example of our negative take on morphing is the requirement, when we log on to certain sites with special security, to retype letters and cyphers that are in the process of becoming something else. The ability to recognize them even in this disguise, or before they become altogether other, is regarded as "human." If we fail, as I always seem to do, then we must be robots. There is nothing negative about being a robot but, in this context, it is regarded as a fraud: a machine that wants to be me. This is a vivid example of how to many people metamorphosis cannot be integrated joyfully and unproblematically into our epistemological cosmos. It defies the old virtues of truth-to-nature and objectivity, both premises of modern scientific thinking.

This truth-to-nature thinking emerged in the early eighteenth century (one of its most prominent exponents being the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus) and was a reaction to the overemphasis by earlier naturalists on the variability and therefore monstrosity of nature. It would be very difficult to encounter a defense of variability in Western philosophy. We can trace the interest in immanence from Spinoza to Gilles Deleuze, but it seems too complex a concept to render itself truly productive or absorbable. And yet immanence emerged as a response to a notion that is at the core of both our political organization—democracy—and our idea of the social: participation. Plato saw three possible kinds of participation: a material participation, an imitative participation, and a demonic participation. If participation consists of being part of something, then it is difficult to see how what is participated in suffers no division or separation from the

participant. If to participate is to imitate, then the artist (or the demon) might force all the senses to reproduce the model. This means the introduction, for example, of a foreign force, something external to our nature to make us participate. This problem has shaped philosophical discussions for centuries, leading to many speculative theories that attempt to come to terms with a principle that would allow one to think of participation without implying "breaking into parts," ceasing to be oneself to fully become another. Philosophers have sought to define a cause, a force that gives rise to change, transformation, whose effect would be immanent, emanating not from an outside, but from itself. As Spinoza expressed it, "the effect remains in its cause no less than the cause remains in itself."[2] But what does this mean? Immanence involves an ontology, a theory of existence where beings are not defined by their rank in the hierarchy and are no more or less remote from the One. This notion—immanence—would make participation a true merging exercise that would imply a flow of beings into beings.

If participation, the breaking into parts and separation, is what defines our modern political organization, it also governs our understanding of mechanical and technological developments as mere "components" that participate in the enhancement of our powers, skills, and intelligence, and reinforce our nature as a mere source from which we can take as we please. Such a symbiosis of humans and technology has been termed "Posthumanism." In answering the question "How Did We Become Posthuman?" scholar N. Katherine Hayles writes:

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[2] Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (Paris, 1968), trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 172.

> First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born.[3]

Hayles argues that our relationship to information technology is mediated by what we can call possessive individualism. While Thomas Hobbes and John Locke suggest that "Its possessive quality is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them … The human essence is freedom from the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession."[4] "Owing nothing to society" comes from arguments that Hobbes and Locke constructed about humans in a "state of nature" before market relations arose. Because ownership of oneself is thought to predate market relations and owe nothing to them, it forms a foundation upon which those relations can be built, as when one sells one's labor for wages. Hayles's point is very interesting as a different reading of information or

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[3] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2–3.

[4] Crawford Brough MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 3.

intelligence, seen as an external trait that can be possessed by both the human body and the machine without implying a radical change in either. Hayles advocates for a reversal of the "bodiless information" abstraction that is an undeniably essential component in all theorizing and yet can account for the infinite multiplicity of our interactions with the real, erasing the world's multiplicity and risking a much more complex understanding of life.

In the face of such a powerful dream, it can be a shock to remember that for information to exist, it must always be instantiated in a medium. And this is probably the reason why so many artists today are interested in exploring the relationship with form, with change, with intelligence, with nature, without indulging in transcendent modernist dreams of coming closer to a goal, to an End or to the One. This exercise of thinking of life without hierarchies, of giving way to an idea of morphing, of truly trying to become nature to understand the limits of mere participation, has been undertaken by artists in an eloquent and courageous way. An impulse is appearing in many different practices and contexts that invites us to see this not as an arcane encounter with the powers of nature, but as a radical process of liberation and demystification, one which, nevertheless, stresses the importance of expression—an expression not of the "I" or of the "self," but rather a method that finds its source in experience and moves us towards invention. After all, metamorphosis could be another word for invention.

But if it might be easier to say that to explore metamorphosis is to inquire into invention, why did I not say this from the outset? The problem lies in something very simple: we have severe difficulty in thinking of invention without thinking about results. The invention I am envisaging

involves an interplay of metaphysical, sociopolitical, scientific, and aesthetic dimensions that give invention an "eventual" nature, the creative capacity of repetition, and the claim that "invention has no cause (and no effect)." In this sense, art is a true inventive force.

I believe that the interest of art and artists in nature has a quantic character—a desire for simultaneity between art and nature. Enfolded in all the practices that have nature at their core lies a will to relate to those who know best, who developed the methods of study, the language and, almost more importantly, the images to pursue the desire for an experience of nature that is constantly evolving. Yet perhaps more than building a relationship with other disciplines, I sense that these artists have an ambition to impact these disciplines, with the imperative to transform art's own substance as well. The interest in nature cannot be perceived as a revision, as an adjustment of a "subject" inside artistic production or its exhibition history. There is an instrumental use of those practices as well, since they are being integrated into institution programs, conferences, publications, and so on. But the instrumental use should be seen as an exercise that entails the slow comprehension of how this quantic relation to nature, this new simultaneity between art and nature, and therefore a transformation of the time-and-space language and structure that supports it, can be achieved. Returning to basic forms of producing connectivity and relations, therefore, can be far more productive in achieving this ambition than the orchestration of a vast range of technological tools to fill the *horror vacui* of not knowing exactly how far we are from our goals.

I would like to mention here an important project that I undertook in 2016 thanks to the Argentinian artist Eduardo Navarro: the exercise of displaying the documentary footage that TBA21–Academy had gathered during several ecological ocean expeditions.[5] The footage showed the coming together of individuals of different backgrounds, the experience of being in the many different biodiverse environments, as well as the technological spectrum that has been used to record this experience. It became clear that one of the most interesting aspects of these 600-plus hours of recording was behavior. The will to transcend passivity, to be active in nature, to record, to produce something out of it, even though these expeditions had a highly speculative character, is palpable. These beautiful images framed not just nature but us: and not only as humans but as cultured humans. Moreover, I would argue that the images revealed a gendered world oscillating between the desire to control, generally associated with the male element, and a very important perception of culture as sentient, which may spark a new sense of coexistence with the nonhuman, traditionally associated with the feminine world.

It was therefore of great importance to consider several ways of activating these images in a public context for the event "Fishing for Islands," held at the Hamburger Bahnhof in October 2017: giving them to an artist to be rearranged according to a logic that was quite different from that of those behind and in front of the camera; making the underwater imagery coexist with moving bodies and gestures on land; and embracing a singing voice. Every piece of research is

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[5] "TBA21–Academy is the exploratory soul of Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, and an itinerant site of cultural production and transdisciplinary research. Conceived as a moving platform on the oceans, it brings together artists, researchers, and thinkers from various fields concerned with today's most urgent ecological, social, and economic issues. Through its Expeditions on sea and land, TBA21-Academy seeks to reinvent the culture of exploration in the 21st century, while inciting new knowledge, communicative strategies, and dynamic solutions for the pressing environmental challenges facing the world we inhabit." (www.tba21.org/journals/article/about accessed March 7, 2023).

marked by individual intentions and desires, so it seemed compelling to explore a different way of becoming one with the oceans by inviting two mimes, who over the years have focused on moving like fish and animals, to perform in front of Tiphanie Kim Mall's filmic installation, presented on a very large, articulated screen-wall, and accompanied by the singing of Kabir poetry by filmmaker Shabnam Virmani. The movements of the mimes near this sea of images strengthened the sense that the footage was not merely there to be seen, or to acknowledge the expeditions, but to show that new organs and a new complexity of movement is required if we are to transform human behavior.

This simple idea posed a complex challenge that I could not have solved without the involvement of Navarro. He developed a mechanical set of hands that replicated those of the mimes, covered in mirrors. He dressed the mimes in black and mirror masks, and each held a hand and a mirror. The simultaneity of the projected images, the mimes, and the voice of the singer presented the audience with a complex set of variables that emphatically addressed the epistemological dimension of this non-division of realms. The environment declared: take the sea as that "one thing," a source for a new imagination of the world. Think about the sea as an organ, not as a place or a medium, but as a fantastic addition to sensation, and therefore to affection, and therefore to the future of science and technology and art; but also to the future of love. Think of the sea as you might think about philosophy: as an infinite substance that can provide us with an experience so radically different from the commonsensical that it will insulate new life. The project and archive presentation of "Fishing for Islands" aimed to show that the sea is not a "thing" we possess or a place we protect, but a whole new plane, an infinite image where unknown intuitions and ideas coexist without belonging to any mind, whether human or other

animal. It proposed the sea as an infinite perceptual image capable of saturating our verbal narratives, so that we may emerge with another language in which to tell and sing about a new world, to approximate ourselves to a new form of becoming that will affect life, that is affecting art—and therefore politics, since the polis was never in the seas. It was an exercise in identifying artists, scientists, poets, singers, and dancers as being able to trace the moving away of learning and thinking solely from the realm of the social sciences. Art and artists in all the realms of knowledge will challenge the dry, the Earth, the social, the real: the world.

Towards a Holographic Understanding of the Oceans

Objectivity has a history. The idea only emerged around the mid-nineteenth century, and its function was related to the notion that to represent a scientific object faithfully, one had to eliminate all subjective interferences. Although the emergence of the self as a cultural idea can be traced much farther back, it is contingent on the peculiar vicissitudes of the new circumstances of urban life. Individuals in cities are both made by and subjected to the constant influence of the mental processes of others, which stimulate and expand our minds but also make them less our own. The self has always been vulnerable to this form of contagion, a flow that perpetuates a collective production of the self, making us no longer know what it means to be sincere. But, again and again, we try to simulate sincerity, to approximate the noble ethos, by becoming a reiterated impersonation. Yet the world of objectivity and the different kingdoms of the self rely heavily on but a few organs, mainly the brain and the eyes.

When Navarro mentioned to me that he had been developing for some time a series of edible drawings, I immediately started to think again about the subject that opens this text: the idea of a different metabolic relation with nature. For Navarro, metamorphosis has been the main principle of his work for more than a decade. This proposition can only be understood by considering our relation to destruction, since becoming formless is the first step in reemergence. Navarro cites the ideas expressed in the holographic principle.[6] When artists make such references, scientists smile, since what we—the art community—understand of such complex theories is always highly particular and simplified. The holographic principle can be radically simplified as follows: destruction is no option in the cosmos, since the cosmos does not destroy its own information.

I love the first lines of Gustav Metzger's *Manifesto of Auto-Destructive Art* from 1960:

> *Man in Regent Street is auto-destructive.*
>
> *Rockets, nuclear weapons, are auto-destructive. Auto-destructive art.*
>
> *The drop drop dropping of HH bombs.*
>
> *Not interested in ruins (the picturesque)*
>
> *Auto-destructive art re-enacts the obsession with destruction, the pummeling to which individuals and masses are subjected.*

[6] The holographic principle suggests that the contents of the universe originate as mathematics encoded on a boundary surrounding the entire cosmos.

I think Metzger knew even then about the holographic principle. Stephen Hawking has observed that, as far as quantum mechanics is concerned, information about the quantum state of a particle that enters a black hole goes with it but is never destroyed. According to Leonard Susskind, all we know about physics would fall apart if this information were lost. Thus, no destruction is possible. This can be read in so many non-quantic ways, but we could claim it as very good news, since it is an invitation to stop trying to destroy—an invitation coming not from a well-intending soul but from the universe itself! However, we all know that in the precarious minds of humans, things are far more complex.

Navarro's very simple gesture of drawing on a matter that is compatible with our guts radically challenges the cry for an immaterial art. Taking into consideration the power of the market and the aggressive opposition to complex thinking, as well as to art and artists, the idea of a non-destroying but metabolizing art seems an important proposal. It heralds the end of the sweet years of bourgeois culture and the beginning of a radical post-capital stage—where, however, it is difficult to know what might challenge the current situation. Is a difference from capital even possible? Digestion is a flow that includes both natural and cultural phenomena. So perhaps eating art, making it part of our digestive system, is a way of addressing the importance of radically transforming ourselves, as well as imagining a space for a different connectivity among humans and nonhumans. Once in our stomach, art may do its part.

Bruno Latour wrote: "The very notion of culture is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off."[7] The aim of all these art-and-nature-related practices is to investigate what it would be to "bracket culture off" as a transitional way of transcending both states.

[7] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Paris, 1991), trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 104.

Food in the Metabolic Era

The Death of the Experiment

I spent many of my summers at Fondazione Morra, Naples, going through pictures, stage materials, and films of The Living Theatre. Known for the organic integration of scenography and fashion into their text, dramaturgy, and performance works, the company, founded in 1947 in New York by actress Judith Malina and artist Julian Beck, remained active until 1985. The film documents of these performances reveal what made this group emblematic for over two decades. The footage, though not always in the best of conditions, is a unique document of an experimental practice based on radical transformations of social and gender values. These very speculative plays move away from scripts, relying on the possibility of integrating the spontaneous performances of both the actors and the audience. However, as much as their confidence in dramaturgy compels, one senses in their work the increasing impossibility of relying too much upon "experimentalism." Perhaps even more tellingly, all these filmed performances *look* "experimental." They assume the possibility of denying or accepting the basic assumptions that constitute our world experience. They test through feeling. Sitting there, watching for hours, I thought that this way of giving oneself up to experience has radically changed.

For me, these exercises of a body on stage, invoking freedom, peace and, above all, a will to transmit these values via a vocabulary of gestures, recall the anti-psychiatry movement. I became

aware of the social and political language of this movement thanks to the research and works of Dora García and Luke Fowler. So I decided to watch Fowler's films on R. D. Laing again. Of course, while watching the filmed performances of The Living Theatre, a million images from the 1960s counterculture movements appeared in my mind, along with Jung's theories on the Age of Aquarius and Wilhelm Reich's orgone chambers. However, these images appeared to me as in relation to the environment of crisis that has been growing around us over the past ten years. They had LSD and the anti-psychiatry movement and had lived through the Great Depression, which remains the greatest financial crisis in history. How will we react to our current crisis? What are the mind's and body's answers to the feeling of living inside well-defined limits?

Of the films that the Scottish artist-filmmaker Fowler made about the controversial figure of Laing, *All Divided Selves*[1] interested me the most in the context just described. The film looks back at the vacillating reactions to Laing's radical views and the unforgiving responses to his late career shift—from eminent psychiatrist to enterprising celebrity. Fowler's film is beautiful and dense, weaving archival footage with his own filmic observations, and leaves us with the feeling that the days of experimentation are over, as well as those when the performance of experiments was a means of testing the boundaries between dissimilar groups and classes composing the social body. The film elaborates upon Laing's transformation into a public persona, the radical approach he took to channeling his views towards increasingly broad audiences, and the almost decadent way in which he made himself into a media star. In a scene towards the end of the film, Laing appears on screen, singing. The image is surprising, and it looks as if he is delirious.

[1] *All Divided Selves*, directed by Luke Fowler (2011).

In 1977 and 1978, Laing's collaboration with composers Ken Howard and Alan Blaikley resulted in the album *Life Before Death* (1978) with lyrics in the form of sonnets, many of them quite compellingly stupid, written by Laing. At the time, Howard and Blaikley were well known in the United Kingdom, the authors of several hits there during the 1960s and 1970s. One of the most famous tracks from the album goes:

It's all correct, and crisp, and keen and bright A place of order, form, and right design.
A haven, in this world of dark, of light.
A Where to start a long and clean straight line. It would be nice if all around we saw

The grace, decorum of the antique mind

Brought forward to the present as a law
Instead of our cacophonous and brutal bind.
It should not need to hearten me so much
To come across a little worth, among
The slush and drivel, dross, and mulch
Which would be better formed of honest dung.

The game's not up.

Some children still can sing.

Go tell the falling leaves it'll soon be spring.

There's light and love and joy and freshness yet,

There’s those who have something to celebrate.

There can be times we hope we’ll not forget.
A helping hand is not always too late.
Up really high there’s still clear perfect blue.

Morning must dawn as long as there is night.

Without the old there’s nothing to renew.

Occasionally, it almost feels alright.
Although I know that light needs dark to shine,
I don’t expect to tell what atoms mean.
The universe is fine without being mine.
The flowers of countless valleys grow unseen.

What is above subsists on what’s beneath.
The world is not entirely blasted heath.
The freedom that you seek is in the mean

Between opposing tensions in your soul.

Achieve the integration of the whole
And then you are, and not a might have been.

Remember that to live is to metabolize.
So don’t forget en route to the sublime
To check on your mouth-anus transit time

Look at the ground as well as at the skies

You've heard it all before?

That's fine.

Reiterated truths soon sound absurd.

To be blasé is not beatitude.

It's just your glutted tongue can't taste the wine.

One in a million hears the blatant word

Before it echoes into platitude. [AQ: do you have permission to reproduce song lyrics?]

Never thought of it…

What is more important than the lyrics is the impulse that led Laing to sing. Why did he sing? In an article published in *The Observer* just a few days before the album's release, author Caryll Faraldi pointed to the fact that Laing had always been interested in the voice (and in music) and that the record could be linked to a previous voice recording he made with Georges Cunelli, a voice expert, theorist, and close friend of James Joyce. It was only natural that Laing was interested in the voice, for, as both a psychiatrist and a media personality, he was perfectly aware of how a presence and a voice produce an effect on listeners. Singing, however, is a different story. The voice that speaks is not quite identical to the voice that sings. Even the control one can exercise as a trained speaker can be lost in the singing voice, since the latter requires a wholly different (though equally thorough) training in breath control and rhythm. The singing voice does not form spontaneously. Thus, when singing Laing was revealing himself much more than when he spoke, both in his (lack of) technique and in his personality, since the very act of singing

stressed that he was a performer aware of the stage and that the subjects from his counseling were transformed into an audience.

The surprise in seeing him perform in Fowler's *All Divided Selves*, however, lies in the fact that, at the beginning of the 1980s, the days of "experiment," as understood by The Living Theatre, together with the idea of unmediated expression and self-expression, of experiencing the world as a "naked human," were coming to an end. This musical performance by a very well-known psychiatrist is not just an anecdote; it was a result of the radical transformation of expression into a more metabolic response. It was also the result of transmuting information into a totally different substance—one that is more complex than knowledge, since it is a form adopted by life that avoids contact with the naked body, or the influence of LSD or any other substance. This singing is crucial because it does not proclaim or state; it addresses us from the inside. It is pure queerness as an accepted form and as an acknowledgment of the complex relationship between information, wisdom, and culture. It revealed a need for a change that would go beyond action, that would live in us, transforming us first and then the world.

Remember That To Live Is to Metabolize

During the 1920s and 1930s, a branch of scientific research appeared that focused on understanding the human metabolism. The isolation of vitamins started in the second half of the nineteenth century and multiple experiments in the 1920s explained the role of vitamins A and D, while further studies isolated vitamins C and K. Thus, interest in diet took on a new form and food was redefined not only in terms of accessibility, class, or tradition but also in relation to

health and self-control. Especially relevant in our context is the work and research of Catherine Kousmine, a Russian émigré who studied in Lausanne and developed a theory and practice for cancer treatment based on food or, more precisely, diet. Her first diet protocol, based on a 1949 case study describing the treatment and cure of a patient with intestinal cancer, was highly influenced by the research of another woman, Johanna Budwig, a German biochemist who studied fatty acids and their influence in curing cancer. She published her first diet protocol in 1952, which expounded the virtues of consuming flaxseed oil, low-fat cheese, and meals rich in fruits, vegetables, and fiber while avoiding sugar, animal fats, oil, meats, butter, and especially margarine. Even if Kousmine was following up on the discoveries and the precepts of Budwig's diet, she was also a pioneer in a new understanding of the properties of raw food for our health. She put a special emphasis on the health value of cold-pressed oils. During World War II, seeds were pressed under heats ranging from 320–392°F, allowing up to 70 percent of the fat from the grain to be extracted. This resulted in a dark, strong-smelling liquid that required further processing and refining and, though this oil was very durable, it was, as Kousmine put it, "dead." Cold-pressed oils, on the contrary, produced by simple processes such as decanting and filtration, are "alive," but they are sensitive to light, quickly becoming rancid and requiring refrigeration once unsealed. Kousmine's texts are intensely eloquent in their explanations of how a simple food had been transformed by industrial processes and how the loss of fatty acids, also known as vitamin F, plays a fundamental role in the weakening of our cell membranes' protection against external attacks, resulting in, for example, immunodeficiency disorders.

There is, of course, no proof that following diets, even those as rigorous as the Kousmine method, can cure cancer. I do not intend to present these methods as effective, but to note the

parallel growth in understanding, at the start of the twentieth century, of both drug use and diet. The common denominator is clear: an effect on our metabolic system.

Both interests, in drugs and in diets, are related to the exploration of the possibilities of enhancing our capabilities. The world of drugs centers on the brain, the possible chemical transformations that enable us to explore this organ and, therefore, the way we sense the world. Comparing the rise of interest in vitamins and raw food to drugs seems nonsensical at first sight. Food may indeed affect us, but isn't it too slow, too long-term a variable to provide a basis for proper comparison with drug use? Yet, after nearly 100 years, such thinking has allowed food to acquire the social and media relevance it has today. The revelation of the importance of food, not as gourmet cooking but as an actual source of and structuring method for life, bears a strange but powerful relation to all sorts of experiments on "freeing the mind," with the psychiatry and anti-psychiatry movements of the last century, as well as with modernism and the avant-garde and the idea of controlling the body, fueling it not too little and not too much to maintain productivity. The science of nourishment not only aims to avoid an ill body, allowing us to live longer and increase the productive years of humans; it goes beyond and attempts to strengthen the body-as-machine and towards the generation of a paradoxical state in which the human organism is not merely healthy enough to do more work, but to make us feel we are in a state beyond labor: the body as resort. If drugs treat the mind as a skyrocket ready for take-off, escaping the damaged body, the metabolic cult, and super foods posit a body capable of making the mind stay put.

Post-Junkie Years

This transformation in the scope of diet's influence on humans is part of a larger, radical shift in our understanding of the social and aesthetic conditions that determine our current relationship with the body and gender. It is defined not only by a tendency towards more freedom but also towards increasing control, which in turn leads to shifts in the notions of gender that are central to art. Here, gender is not understood as constituted by a dichotomy of the male and the female, but as an intelligent means of addressing the issue of the dichotomy of the inner and the outer. This is gender as a language that we can adopt to grasp the possibilities of consciousness. This is gender as another name for art.

To imagine that great things can result solely from self-disciplinary mechanisms is difficult. Food is surrounded by confusion. It is hard to remove cultural and geopolitical factors from the discussion, and even more challenging to discuss food without invoking the names of star chefs and the exploration of the senses through food. The rise of celebrity chefs has much to do with classical experiments in self-expression and an avant-garde or modern understanding of subjects able to cross their boundaries through taste and express their relationship towards an inside and an outside in a radically new way. This is completely determined, however, by the dramaturgy of the plating and the restaurant, in the same manner that, with The Living Theatre, the stage determined the extent of the experiments. I am more interested in a different relationship to food, that expressed by Kousmine's research, which studies the ingredients of a diet and considers diet as an act of absorbing nourishment that has nothing to do with aesthetic pleasure but, rather, with the strong intention to slowly affect the human system.

While there exists a vast body of research on drugs and the many other means of exploring the limits of our mind in its relation to science, literature, music, and, later on, every other form of subculture, there exists almost nothing written on how these early biochemical experiments relate to culture and to art. The gendered aspect of this field must also be noted, for the history of research on food and diet as a means of altering life is peopled almost exclusively by women. Although there is as yet almost no existing artistic production in the form of raw food or vitamins, an unstudied aspect of art production is based on the same principles as this new metabolic way of living.

Heroin and Calorie Counting

It was 1995 and I was in New York City. It was before the days of online newspaper reading, so I got myself a copy of *El País* for the long train ride from Uptown to Brooklyn. I read it nearly front to back, neglecting only the film section. The train ride continued, and was boring, so I decided eventually to read the film section as well. There, a critic used up an entire page smashing *Waterworld* (1995, remember that one?). The critics were nearly unanimous in their dislike of the film, and this piece used humor to critique it. The dystopia, the critic pointed out, was set following an ecological disaster and yet the bad guys were known as the Smokers. The Smokers! In a world of water where humans are almost fish: how did they manage to keep the tobacco dry? Though the article was quite funny, I could not concur with the critic's argument, since I come from a place, Galicia, where tobacco is preserved under water. This region of Spain has a particularly rough coastline; piracy was common there for centuries and, during the dictatorship, Galicia was famous for the smuggling of goods over its border with Portugal. Economically underdeveloped on levels difficult to portray here, the region's water and land had

a virgin character that facilitated many farming initiatives. From the late 1970s into the 1980s, we saw the number of floating wood platforms drifting on the waters of the estuaries increase. These platforms, known as *bateas*, served primarily for the farming of oysters and mussels but also for smuggling tobacco. From here, the name "Winston de batea" was coined, designating the tobacco illegally entering the country that shared with the shellfish the cold, nourishing waters of the Atlantic. This same coast saw, some years later, tons of heroin and cocaine introduced into the country, producing both a total imbalance in the local economy and the genocide of a whole generation of drug users. These were the same drugs that inundated both lower- and upper-class nightlife during the first years of democracy in Spain. For a whole decade, beginning from the age of sixteen, I coexisted with junkies in many ways. The village I am from and all the others like it were actively witnessing how drugs could shape life. On the opposite coast, the relatively tepid consumption by hipsters at the high schools coexisted with increasingly visible signs of a dependent population in the streets—the public spaces, clubs, bank lobbies, and food markets where, every morning, junkies would beg to housewives who in turn prayed to God that their sons and daughters would be spared such a fate. Heroin was bridging the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea through this trade.

After moving to Barcelona, I was required, as part of a school-sponsored prevention program, to attend many information sessions and to volunteer at one of the largest methadone clinics in Europe. It was in a neighborhood that no longer exists called Can Tunis, a hellish island located behind the harbor, circumscribed on one side by a highway and on the other by the Montjuïc hill, both of which served to cut this section off from the greater urban texture. I have never seen a place so desperate and secluded. The permanent population consisted of between 80 and 100

Sinti and Roma families, who were accused of having created the biggest heroin market on the planet, even though they were the victims of extreme poverty and drug dependency. I started going there, scared to death, pretending to be a help to the organization while only managing to effectively cure myself of any desire ever to use such drugs. Indeed, my school's prevention program was highly effective. Methadone was presented at the clinic as the "solution," as a good substance that could replace the bad one and help one live a drug-free life. I was there every night for a year, over the course of which I discovered that methadone was an even worse drug than the one it was intended to replace. In reality, the whole operation was a means of controlling the Sinti and Roma communities and their links to drug trafficking, as well as a pretext for resettling these undesirables and expanding the harbor to its current size, effectively erasing Can Tunis.

Why am I recalling this episode? In my mind, the rise of the importance of food coincides with the drug war. I see these two phenomena as linked in a dance that began in the Basque region with hopes of peace, and on the Mediterranean coast as an attempt to absorb life and all its substances not through drugs but through food. Food was required to overcome traditions and go through a complex, almost alchemical ritual of reinvention. Suddenly it became socially necessary and historically crucial to translate and retranslate the most obvious ingredients, the most banal tastes.

Food and the Political Algorithm

Not long after my Can Tunis experiences came my first encounter with molecular cuisine. A friend took me to a seminar, during which we were presented with an egg, the yoke of which had been replaced by *café con leche*. Though my friend remembers it this way, I am uncertain whether the memory is accurate; I am not even sure whether it was Ferran Adrià himself or a member of his team doing the "cooking" and presenting this new juggling act of taste and technology. Memory, not only individual but collective memory, always finds good reasons to collapse objective information. The group attending this meeting, consisting mostly of architects, product and graphic designers, web developers, as well as two of the most important advertising teams in the country, was truly shocked. However, this shock had nothing to do with food as a "dish" or culinary event. The cooking demonstration was received with as much enthusiasm, misunderstanding, and resistance as when a new discipline of knowledge is introduced. This egg containing a *café con leche* was perhaps only described to us, but it is an incredibly powerful image. It produced among my associates attending the seminar an endless series of jokes, repeated again and again, where the two original elements morphed into a thousand other combinatory variations, like a strawberry with a heart of anchovy. All society seemed, at this point, to be laughing at this extreme Pantagruelic game the chefs were performing with food. Imagine, the raw DNA of an animal product, the egg, was being replaced by a culturally made element, *café con leche*! *Café con leche*! Our breakfast staple had replaced the egg's "origin" point that, though still protected like the yolk before it, was transformed into a consolidated item ready to be swallowed whole without consideration, without thought. The ritual chain of small, familiar gestures, the unconscious steps taken from hand to mouth, had been, all at once, replaced by a single, determined act, as unified as taking a shot of liquor. The vast collective choreography of every Spaniard, every morning, across millions of counters, publicly performing

the gestures of drinking their *café con leche* had, suddenly, been replaced by the precarious substance of an egg.

Such transformations had nothing to do with food but instead with a metabolic revolution that emerged from under the flood of drugs that had submerged Spain as unexpectedly as a tsunami. The drugs were not merely there because of the convenience of Spain's geography and location but also because of the intense appetite unconsciously created over many years of dictatorship, now made manifest during this transitional period into democracy. Such appetites were the product of senses that had been restricted from performing their normal functions for too long and further oppressed by the fact that the old system was neither removed nor contested but merely being allowed to die away. The rise in drug use and, after its peak, in the importance of a new food, played a fundamental role in creating the conditions in which a new self could be formed.

Like a metabolic reaction inside the social body, this new interest in food possessed a distinctively synthetic character. It could be linked with neither a long tradition of cuisine nor with the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, it emerged, almost like an artistic movement, from an independent group. The molecular cuisine and its accompanying tendencies were somehow Kantian, focusing not on the food itself but on invention and a kind of social training. This cuisine set up as a goal, though of course an impossible one, to make us all eat through the mouth and sense through the nose in one special way. The very impossibility of this goal, that an entire culture would adopt an attitude towards eating that was deeply anti-culinary, made it a

radical proposal to challenge the habits of an entire nation. It suggested that a new historical period should not start off with the same gestures and tastes as the previous regime. Food that is not food and recipes that are impossible to share are excellent antidotes to nostalgia. Almost overnight, a huge portion of the population was addressing food in a completely different manner and, thus, opening itself to new possibilities regarding how and what it was consuming.

In my memory, I see the fall of heroin use, along with the rise of a new food, coinciding with the emergence of feet encased in the first Camper and Camper-like shoes. In my mind, here too began the *Spaziergang* fever. The black rubber soles of Camper shoes that refused to stop at the limit of the foot's actual form, expanding pneumatically around it and abstracting the shoe's shape until it resembled a digitally enhanced paw, always fascinated me. These were friendly, democratic feet, without edges or borders, ready to traverse the asphalt plains of huge cities as readily as the dirt of the rustic Mallorcan countryside from where the shoes came. Their formed rubber shapes also recalled for me the dinghies so often used to transport bricks of cocaine, hashish, and heroin along the cold beaches of the Atlantic coast. Yet they were designed to convey a new era, never quite accomplished and now completely gone, in Mediterranean culture, populated by metropolitan neo-peasants, who took to the markets and supermarkets to rehearse and proclaim their new values, wafting through the cities a balsamic-marinated social democracy. This unarticulated movement was powerful and widespread, even if, to this day, it remains impossible to interpret its promise or the stakes of its speculative energy. It was clearly there, however, and I dislike it now as much as then, perhaps because I blame it, albeit unfairly, for mixing nostalgia with resentment and for encouraging a very specific form of unguardedness and naivety. It was the diluted aftertaste of a movement, politically expressed through the worst

kind of liberal defensiveness. It was the opposite of what the surrealist egg with its yolk of *café con leche* had wanted to announce. Something had gone rotten.

Gender Mousse

Everything troubling about the image of the singing-star therapist, as the mutated byproduct of the anti-psychiatry movement, can also be seen in what went wrong with molecular cuisine and its interpretations. And, as in the case of Laing, the first response may be to sing an ode to the incredible misunderstandings that "food" created at the core of the social body at a very particular historical moment. Like the leaf on Siegfried's back, a point of vulnerability was created that was conquered by gourmet promises and comfortable, oversized rubber soles. Via the mouths of the middle class, a major transformation occurred that altered senses and modified tastes forever. I call it a tragedy because I am an optimist and I see, as Laing saw, that it might be good to be singing this drama for a while. Most likely, though we are still unprepared to understand it, we will hear amazing news concerning a radical transformation of human sexuality. After the wave of drugs that promised both potency and resistance, but only exhausted the body to an unthinkable extent, exterminating its natural defenses and powers, food acted as an antidote. However, all elements of culture began to impact very directly upon our sexuality. The construction of the body during the Camper era did not happen by chance but was an already corporate-approved reinterpretation of a post-therapy hippiedom, now fully integrated into the productivity chain with a democratic body ready to present itself in a post-sexual state. The new food appeared at a crucial moment in the transformation of a body eternally oscillating between diets, drugs, and anti-depressants, a transformation that is now moving us towards a completely different understanding of gender. Together, new food and fashion combined to produce forms of

desire and anxiety that displaced sexual appetites. Corresponding with the rise of virtual realities and online pornography, a new phase started, defined by a kind of disinterestedness towards sexual, especially heterosexual, interactions, which allowed for a new sexual revolution. It not only resulted in gay marriage and rights, but also generated a new imagination in which gender and its functions are also a matter of choice. Gender has become a key aspect in the liberation of the body from modernity, labor, and *Leistung* (productivity). The slow but steady deprioritization of body-to-body sexuality is a metabolic process within the social body that will create the organic space necessary for this new gender reality. Producing, of course, all sorts of anxieties—from eating disorders to extreme surgical operations. Food, with its incredible capacity for transferring to the mouth some of our genital sense, can most successfully compensate for these lacks and losses. Camper's inflated rubber paws, though as rudimentary and nostalgic as our current ideology, appeared to signal this transitional era. It will not last, however. Like the phase of shedding old skin before the metamorphosis into a new creature, one whose form is yet unknown to us, we are performing our old cultural-critical logic before acquiring a new one. We just need to sing it a little while longer.

Heidi Bucher: A Work Illuminated by the Senses

Does the cosmic space in which we dissolve taste of us?

Rainer Maria Rilke[1]

In my opinion, it does.

The Sense of Something Coming

I went to London to meet Alexander Tarakhovsky—it was the winter of 2009. His research on how cells respond to environmental stresses and how these responses can affect our genes fascinated me so much that I wanted to meet him in person. Only now, as I sat there waiting in a café, was I able to rationally justify my interest in meeting him. We recognized each other immediately, and the smile he gave me was both confident and reassuring. Generations of patient-doctor relationships have no doubt conditioned us both to act in a such a way that we establish trust in a matter of seconds. Just as in a doctor's surgery, I began to mumble something about my case. With a very friendly and charming wave of the hand, he made it clear that he wanted me to stop. "I'm not at all surprised by your coming to see me! On the contrary. For years now, I've been asking myself how long it will be before someone from the arts contacts a

[1] "Schmeckt denn der Weltraum, in den wir uns lösen, nach uns?", from Reiner Maria Rilke, "The Second Elegy", in *Duino Elegies/Duineser Elegien* (bilingual edition), trans. C. F. MacIntyre (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), 14–15.

scientist who's interested in the logic and nature of our adaptive response to the world." As he said these words, he looked at me as if I were a messenger and a new world were about to start.

His most important discovery is the identification of the antibody repertoire formation and T cell signaling. The T cells are key to a new understanding of human immune responses and, of course, to the development of vaccines against a virus such as COVID-19. He began by saying that everything expressed in the words of poets, every intuition about how our organs—from our stomach to our skin—have revealed the world to us, is true. And that he became a scientist because, as a young man in Russia, it had been his good fortune to have the friendship of the Moscow poet and literary scholar Alexei Parshchikov. It was Parshchikov's view that science and history extrapolate our experience into transhuman spheres of knowledge, and only poetry can give us an experience of the real, images and experiences that make us understand the true logic of our relationship with the real without the fragmentation produced by science. Tarakhovsky immediately proceeded to explain to me that his main motivation over the years had been to prove that we do feel with our guts. He claimed that all that had been said about intuition, all the sentiments expressed by writers and poets for centuries, had in fact been the result of a collective description and acknowledgement of a complex and crucial understanding of the human mind in a permanent relation with all the cells and organs that make up our body. Indeed, his research and many others proved that the gut also contains intrinsic primary afferent neurons—in other words, that there is a direct connection between our digestive system and our brain. Cells respond to our experiences, and those experiences leave behind a trace. Cells have a memory, and those memories can alter their ordinary functions.

"How, then, can we banalize art?" he asked. If experience is our hope for escape from all reductionist theories and genetic interpretations, our hope for a more cosmic, more complex understanding of humans: how, then, can art not be a fundamental element for science? Or how can the function of science to protect and preserve centuries of poetry and art, and translate it into another language, lend voice to our senses?

The Intelligence of the Shells

It is with this question in mind that I approach the work of Heidi Bucher.

In January 1832, Charles Darwin spotted a horizontal band of compressed seashells and corals 30 feet above sea level. The whole area looked as if it had once been under water. "Why not now?" He thought about a book he had brought along with him, Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*,[2] in which the Scottish geologist suggested that the Earth was gradually and continuously changing, with land rising in one area, falling in another.

What Darwin saw before him seemed to be direct evidence of Lyell's theory. In 1972, Heidi Bucher realized a series of sculptural pieces on Venice Beach, California, titled *Body Shells*. She was interested in clothes and fashion, in movement, and in how the way we dress transforms our body, both in terms of how we and others perceive it. These shells are definitely dresses—attire that aspires to house bodies we cannot see. The pieces appear to be a philosophical interpretation

[2] Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology (vols 1 to 3)* (London: John Murray, 1830–3).

of a shell: a big hut, their form slightly bottle-shaped … the shell-vessels, created by a human inspired by the sea, address the same questions raised by Darwin. Two worlds biologically separated and two times—human and geological—reunited. These structures are called shells because shells are made of a marvelous substance: mother-of-pearl. The artist created drawings using mother-of-pearl. It is easy to imagine her walks along the beach of Los Angeles, where she lived, collecting shells and pondering over their colors, their strength. Mother-of-pearl, or nacre, is a strong material with a very particular trait: iridescence. This iridescent material is the innermost layer of the shell, present only to the animal living inside—a coat of glossy and silky matter beneath the rough surface of the shell. However, Bucher's *Body Shells* are neither rough nor solid nor strong. Why are the real shells so different from her *Body Shells*?

It has recently been discovered that nacre is as resistant as concrete and that, like plastic, it can return to its original form if damaged, without losing its resistance. A shell has very particular structural peculiarities. It is composed of tightly packed aragonite crystals held together by proteins. These crystals are like tiny bricks the complex disposition of which is also the origin of the shells' attractive coloration. If these materials were completely smooth, we would see a plain —probably boring brown—color. No wonder, then, that the objects created by Bucher were unable to replicate the shells—but it was never her intention to do so. *Body Shells* serve more as an ode-cum-manifesto: an ode to the simple sculptures one finds in nature, autonomous forms of life able to preserve and protect life, durable and eternal, as is the dream of art; and a manifesto, expressing the complex and associative relationship between the depiction of women's bodies and the history of art. We are all familiar with the image of Venus standing on a shell, and the oft-repeated connections between female genitalia and shells. A major producer of images, art

history has not been indifferent to that bond. It is only fair to ask how women feel about such images, about this pairing of forms, about the motherhood of pearls.

Bucher's *Body Shells* may be an unconscious response to shame. They are exoskeletons that allow its inhabitants—the women-clams—to move, live, and act without their bodies being revealed. Unlike the *Venus* of Sandro Botticelli, the women inside Bucher's shells do not need hair to cover their exposed bodies, none of which, in fact, are normally shaped. But even if they no longer resemble the female form, they may still feel vulnerable and exposed, given the historical images and practices pointing towards their genitalia from previous centuries. One thing is obvious: the bodies inside the shells on Venice Beach must be soft and vulnerable—or why else would they need shells? But why imagine them as bodies? Just because we know they are activated by dancers. But forget about the humans now inside them. The living forms inside these other forms may already have transcended the question of gender, having grown weary of the impediment of the dual relationships imposed on us for centuries. The *Body Shells* are merely empty vessels—or may, depending on the circumstances, be host to jinns.

It was not uncommon in previous centuries to imagine humans mutating into other forms—walking sculptures, for example, soft forms that add organicity to the classical language of object and form making. Influenced by fashion, popular culture, dance, and television, they are equally naïve and vulnerable in their nature. But besides these obvious traits, the artist was mesmerized by the unsettling expressiveness of shellfish. It may have been no more than a thought or a phrase, such as "looking for a new direction," that propelled her towards exoskeletons and

houses—simple forms that appear to offer a flippant way to describe to us all an existential, no less gut-wrenching one in its universality.

The Clam in Her Studio Shell

There is a body of work that is especially interesting concerning Bucher's relationship to the making of art and its history: her series of studio portraits of nude men. Shells are the calcified remains of some long-dead animal. The body in the studio is also a relic of a practice within art history. Like a fossil, it tells the story of a time and a relationship with academia and the female body and the secondary position of women artists inside a discipline.

Bucher depicted her private sphere in her notebooks: large series of male nudes, the occasional nude self-portrait, as well as sketches of fully clothed men. In these images of naked figures, she dispenses with any explicit eroticism. The nudes appear more to be observations, displays of the body in different positions to help capture movement and expression. Looking at these drawings, it is easy to imagine the conversations and interactions that took place between the artist and her models. The models' anatomy is not presented by the artist as the object of desire but rather as research into concerns of technique and composition. However, in performing classic studies of the human body, the drawings reveal an interest in the political nature through her choices of their subject matter. They give the slight impression of being a distraction, the result of an artist indulging in a genre that is out of fashion, that does not necessarily belong to the exhibition, made not for the public but for herself. There is pleasure involved for an artist who portrays men but chooses not to include the human figure in her sculptural installations. And yet all her work

revolves around a question of place, of inhabited spaces—shells or houses—which take the form of the skin of a dead, stranded whale. Where once there was life, there is now only death.

In her sketchbooks, however, these people are not in the past. The men represent a continuous present of relations. When we look at the naked bodies, they seem to pose the question: is the male body the "place" of widely accepted values of patriarchy? It's worth keeping this question in mind as we study the men, their faces, their nakedness. Can a woman artist, through all those encounters, investigations, conversations, discover why women—in most societies—still have fewer rights or a lower social status than men?

It is, of course, a question we can only infer, but it is interesting to note the different elements in the work of an artist who is obviously preoccupied by her place and that of her work in art. The drawings seem to constitute a balancing act between her installations and other, less private, series of drawings and works from private life. The presence of her own body, a realistically portrayed female nude, takes on a special dimension because it helps to convey the social norms, the handling of nudity as the place to research the tightrope between artistic and pornographic depictions. Nudity offers an opportunity to reflect on the set of norms surrounding the question of "appropriate" life, a life according to the expectations of others but now observed by the artist herself. In a sense, these drawings are a study of those norms and the way bodies, dress codes, expressions signal to the female artist.

The Skin

Bucher's "skin" works are remarkable not only in the way they reinvent sculpture, but also in how they awaken a memory of a process that surpasses any traditional sculptural practice. On the one hand, they are like death masks, and could be interpreted as part of a funerary ritual commemorating the artist's past, but perhaps also hoping for its disappearance. The translucent quality of this 'dead' material, latex, its ability to translate certain traits and details, its yellowish color. All these factors address the need to acknowledge certain cultural beliefs: concerning the house and the question of origin; the room as a unit of power that transmits certain values; the bed as the place of birth and death. Through these Bucher performs both as a community shaman, charged with producing objects of meaning, and as an anthropologist, entrusted with the role of making us reflect on the role, form, and past function of the objects she creates. The historical reading of death rituals often focus on what they tell us about societ. Through the remains and traces of a particular community, we can discover who they were and how they were organized, but also the circumstantial and physical factors that caused their end.

In her "skin" works Bucher creates a code that not only addresses her personal life—her parent's house (from which she made several casts), her feelings towards her origins—and the notion of the individual, hypersensitive female recreating a vulnerable space—one that is also a formal and aesthetic language aimed at focusing attention on the cultural guidelines that determined the treatment and disposal of the body in the space—its power, its function, its sexuality. We do not see the people who perhaps once lived there, and there are no documents describing those societies. We are left to deduce the facts from the remains. These objects can tell us what happened and, at the same time, prescribe a period of mourning for close relatives. Are we close

relatives? We are. The skins are an expression of a cultural blueprint passed down by previous generations. The artist knows that we will recognize all this.

While her shells express an interest in natural sculpture, geological time, care, and shelter, Bucher's latex skin works inform us about a society and its beliefs. Rooms and beds are secular symbols and yet they reference the stereotypical spatial and social communication that takes places inside the home. These are not spaces of protection, but rooms that prepare organisms—us humans—to perform social rituals and to coordinate our preparation for action among several organisms, also humans.

Perhaps this is why the dress-shells appear in her early work. If we look at her creative evolution, one might perceive these works as denoting an interest in fashion and performance. If, however, we consider them independently of any timeline, it is easy to see the vital importance of relativizing the weight of all these symbols of human society, of a certain social and educated class, to the world of nonhuman organisms. Performing the part of the nonhuman allows for the emergence of sentiments, values, and beliefs which transcend the utilitarian codes of Western bourgeois societies. For a woman—a woman artist—behavior needs to become ritualistic, since there is almost no other possibility besides being a daughter or a mother or a wife. Otherwise, it risks being socially sanctioned. A possible scape is to seek refuge in the realm of the symbolic and stressing the supernatural, the hypersensitive or the ultra-personal. A woman artist's work is too often reduced to the role of expressing and amending social relationships and helping to secure mystical blessing, purification, protection, and prosperity.

Bucher's architectural skins reference this possibility, one that is offered not as a redeeming machine but as part of a death ritual. These objects are the past, disappearing societies, with the houses and their inhabitants representing death. In that sense, her work elaborates on the intersection between a world view—her own, of a particular group and society—accompanied by a world-history view, namely the second half of the twentieth century in central Europe. Through her references, materials, and formal languages, she relates two propositions that are axiomatic. The first proposition: humans are part of nature and can be dissociated from it only in an artificial and illusory way. The second proposition: biodiversity is the source of all creation.The first is indeed more obvious, given the subjects she chooses and references, but the second is ever-present, as pearl mother, as sexuality, as gender, as shell, as a gigantic skin sensing the world.

All Organs Meet

In 2018, the scientific community made a huge discovery: a large human organ "hidden" in our skin. Various publications described the organ—called the *interstitium*—as a "shock absorber" that keeps tissues from tearing. *National Geographic*, for example, wrote: "The interstitium is a layer of fluid-filled compartments strung together in a web of collagen and a flexible protein called elastin. Previously, scientists thought the layer was simply dense connective tissue."[3] This makes our skin not just a coat or a layer but an extensive organ able to regulate the feeling of pain. As I briefly mentioned at the beginning of my text, when describing my conversation with

[3] www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/interstitium-fluid-cells-organ-found-cancer-spd (accessed January 17, 2021).

the scientist Alexander Tarakhovsky, artists and poets have long understood this to be the case. And, over the centuries, we, too, have come to know this through references in literature and art, where skin is a soft and sensitive organ that retells the world in waves of sensations.

I think that the axis of nature reappears in Bucher's latex works. While they can indeed be seen as death masks, this reading does not exclude other interpretations, such as them being the result of molting or shedding that certain animals undergo. What if the whole world possessed a skin? One that enabled all forms of life, even institutions such as the home, to be protected, withstand adverse conditions, and accept the pain of individual and social transformations. If everything imaginable had simply a skin rather than a facade, a cover, or a roof—this would create infinite mutualities between materials and humans, between animals and rocks, between all the surfaces of the planet. In that sense, the latex works are not the negatives of existing space, but old exoskeletons and skins that we have outgrown. Every year, the coastal sands in many latitudes of the planet are covered in thousands of perfectly formed, empty crab shells. These form due to the process of molting—a critical and incredible event in the life cycle of many an organism. Humans have a flexible skin and bones that stretch and grow with us over time, while other animals, such as certain species of crab, have rigid outer bodies, like our institutions.

When viewing the works of Bucher, there comes a moment when one might imagine her fascination with technology, in visual imaging with high-resolution tactile sensing, in being able to retranslate multi-sensorial views on place and space in relation to the multiple dimensions—historical, economical, class, gender—that define a woman artist of her time. One might even

assume her interest in DNA testing, in finding out the genetic commonalities between the materials she uses and our own skin.

It is this power—a work's capability of igniting our thinking about the relations of form, the sensorial organs, and the conditions imposed by culture—that I call artificial intelligence. Art that is capable of envisioning epistemological transformations. How does such a transformation take place? Not only by imagining new forms that bring with them new questions, but also by relating the existing forms and questions differently. Bucher expresses the importance of art that inhabits an expanding sensorial space. An expansion that is being performed through the institutionalized languages used by certain genres—such as sculpture—but also through presenting an uncommon intersection of art and culture in the public domain. This hyper-sensorialization of the materials and language embodies a change in the way we imagine what is possible, proposing a new ground from which to sense not only the past of art and the social world but their future. Bucher's work has a metamorphic dimension: it aspires to be alive, to cease to be culture and become skin, shell, nature. And nature today names a complete revolution in the way we sense, in the way we relate organic and nonorganic life, in the way we understand gender, generative life, power, and life.

Be Enraptured in the Will to Be Transformed! On the Work of Rebecca Horn

Change

I used to have an image of Rebecca Horn's *Unicorn* (1970) glued to my notebook during my time at university. I have no idea how it happened, but it acted as my signature for a long time. Since I am very small, many thought it was a comment on or a wish to be taller, as if that horn attached to her head was a symbol of my desired height. Every time there was a remark on the relation between the picture and my body, I said: "Right!" There was no point in answering: "the artist is called Horn, you morons!" Many years later, I traveled to Bombay, in India, to meet with artist Tejal Shah. She was hesitant to show me anything, claiming her current work was unedited —she had just finished filming a few days prior and felt weird about sharing a work she had only recently completed. Even more unnatural would be to return home without having seen your work, I responded. The only way around this situation was to stay for longer, in the hope that I would eventually be invited into the video-editing room. This happened late one night, and after some great days of sharing thoughts, wonderful storytelling, and friendship. I entered the room, two screens were on, and BAM! There it was, the horn, hurtling towards me like a meteorite shining in all its wonderful cosmic speed! Dressed in horns, like the one Horn wears in her film *Unicorn*, a group of women were dancing on top of a monumental pile of garbage. *Unicorn* was a film made by Horn in the 1970s. Shah's film constituted a tribute and, more importantly, a statement on how Horn's work addressed the environmental crises facing urban populations at a moment and in a context when they were unwilling to hear it. Titled *Between the Waves*, Shah's

work ended up being a five-channel video installation presented at “dOCUMENTA (13)” in 2012.

This was at the same time as the rediscovery of Donna Haraway; not all the visionaries belonging to her generation had the same luck, however. Art history and exhibition making are reluctant substances when it comes to change and transformation and prefer form to dynamic forces; these subjects favour exceptionalism over a careful reconsideration of the multitude of different practices that created the groundwork for thinking on the nonhuman that is to reverse the history of mankind. It is also true that those artists, like Horn, that saw the substance of cultural metamorphosis from its inside, would resist—for very good reasons—being considered among the many women artists that situated the making of art within the ecological and political imaginaries beyond the binary of the human and nonhuman. Indeed, it would be extremely complex to create comprehensive “groups” of artists, thinkers, and writers interested in a subject matter when the subject matter was not even established. Creating large families and surveys on their work would also automatically imply that they are a sub-family inside the family of art, as we know it. No. This would not be satisfying. It would reduce everything to hierarchies and pyramids and some artists’ names would replace others’ in the books, in the booths, in the galleries, in the collectors’ storage, in the living rooms. Oh! Yes, this is not bad and probably necessary as well, but it should be considered more like a side effect, not an aim. It happens because it is easy to react by replacing certain works with others, inviting certain individuals while ignoring or silencing others, but this is still agriculture, it responds to the control mechanism of the ground, to replacing one crop with another. What works like the film *Unicorn* demanded was a rewilding, the returning of nature to a state of myth, fantasy, and growth.

Unicorn is a record of a performance in which a woman walks through the countryside for twelve hours with a "unicorn's horn," a sculptural body extension, on her head . It seems simple, and yet the work opens us up towards an understanding of transformation that goes beyond the tragic—and therefore classic—idea that change equals replacement or the reverse. From Aristotle to Ovid, from the classical era through the long history of telling and recounting change in Western colonial culture, change has been a binary game. It occurs by replacing one trait with another, or one person with another, or the game in reverse. Change simply means you cannot be the egg and the chicken at once. Aristotle stressed that real change only occurs when the chicken replaces the egg—only then does the story begin. Without it, there is no story, nothing happens … Aristotle was speaking about art—about theater—but this structure is deeply embedded and explains the reckless way substitution was an operation that could be performed by those in power and used to erase the complex history of the hybrid, the long tail of coexistence that migrated to the taletelling, to the fantasies of the folkloric worlds, to those unable to see real change.

Horn's story—in the eyes of the classical thinkers—would fall completely flat. Accepting the metamorphosis and not the crude substitution that occurs through it would be the same as negating the "was": the unicorn was a woman.

It is amazing how little space there is in the making of change for nonbinary states, how much there is to endure and to perform, to write and to embody, to sustain a world that celebrates the woman and the unicorn, at once.

Half

Being "half" is a condition that enables an unknown world of possibilities. There is an incredible storytelling tradition about creatures that are "half"—from *Melusine* by Jean d'Arras in the fourteenth century to *The Cloven Viscount* by Italo Calvino.[1] The creatures of the "half" are those who are, in fact, double. Melusine is not half woman and half serpent, but a serpent and a woman. And the Viscount of Calvino is not half Gramo and half Buono, but Gramo and Buono in full. There are several obstacles that force history to be humble and name the coexistence of two conditions at once as only "half" instead of celebrating the grace and the blessings of nonbinary life. Horn's *Finger Gloves* (1972) and *White Body Fan* (1972), like *Unicorn*, present the artist with body extensions, sculptural annexes, exoskeletons. These works gently introduce us to the condition of our body being more than the simplified vision of the human that we operate with daily. Christianity especially had no interest in us thinking that nonbinarity is possible for those who are not God. And the artist beautifully introduces the miraculous and fantastic possibility of being a bird and a unicorn and a creature capable of enhancing our body and capabilities in unexpected ways with simple, pragmatic tools we could even fabricate, with magic, without much technology or science. In these exercises, Horn addresses the host's supposed resistance to such transformations, showing us that our body also needs to slowly understand the benefits of becoming two. Her performances play with this possibility, but present to us, at the same time, a

[1] Jean d'Arras, *Roman de Melusine* (1392–94); Italo Calvino, *Il visconte dimezzato* (Torino: Einaudi, 1952).

serious speculation on how the symbolic thinking and the actual training of the body should merge. A fundamental issue needs to be brought to our attention: the two realities she brings to life are not interchangeable and, therefore, the way they bond and interact is complex.

Mutuality

Mutuality is a core value in Horn's practice. And she addresses it again and again as an element and a force that establishes bonds and generates frictions and conflicts between forms of life and inert matter. In that respect, it is important to understand that the half belongs to the realm of the hybrid and the double to the kingdom of metamorphosis. Take, for example, a work that I love beyond rational explanation: Horn's *The Feathered Prison Fan* (1978). Here, a ballerina is trapped in a transformation machine that may—or may not—transform her into a double creature, a woman dancer and a marvelous bird. She presents us with a "mechanism," like a master class, to help us understand our own way of seeing the world of paradoxes and complex forms. The hybrid and the metamorphosis are not only different strategies and ways of interpreting mutuality and coexistence, but they embody different ontological visions, different values. *The Feathered Prison Fan* presents us with the moment right before one or the other operation would enter in full force. The woman dancer may become a hybrid. That is, she encounters the feathers and stands still in the prison of an identity that she resists, but without success. She then becomes a women-bird, and her identity becomes a paradox in the eyes of others, even in the eyes of nature itself. Or we are, in fact, the witnesses of a metamorphosis, a labile world of flux where the stillness of the woman responds only to her being fully attentive to the feathers and her willingness to be part of this fluid transformation that would turn into a creature that is both a dancer and something else.

We see parts because we are not yet able to see the whole. But the whole practice of Horn's work urges us to understand the relative weight of presence, the importance of forgetting the traces and the parts that prevent us from imagining that, in the constant series of chances and replacements, a new life is born.

If we see Horn's creatures as hybrids, we see a world of difference, a world that may conflict with the forces that historically insist on stabilizing identity, forcing contradiction to the limits of moral impossibility, urging that it remain solely fictional, metaphorical, but never real, never legal, never equal. If you perceive her as presenting an unprecedented study on metamorphosis, you realize the importance of breaking down assumed categories, revealing a world of stories, first, and then a practice, a reality, a law, a new love, a care.

Storytelling

The dialogical and storytelling have a similar relationship to the hybrid and the metamorphosed. A world made of parts—like representative democracy—is a world of the dialogical. Decades ago, we were writing of the importance of realizing that democracy is an unrealized project, and that dialogue is the best method to address the relationship of the parts that compose the social body. However, the practicality of the dialogical method faded away without any reflection on why, and other rhetorical images emerged, together with an interest—from indigenous knowledges to technological tools—in storytelling.

The works of Horn are not calling for a dialogue, in the same manner as they are not composed by parts. It would be difficult to participate in them—even in an imaginary plane—simply because they resist this conceptual framing. She surprises us with the world of stories. She is dry. She is not telling the stories herself. She is just provoking encounters to create the fundamental metaphors that sustain the substance of telling. Oh! She plants the seeds, imagine the dwellings, and even more so being a German artist, she creates an apotheosis of the possibilities—and horrors—of presence, disappearance, emergence, and loss.

Change is—in the Western colonial mind, full of images of destructive power—very close to horror. This closeness is the tool used by binary minds to blackmail us and fortify suspicion, mistrust, and fear. We may resist. Becoming a hybrid is never as good as staying pure. Parts that never mingled, like transplanted organs, may eventually be rejected by the body. The Western mainstream still nourishes and fosters this narrative of loss.

Horn, on the contrary, creates works supported by her own body that express the glory and the immense importance of embracing transformation. The glory and boldness of asserting simultaneously the ontological similarity and dissimilarity of the self and the other carries us into a fertile, nonbinary otherness that bears no traces of the dangers of essentialism, naturalization, and purity. Shapeshifters serve as the ground for a pedagogy that unites narratology and the importance of presenting the court of the social with the draft of new law.

The Days and the Nights of the Ocean

1.

Our ways of knowing are shaped by two extraterrestrial bodies: the moon and the sun. All too often, we think of them as opposites, but they are the very image of nonbinary life, one ordered by a movement that blends light into darkness and opens darkness to light: movement and repetition as the source of possibility, regeneration, and life. Thus, it is no wonder that the exhibition "Claudia Comte. After Nature" is divided in two chambers: day and night—a room of light and a room of darkness. However, there is something that unifies the two worlds—a wall painting, a series of waves that runs from the first space into the second, inviting us to think about the possibility of an infinite visit, a permanent bond between the two elements. This invites us to ask the question: what comes first, day or night? There is no right answer. They are eternally consecutive, as are the elements displayed in the two rooms. We do see them as separate, rather they allude to life systems in complete entanglement, in a constant flow of regeneration. And this is what this exhibition is all about: regeneration, the possibility of life, of the reemergence of life after destruction. This is what every morning is about, and every tide that responds to the moon. We need continuity and we imagine it as a flow, as the result of an organic response surprising us time and time again when we thought nothing more was possible.

2.

Entering the exhibition, we encounter two components, the beguiling wall painting just mentioned and a series of coral-shaped wooden sculptures. The corals have been taken from the

tropical forests of Jamaica, produced mostly from fallen trees. They look soft and their generic shapes seem familiar and welcoming. It is as if we know them already. We wonder if we have encountered them before, perhaps in a comic, a cartoon, or in an advertisement? Their size is also appealing. It is easy to imagine walking towards them and impulsively cuddling one in our arms. They form a family with their shapes and typologies. They are, somehow, manifesting their "coral-ness." We have all seen corals before, but these are strange ambassadors of the others, the real ones, which appear stone-like and beautifully colored. And now we take notice of them! These ones have no color. Well, they do, but it comes from the wood from which they are made and bears no resemblance to the hues and tones to be found under the sea's surface. And yet, they are so eloquent and relatable in their coralness that we do not doubt them.

They could be considered *kawaii*, the Japanese notion that is often translated into English as "cute." But this cuteness has a strong anthropological function, and a magical one as well. Western culture has never been good at cultivating cuteness, and this may explain why, for centuries, we had a hard time relating and finding ways of embracing nonhuman forms of intelligence. When I was a student, a teacher of mine used to say: "Shakespeare, my dear fellows, was never cute!" We knew what our honorable teacher wanted to say. The themes and forces that shaped the dramas of Shakespeare were rooted in the antagonistic tensions of the binary world, the world that divides the good from the bad, the lovers from the haters, the storms from the calm seas. The development of reason—he thought—needs a continuous struggle with enemies, adversaries, darkness. Not long ago I found myself rereading *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[1] The play chronicles the adventures of four young Athenian lovers and six amateur

[1] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*c*. 1595–96).

actors who are manipulated by the faeries that inhabit the forest in which the play is set. And guess where cuteness emerges! In that very forest! The play revolves around gender reversals; this wonder occurring through the figure of Puck. Puck invents a language for capricious spirits, magical fancy, fun-loving humor, a language of lovely, evocative words that permeate the atmosphere of the play, reaching our senses with a warmth that cannot be resisted. This sensation of not being able to contain our feelings, the sincerity of a sudden attraction to a phenomenon, is what the Japanese call *kawaii*. In Western culture, so keen on describing processes in consecutive stages, the fear of remaining a child forever, or possessing childlike traits as an adult, has negative connotations. But it is this pureness of heart that makes a new order of relations possible between humans and nature, between the human and nonhuman realms. This radical sincerity of the heart is what I think is present is those coral sculptures.

They encounter us with the same surprise we find upon meeting them. They stand on a mirror that references water. They stand on a mirror because its surface, like the surface of clear water, can reflect the skies and encompass the poetics of impermanence that constitutes their habitat: the winds, the clouds, the ground kneaded by the roots of the plants, the birds, and the animals passing. The mirror is there to remind us that those corals were trees and that trees have been constantly affected by the actions of humans. The mirror is also a call for awareness. We see ourselves reflected because it is mostly us—the human species—endangering their existence. Those corals, however, do not bear a negative message. We see our reflection in the mirror, and we come together again. In seeing this image, we sense gratitude. Luckily, we are still able to connect. Nihilistic despair about our actions only reinforces a cynical view and disassociates us from our agency and the will to change our behavior.

3.

The most precious thing about life is its uncertainty. The acceptance and celebration of this idea would liberate us from greed, from the impulse to control and reduce nature and other forms of life to the status of resources. Norms are fundamental for regulating—and hopefully stopping—abusive behavior. However, the written law is dependent on the raising of a profound sensitivity to the emotional and affective dimensions of the existence and logics of life. The regeneration of the coral reefs can only be possible if, at the same time, we control and forbid overfishing. If we do not create empathy for the reef, for the time nature requires for regeneration, for inventing ways of assisting animals and plants in their quest for survival then the reefs will cease to exist.

The wooden corals express how forests on earth reflect the forest of the seas. Trees and corals make us breathe. These wooden replicas make sense. Sculpturally, the forms echo the pathos of the oceans. They help us to accept the basic connections that sustain our survival and acknowledge that we need to desire a view of the reef embracing everything and everyone, including the coast, the mistakes made and the damage of colonial destruction that makes it impossible for the inhabitants of those communities to love their ocean. They also make us consider the time it will take to reverse the damage, and the many times damage will be perpetrated again before a renewal can happen. This back-and-forth, between damage and correction, is possibly the hardest thing to accept. Western cultures are driven by development fever; once progress is set in motion it needs to happen. The same imperative is true of conservationism, of the will to stop the damage from now on. From now on, all will be better.

And then the damage recurs; and mistakes are repeated. Being accepting of the time that it takes to introduce love into the system, to completely change not only the structures, but their very DNA to establish coexistence, is the most important part of this complex exercise in existing in harmony.

4.

Who killed the reefs? I was unaware, as I assume many of you are, that the reefs of Jamaica were among the most beautiful on our planet. Their splendour lured people from different parts of the world to move there, making the place "popular." It is sad that the human desire to enjoy beauty is always accompanied by exploitation. Hurricane Allen, the strongest storm in the Caribbean in the past century, greatly damaged the reefs in 1980. It hit the coast of Jamaica on August 4, after the closing week of the Moscow Olympic games. Do you remember games' mascot, Misha the bear, who was all over the packaging of our breakfast cereals, cocoa, and T-shirts? Misha's creator was Viktor Chizhikov, who passed away last year during the pandemic. He was a children's book illustrator and his design, chosen from among sixty others, touched the hearts of millions. The bear is the national animal of Russia—they say—as were the corals for Jamaica, I guess. Curiously, if you search for the meaning of the name Misha, the most popular result is the Hebrew "he who resembles God." Animals are so important and yet we perceive their presence on earth as inferior to our own. But wait! I did not finish telling you about the reefs. Allen, the storm, did its damage, but before the reefs could recover another disaster occurred: a pandemic. A virus, perhaps originating in Central America, where it was first detected by marine biologists, travelled with the currents, killing all black sea urchins. Pollution, overfishing, and boat traffic added to the disaster and the damage seemed to be irreversible. Reports describing the death of

the sea urchins brought tears to our eyes. The pandemic's speed and extension were of a scale never seen before. Apparently, it all started with the starfish. Scientists understood only recently that the starfish had died first. Within days, the animals' arms walked off in different directions, and their entire bodies melted into goop. The next observation concerns the sea urchins. I did not know that starfish eat them, without whom they would cover the seabed, creating a carpet instead of hiding in the cracks of rocks and reefs. But soon after the starfish died, so too did the sea urchins. These episodes have been occurring since the 1970s, and the immense mortality of the 1980s has recurred several times on different scales. The only explanation is that of a virus. A virus that had been active in marine ecosystems for decades—records state for around seven decades, but perhaps longer—suddenly flourished, although the reason they suddenly become so active and deadly is unclear. Yet, as in the case of pollution and coronaviruses, there is a correlation between the increasing acidity of the sea and the ocean's warming. These two factors may explain why starfish are so vulnerable, why sea urchins cannot fight and, instead, die. Reading these reports, we realize how one element affects the other, the starfish affect the increase—at first—of sea urchins; the proliferation of urchins affects the kelp forests, small fish, and the nutrient production that occurs in the ecosystems. And also how the kelp forests proliferate uncontrollably if the sea urchins disappear. How the system out of sync and balance destroys the coral reefs.

Where does the cycle of destruction start? We know the answer too well.

5.

In the same room as the corals, we encounter the currents: a large, delicate, and bright wall painting that gives movement to the whole room. Ah! Now we realize the walls of the room are not square but shaped like an ellipse. Natural water circulation does not go hand in hand with the human fetish for corners and cubic spaces. Since ancient times, currents have interested sailors. Or, said differently, the study and understanding of the currents is mandatory for survival in the oceans and at sea. There are two types of currents: surface and deep. Surface currents are wind driven; deep currents are density driven. The former flow across the surface at a depth of a few hundred feet. I bet we humans have encountered only these moody, weather-determining bodies of water. Deep currents flow near the ocean floor. The dynamics of the ocean are so strong and difficult for us to imagine. Both surface and deep currents merge; deep currents resulting from cold water being pushed to the bottom. Cold water is dense, heavy, and descends to great depths, but it stays in movement. Surface currents are moved by the winds, they moderate the climate—or accelerate its ferocity—as they transfer heat from the equator to the poles. And while sea surfaces are defined by the interplay between air and water, the deep ocean remains in constant flow, due to what is known as the "global ocean conveyor belt." The water at the dark depths of the ocean moves because it is cold and saline. As warm water is carried northwards through the hemispheres, cooler water sinks and is driven south. This cold water flows all the way to Antarctica and eventually returns to the surface, creating a conveyor belt that encircles the Earth. The drawings and diagrams of this constant flow are gorgeous. The ocean has such a complex mind. The scope of events cannot be described in words. It is easier to imagine them under the hypnotic effect of these colorful lines—as precise as the waters themselves, as the waves and the winds, as the coast and the circles they form, as salt crystals, as the ice they touch, as the millions of creatures they embrace, as the rivers they swallow, as the boats they carry … Here these lines form waves and seem at rest. They are—as ocean engineering scientist Alexander Babanin puts it

—"ordinary waves." Oh yes! We humans even discriminate between waves. Not all waves are of equal interest to us. I imagine that the reef understands the functions of the waves but we, since ancient times, observe the waves as visitors to the ocean and judge them like critics. Their force and power in breaking towards the coast, their height, their length, their destructive potential … We also assign genders to the waves—as ocean anthropologist Stefan Helmreich has explained that, as icons of rhythmic and "predictable" motion, ordinary waves are more "feminine," while other waves, those that embody chaos and destruction, are interpreted as "masculine." Our love for binaries never seems to end. The day room, inhabited by the wooden corals, is submerged in calm waters. The waters are warm like the colors of the lines, heated by the sun, by light. These lines are, strictly speaking, not waves at all, but an exercise in distilling waves into curvilinear forms, taming the ocean for our sake, creating a universal language where the formlessness of the curve engulfs all other forms present in those fertile waters. The wall painting could be considered as a necessary oceanic disorder so that an order can be presented to us, that of life in the reef.

6.

I have always found the ocean to be a strange place after dark. "Strange" does not necessarily mean "scary," but neither does it mean "calm." As a child I thought that if you fall into the dark waters off the Atlantic coast—where I am from—a channel would form, taking you directly to the depths or to America. Corridors would appear each and every time a sailor fell from a ship at night, and that is why their corpses cannot be found. Sea legends are born with the moonlight. Stars reflect on the water's surface, the dark blue hues of the waves become glass-like, and the sea shimmers. Bioluminescence cannot be explained coldly. From planktonic microorganisms

that emit blue light, making the surface seem extraterrestrial, to the luminous bacteria that create the milky seas in the northwestern Indian Ocean, reports by sailors over centuries have described this out-of-this-world nocturnal field as crisp, glowing snow fields on the waters. The light is so strong that, in 2005, satellite images revealed that these phenomena can be seen from outer space.

Animals also glow in the dark. Light emission is common among fish, squid, mollusks, and even turtles. In shallow waters—like the ones portrayed in this exhibition, the waters of the reefs and a bit deeper—bioluminescent fish display their light at night. It is a biochemical reaction. The same can be said of so many phenomena, like love, yet still we will need poets and playwrights to recreate these encounters scene after scene. There are things we never tire of, neither do we demand an exact explanation that would spoil our joy. If we could have the pleasure of swimming by a group of glowing squid in the early hours of a summer evening and suddenly see that they are glowing along with the coral reef nearby, we would not want to sense anything else than their call for our attention— observing the millions of light sources of which our eyes have been unaware for centuries—partly because our eyes cannot see as do the eyes of fish. We should be aware of how corals are able to synchronize and simultaneously release their eggs and sperm during a period of one hour, one night a year, in spring, under the moonlight. Light acts as a synchronizer of life. That is why the second room of our reef is set at night, vibrating with the lights of all the creatures of the reef.

7.

The second scene of the exhibition takes place at night. Surrounded by the magical effect of the bioluminescent waters, a new family of corals emerges. This time they are digitally animated, forming and un-forming, playfully giving us a new insight into their morphology. These corals are the characters of a story they would like to tell the world: how what we see as happening in seconds in the animation—coming back, regenerating—takes them years to accomplish. Corals are a complex form of symbiosis between plant and animal. This complexity is shown in their morphology. Variation in coral community structure and form correlates to changes in light conditions across shallow environments, and the shape and size of coral colonies determine how their relationship to the physical environment and with other organisms. And because form determines function, becoming a key element in understanding how we can help regenerate the colonies, the study of the traits of coral has become a matter of great significance. And so, corals have gone Big Data. Collecting and creating trait databases may assist the advancement of ecological and evolutionary research, since traits provide the key to the organisms' function and fitness. These animated corals tell the story of their future. We are not scientists, and therefore unable to read their physiological, ecological, or functional traits to infer their problems.

Nevertheless, the information is there, dancing before our eyes. And again, there is nothing sad in their storytelling, in their disappearing and reappearing for us. On the contrary, we feel strongly for them. What is the source of our joy? The answer lies in the structure of our own storytelling. In the beginning—it is said—the earth was without form, a void; and darkness was upon its face as a giant cloud of gas and dust collapsed to form our solar system. The planets

were forged as the nebula spun, jolted into motion by a nearby supernova, and in the centre, the most rapid compression of particles ignited to become our sun.

Now, here, in the presence of this cubic digital display, we feel these corals are our new sun, the source of light and love.

8.

I believe in the night.

The Magic Flute, Mozart's *singspiel*, awakens all passions in me. It was his last work. It premiered on September 30, 1791, not long before his death on December 5. It is structured into only two acts—like Claudia Comte's installation. It is not my scholarly reading of the play, but my first memory and interpretation of the work that marked me forever. Two birds—Papagena and Papageno—singing on stage in the language of the listeners, German, represented for me the first "call to action," the most radical epistemological awakening I can recall. The birds singing —and us, singing along with their tunes—was the very first moment I understood that interspecies communication is not a matter of deciphering but a matter of art. I will not go on here about Mozart's intentions, yet I believe he created the conditions—aesthetically and emotionally—for the emergence of a very powerful interspecies exercise. And it is so very eloquent that it can be used as an argument to advance that it is an art we need to transform for the future of coexistence. *Ohs* and *Ahs* in the audience! A rumble of thunder announces the Queen of the Night's arrival! She appears clad in darkness and stars—as if she were the Night

itself. She hands the world a magic flute and a magic silver bell. Remember: these have been, since then, the fundamental tools of transformation.

PART IV

New Institutions at the Horizon—How the White Cube Turns Into Nature

The Invention Is Nature

There is a reason why art is interested in nature, an interest that is far from only a trend or fashion, and this reason is the long and legitimate desire of artists to find a place and a receiver outside of a class system and its institutions, which see humans as the only beings concerned with art. There have been many attempts to move away from the traditional questions of taste and its bonds, though these attempts have not been conventionally studied. For example, think about the emphasis on process versus result that was so present in the art world not long ago. This was not only an expression, or a way of saying that the time and decisions that go into an artwork are part of the resulting piece or installation. It was also a means of stressing that art is a living organism, one that cannot be judged only in a certain moment, but which should instead be subject to a complex form of acceptance and love that engages and envelops all the cells, all the minute parts of this body, in all given moments. Or think about the importance of the archive.

On the one hand, it relates to another form of institution, one not necessarily linked to the context of the traditional art museum. On another level, however, artists' emphasis on and interest in archival material can be seen as a call to flee from taste—the legitimation tool of a certain social class—and take shelter in the function of an organ: memory.

The word invention, wrongly, seems to belong to industry, but it pertains also to philosophy. It is a notion that allows us to think about origin and creation without referring to a cosmogony. But don't get me wrong—it is not us, humans, inventing, but nature inventing itself that matters here.

That there is a strong, rising interest in nature, to which art is also responding, has nothing to do with a trend, but with the need to move away from certain processes that were completely focused on production and labor as a task that frames and defines the human perspective through the real, through agency, through politics, through the social, all in oblivion of nature as a fundamental part of our life. Nature has been for centuries a provider, of air and water, of experience; nature has been seen as a colossal outside—to the factory, to the office—and as the sun that shines, the wind that blows, and that clouds that rain, all on our money. There have been millions of voices and views contrasting this notion of nature as chiefly counterpart, and yet we have never reached, or not until now, a widespread sense of how it has failed to name what it is that defines the many millions of ways we connect, we interact, we coexist … We do have an experience of nature, and yet we need to expand it astronomically to be able to understand all that we do, not only in our direct relationship with nature, but also in relation to gender, to sexuality, to technology, to economy even. It is this expansion of experience that I call "invention." Expansion is a funny notion. Saying we "need to expand our idea of experience" usually evokes an image of shortness as a historically framed notion emerges and, at the same time, an image of a timid scenario involving the millions of things the present and the future challenge experience with. Expansion always seems much more commonsensical than invention. Invention seems tied to the maker and their studio. But this is only because already in the past the idea of us being able to create *ex nihilo* life and possess forces similar in power to the ones we encounter in nature was much too appealing not to form a very powerful image around the word.

In the context of the arts the most famous expansion is the avant-garde. It takes the modernist idea of making a significant change to something existing, like form and composition, while using a military term to convey that this change is going to be made in a systematic way. Expansion applies perfectly to all that is made or can be made; however, it poses big problems once allied to life. To expand a living organism seems to suggest stretching and making it collapse. This is why, in talking about artists' interest in nature, we need to call it an invention, as well as a movement. What we are witnessing is nothing more than what the avant-garde was: the possibility of being part of not only the expansion or redefinition of existing canons and languages through bigger and broader terms, but rather the invention of life.

But what is nature? What is the ocean? What are we doing when we include nature in the curricula of an art institute? What are we saying when we relate oceans to the question of gender? Why these questions are important, as well as more concrete ones, such as what damage has been caused by plastics or how our actions have affected the climate, is illustrated in a fictional conversation between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan written by Italo Calvino.[1]

> Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone.
>
> "But which is the stone that supports the bridge?" Kublai Khan asks.
>
> "The bridge is not supported by one stone or another," Marco answers, "but by the line of the arch that they form."
>
> Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: "Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me."

[1] Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili* (Torino: Einaudi, 1972).

Polo answers: “Without stones there is no arch.”

Nature is the arch. Or rather, it is both the stones and the arch—every concrete form of life and all the specific problems and questions that concern it and, at the same time, an abstract entity that may motivate us to transform our behavior and that has an enormous impact in the way we organize our institutions. This huge new interest in nature, in the ocean is not—or is not only—the artistic and curatorial intention to include questions long forgotten by the arts in the agendas of works and exhibitions. It is also, even if much more hidden, an impulse to create a new thinking, a philosophy that would allow us to move away from our inherited institutional habits which structure our collecting and exhibiting, which still inform our current practices. Nature provides us not only with the possibility of including life differently in the context of art; nature provides us also with a different way to understand politics and the impact of human action on life; nature also provides a different way of seeing the use and the role of technology and sheds light on the meaning of artificial intelligence as a tool to connect with an organic intelligence that exists beyond the human one. Nature is the name of a big reform, one that affects art and culture not only in its subjects, but also in its structures, in its role it has historically played forming a sense of the urban and of a community that exists in a world of labor outside of its norms and rules, and in its configuration as a product that is not equal with any industrial one … Nature has emerged to push us all a little out of the architectural way we have imagined space. Nature has also emerged to move us away from an encompassed experience, one that is directly linked with the constrains of labor and production, one that still revolves around a very restricted idea of the public space, of influence, of impact … Can you think of a forest as new media? Do you think

the mountains, the rivers, the winds, the ocean constitute public space? Or do you, rather, see this expression as only a metaphor?

Nature is also providing a new ground and opportunity to gather together. Did you notice? There are fewer and fewer opportunities today of coming together … Twenty years ago Europe was witnessing the rise of many informal ways of gathering artists. Artistic workshops and symposia that went beyond just public programming were possessed by the many discursive impulses that were then shaping our political, cultural, and institutional art scenes. Institutions were supportive of this. They saw that the future development of culture could not happen just through the linear process of producing artists in art schools who then produce both art and the art spaces which produce the exhibitions presenting that art. It was clear that there needed to be an extension of all the energies originated in the process of reflecting, trying, and sharing, and that the public arena could be the perfect place for this continuation, for merging art with the ideas and arguments of philosophers and writers and thinkers of many kinds, without the burden of expecting career outcomes or revenue in terms of institutional acknowledgement.

The workshops and artist gatherings oriented towards the production of clouds and climates inside the art world that would help us understand how to best respond to the millions of forms that diversity takes. Once we learned about the conditions of a postcolonial, post-capital, post-equality, post-etcetera world, the important point was to create opportunities to rehearse scenarios of coming together. And it seemed art could provide a space for this. These scenarios, on their part, were providers of hope, of a deviation from the traditional ways we have positioned art and culture institutions and their roles. The art world started to make space for philosophers,

coincidentally as archive fever was seizing artists, turning this into a unique moment in which art claimed a concrete effect—the possibility of serving democracy through its activities.

But why, then, has all this ceased? There is no simple answer to this. We are currently witnessing and sensing a return of the old right, of extreme populist arguments, of ideas to which we thought we were ready to bid farewell inside the social, though this has proven to be a longer process. The incredible complexities of these problems have been getting similar answers for so long that there has not been a deep educational evolution in dealing with the challenges that natural, economic, social, technological, and demographic transformations are posing. The future of labor and production has not been properly viewed in conjunction with nature and with the need for totally different demographic approaches to what will constitute our social body in the future.

We talk nonstop about digitalization and the future of our relationship with the machine, and yet the digital age still has not changed the methods we use to teach. Perhaps it is too early. The rapid impoverishment of youth coinciding with a radical cut in public funding played a major role in the ending of the wave of the artist events mentioned above. The powerful male-dominated component of discourses on the left about transformation also produced—even if unconsciously—a sense of non-credibility, giving many of these events more of an air of nostalgia than a new motivational fundament, a new action. In an incredibly short period of time, all that we sensed we had gained vanished. Not only were institutions back to “normal” again, but the memory of that collective effort initiated by so many hundreds of artists seemed as well

to be gone. The crisis had an immediate impact on the art world and there are no signs of recuperation. Today, institutions seem to enjoy a relatively normal life, as they continue with their usual programming; however, if we look more closely we will discover many differences, as reports proliferate on the hard economic conditions that artist communities are enduring, and as even the market seems unable to support small and mid-size initiatives that are not already well-known or established.

It is in this constellation that we see not only the emergence of collectors and private museums, but also of private initiatives aiming to create a space whose role was filled decades ago by the university and later on by the museum and the art center. We see the emergence of new hybrid collaborations between public and private forces that aim to bring about not only new narratives, but also the possibilities of meetings, of in-person exchange, of working together, to try, for example, to approach a sense of art in coexistence with the ocean.

Our field of inquiry is constituted by the questions we are able to ask. Are art schools part of the art institutions that constitute and nourish our social space, or are they a chapter apart, a sort of exception? Can they contribute to debates on nature, such as on nature and racism, in a productive and comprehensive way, even as part of a future art practice? What is the role of education today? After working alongside Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev on the production of "dOCUMENTA (13)," I could sense the surprise of many at my decision to move to education. Even if we constantly repeat the importance of the role education plays in our society, it is clear that a prejudice still informs the hierarchy of institutions in the art world. On top of this, one senses that there is a big difference between an art school directed by a man and one directed by a woman. While the first case is perceived as possessing some of the charm of the avant-garde

heroic gesture of advocating for a free space, as well as a capacity to resonate with radical practices, the second case is immediately met with pragmatic questions about effective teaching and the administrative challenges that our art institutions are facing in an era in which even affluent countries with surplus budgets do not financially support art, public health, or social welfare at all. Therefore, it is not rare, as a woman, to be confronted with the question, "What is it like to be a teacher?" while male educators are more commonly asked, "What is the role of education?" In post-liberal Western societies we face a recurrent problem with identifying a woman as capable of producing a meaningful and strong public sphere, and this affects and distorts the perception of the possible, of the future of our art and cultural systems. But since the imbalance is so present, so at work in the way we perceive female and male practitioners in the arts, in the way that gender identities in their broader sense affect our judgment and social behavior—even without adding origin and race to this constellation—we can easily imagine that the true avant-garde ahead of us is to produce culture under a logic of equality. This may seem simple to some, or only a question of technocratically adjusting institutional structures, and yet, if equality among artistic languages, the possibility of a plurality of forms, and a new concatenation of practices were the questions of the last century, ours will be about how to deal with the incredible challenge of enabling a radical shift in inherited cultural power structures, as well as with the pain of losing and the joy of winning a challenge that will completely disrupt—in a positive sense, in my view—the notion of "quality." And what better place than an art school to test the task we have ahead? The Institute of Art Gender Nature in Basel is small in size but big in ambition, an institution that does not follow the DNA of the French-German Academy model. The institute emerged from a video class that had its origin in the Basel Applied Arts School. Even when it grew into an autonomous university a decade or so ago, the institute kept the group teaching methods of its origin. The class system does not exist—and it never did, so no

nostalgia runs through our cells. However, this collective approach did affect the perception of the institute for many years. Collective methods are often embraced by art practitioners, and yet, the way we understand transmission in art privileges the view that a strong individual—a single artist—is the medium that best guarantees future artists. In truth, however, the group, the forum as a transmission substance, is the best situation in which to introduce the questions of gender, nature, and race, since groups are the actual environments that shape the future of our social behavior and, therefore, that affect the practice of art. These questions are at the core of the curricula, at the horizon of our relations with materials, with the technological world, with all forms of life …

Centering the need to explore different ways of behaving inside art practice and art production and observing not only the language we use to address the problems but also the conditions we create for a different experience of volumes, symbols, images, power, connections, media, and so on, have been key for us in the last years. Insisting on the importance of seeing gender and nature together and of the efforts that lie before us in the decolonizing processes that we need to maintain—or indeed activate—in all cultural structures is a significant task to collectively undertake with young artists. At the same time, the continuous production of opportunities that are open to and include alumni and a broad community of artists and those interested in art is a must.

And yet, there are other questions that run parallel to those just named and also affect the forming of our futures: the status of ignorance and the ill-suited tools we have inherited to deal with it, the question of knowledge transmission when reading decreases, and the challenge of joyfully embracing those spaces that function outside our institutionally shaped modern minds.

I have come to think that the many multiple and different futures that come from all sides are dependent on us to interpret ignorance and its structure—an ignorance that suggests knowledge absorption as our traditional educational methods conceive it is in a deep crisis; an ignorance affected by the structure of media, just as it was in the late eighteenth century; an ignorance radically dependent on self-affirmation, like traditional class structures are ... As a researcher of the media analytic nonprofit Harmony Labs in New York explained to me in a private conversation on this matter, people share only the news and tweets with which they can identify, while those materials that inspired them or made them change their opinion on a subject are not divulged. The majority of what goes viral on social media constitutes a kind of "Aha! You see!" reinforcing of our own views, while we keep private the beliefs that alter our positions. Writer Ingo Niermann explains why this happens, stating that stability is privileged over challenge. Even if a person or a piece of information or a documentary on a relevant matter changes our perception, it also creates a vertigo, a sense of losing the old ground before having a new one ready from which to be assertive and defend the newly acquired sense of the real.

It is on the production of a ground from which to defend the values that matter, to create a sense of identification that does not—or not only—rely on ultra conservative views or the rehearsal of liberal and left-progressive ones, that we need to work.

Therefore, I would insist that ignorance itself is a real active force with an incredible agency. And to reach equality and preserve freedom, we would need to invest in the understanding of the

structures and the experiences that constitute the transmission of ideas and feelings today. If there is something an art institute can do, it is to allow us to understand how to trust art in the complex play between ignorance and that something else outside of ignorance. Making art is a radical contribution to a form of experience that long ago abandoned the aesthetics of surprise.

So, the question is, what can one add to this existing ground? Like Plato's philosophy, an art institute represents trust in rationality, in planning, in a sense of education that demands discipline from the part of society that expects progress in return for its efforts and a development towards a better life, one that we can all agree on, that follows rational principles and arguments.

But the future of an art institute—in this case, *our* art institute—faces the same problems Plato encountered in his *Republic*, many centuries ago. What should we do with those who deny the principles of reason, who cannot see the benefits of a rational and universal agreement, and who, therefore, interrupt the paths of education?

How are we going to address, convince, seduce, win over all those who are so different, who belong to another culture that fails to recognize and accept the rules of this universal reason?

The answer that Plato gives is simple: the Republic needs a powerful security corps that would invigilate those who fail or refuse to follow the precepts of the logos regime. Far from being an

anecdote to the question of how to effectively accomplish a utopia, this response has wound its way through Western society. The centrality of logos (and its educational tools) implemented in institutions that secure its preeminence and centrality has cornered those who fail its regime or sense otherwise. We have trapped and discarded the countryside in favor of the city, along with all those who do not pursue higher education, and we have acted with radical violence against the other cultures and differences that surround our own Republic. Plato's answer has become real, and it now appears to be the only possible response to the question of what to do with those who are situated outside our views on progress, freedom, and understanding of culture. There is, however, another development for alternatives to reason, and though it is much less pursued, understood, or studied, it is already expressed—timidly—in art education: the question of life. Never meant to replace thinking as the core of philosophy, the question of life is nonetheless feared and kept outside the project of logos.

The simple assumption that life is a given and that reason is a common trait of all humans facilitated the argument that life is a notion outside of education, and since we need education to exercise control and power, everything that is prior to it is incapable of providing a solid ground on which to establish our institutions. And all arguments and ideas are guaranteed by institutions to be reflections of social behavior and reason. Whether we know it or not, the assumption after all is that we all want to be reasonable. Otherwise, we threaten the common good and progress of the social, and therefore justify control (Michel Foucault) or violence (Plato). Of course, we can also distract ourselves away from reason and disappear into the many meanderings that reason provides and produces (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari)—this would not constitute a danger, but just another turn into language and literature perhaps.

Life was assumed to be a precondition, and therefore one cannot—easily—submit it to institutional correction. And I would say Marx was the first thinker to see the power of life as a force and as a justification to move all those excluded from—or seen as mere instruments of—the logos of progress. In his "Theses on Feuerbach," Marx famously claims, "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."[2] This statement is a true philosophical revolution, since it reverses the whole aim of the discipline. Action is the true expression of life—not thinking—and the aim of this power is change. This shift in position was, of course, far from a Marxist invention, but it is the true acknowledgement that the logos and reason that philosophers defend are acts of violence that generate an incredible and deep sense of antagonism.

The time has come to remove philosophers and replace them with those who live under the principles of life. But with life emerges a whole family of principles; authenticity, for example. Ever since Marx ordered us to change our lives, life has been evangelized by regimes for change, from diet to running to yoga to social networks to political populism, all of which want us to change our lives to remain like others. It is a contradiction, of course, but a necessary one for these agendas.

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[2] Karl Marx, "Über Feuerbach," trans. W. Lough (1845), www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses (accessed May 1, 2022).

If life is not subject to education, as logos was, the most important principle for its preservation is imitation. We need to be alive like all the others, take selfies to prove we are ourselves, accumulate likes so that we affirmatively broadcast the amount of ourselves that is similar to others, through tastes, apartments, choices, and political views. This impulse is rendered obvious when you read #MeToo, which is far from the problem of visibility, and is instead a positive sign of the necessary impulse to be part of the social, to possess the conditions that make the social possible. The very impulse to imitate life also makes possible not only the best alliances, but also, symmetrically, the vilest ones, borne from misogynist impulses, the rise of racism and racial hatred, as well as a naturalization of anti-intellectualism, of education, of all institutions and discourses that aim to tame the authentic self we *all* share. But still, in order for this to gain dynamics and energy capable of rooting the powerful, it calls on the NOW, and the order is clear: change your life. You need to imitate in a dynamic way, move towards an ideal that would then be replicated by millions of others.

Of course, I am depicting the negative side of this evolution very generally, even when arguing that its flaw is its youth, that the whole thing needs to be worked through. Only much later, after thinkers and philosophers have developed a keen grasp of an expanding sense of life—a trait possessed by humans but also by animals—can that sense gain nuances and the kind of complexity that has marked the end of the twentieth century and continues to mark the beginning of the twenty-first.

We have to go back to Nietzsche to properly locate the main problems of the imperative of life. And we need to go back even further to Aristotle—not Plato—to rescue some arguments for a model of living that mingles animals and humans in an unprecedented way. Nietzsche would say that the ideal of authenticity implies the popular suggestion to be oneself or to be true—and I would say nothing is more actual in all forms of today's societies. However, in contrast to the generalizations, Nietzsche holds the view that the authentic way of life doesn't imply something like a true self that is unique to everyone. The ideal of an authentic life is rather a question of how we do something and especially how we carry out or perform our own lives (*Lebensvollzug*).[3] The most important issue to consider here is that the special way of doing or acting that Nietzsche describes has to be exempt from the satisfaction of one's needs. In other words, to dissociate life from the "utilitarian" mode of thinking is fundamental, as well as is to fight against the idea of self-preservation; for Nietzsche, activities, which react to needs, are fishy. He calls them "re-active" or negative. And nothing can be closer to the truth of all that determines and defines today's political motivations—and not only the right or populist ones.

Until now, I have tried to present a direct and quite blank opposition between the centrality of thinking—the core of philosophy but also of agreement, upon which our ideas of the social contract rest—and the notion of life as a call to action. Life has emerged very powerfully as a force that defies "education" and our current institutions, one that can even become involved with the arguments of consensual reason and send the social back to a state in which antagonisms appear unresolved, more alive than ever—as menace, even, to the efforts to demonstrate the social as a place where differences can be addressed and nurtured. However, the question of the

[3] Sarah Bianchi, "Oh Voltaire! Oh Humanität! Oh Blödsinn! Über den Zusammenhang von Anerkennung, Leben und menschlichem Selbstverständnis bei Nietzsche," Zeitschrift für Praktische Philosophie, vol. 4, no. 1 (2017): 15–36.

importance of life has not only been explored as a potential contestant of logos, but also as a way to expand the Enlightenment and modern projects that were unthinkable before.

From the nineteenth century on, life has emerged as the possibility to think of a different coexistence between the human and the nonhuman. At first, for theosophical societies, invocations to magical forces were replacements for Cartesian reason. Instead, a critical distance between the human and the real, a necessity of exercising the merging, the coming-closer-to of all forms of life, was seen not as an escape, but as a necessary exercise for understanding the possibilities ahead of us. It is in this way that we learned to modulate the project of modernity. But whereas the question of life was first seen as mystical and magical, it now possesses a potential for interspecies communication and intelligence. This is much more difficult to pursue, and therefore harder to didactically trace inside philosophy in the same manner that one can trace the history of life-as-action. Life-seeing is a notion that helps along a new development in thinking—one that approaches the difficult questions of intelligence and consciousness—and it is in its early stages of development. This question of life demands a language, images, experiences, and propositional arguments that are not quite there yet. We have been intuiting the limits of rationality in explaining and judging the world, but we still do not know how to judge, how to introduce this knowledge to our political and social philosophies.

It is through technological discourses that we hear again and again about the need to connect and be one with the programmed inorganic machines, but we still have serious problems with

including interspecies communication as the ground to define new laws and behaviors that would accordingly encompass the messages we are getting from Earth.

The discourses we have inherited are rooted in mystical assumptions or in the colonial desire to get and to protect, at the same time. “Save the planet!” is still an order, and in it is embedded ideas of state, power, and possession that contradict the impulse to rescue with the will to own.

The new interest in nature does not name a new trend, but a necessity to expand our public space inhabiting it, an expansion that is taking place not through the institutionalized presence of art and culture in public but rather through questions that embody a transformation of the way we imagine what is possible, proposing the invention of a new ground to sense the future.

Gathering Sea I Am!

The Trouble With Wishes Coming True

It would be radical—but probably right—to say that the rising interest in nature among artists and art professionals has less to do with nature and a lot more to do with the institutional structure of the art world itself. The rise and development of museums, public collections, and all other participating institutions in this history has been dependent on an idea of social structure and citizenship that is now radically changing: one could even say that nature embodies the last institutional twist in the history of institutionalized art, as the emergence of Nature—as a space and a ground—embodies not so much an institutional alterity to the museums and white (and nonwhite) cubes, but rather the very possibility of a rebirth outside the frame of history. Yes, history. I do believe that more important than the problem of culture is the question of history and national identity that art has been dealing with for so many centuries. However, this is not the question that preoccupies me here.

Both democracy and museums had a short-lived, minor revival at the very edge of their decay, before continuing their descent. The transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century was marked by the energy of discourses inhabiting art institutions, an energy of renewal that affected not only the big institutions, but also the role of medium and smaller-sized ones. The question of the future of representation within the Western democratic system was answered by the proliferation of philosophers and different curatorial and artistic agents promoting access, ideas,

and the archive. The past gained a plurality and the question of history started to fragment into the problems of the legacy of postcolonialism. The archive was the first door: the document—still white—preceded the entrance of materials and artistic voices from different territories and histories. Restitution started to gain body and reality, in regard to the question of race in the art world. Still, the energies of renewal were possessed by enthusiasm, by an economic and social growth that unprecedentedly empowered art to see itself as capable of opening the social to its past through new and different ideas of education, participation, social wealth, and access. The art world believed in itself and many politicians in Europe supported this wave—at the beginning—as a way of activating the Union and creating a resonance between the old continent's dreams and this new political organization, which on its surface seemed a genius development of all those historical loose ties among nations that were never friends, but permanently interdependent. It was only natural that the Union needed to spread a strong sense of culture, one that was critical and, at the same time, capable of capitalizing on the old flavor of history through a renewed "park" of art institutions. This also explains why the tsunami of critique of the old and the belief in its force were interwoven. But, more importantly, this also explains why the whole exercise of investigating the limits of established art institutions and the possibilities of new formats was a very controlled impulse; one was absolutely convinced that at the end of the rainbow was a pot of gold. The emerging interest on the part of the press in museums and the

"stars" that created exhibitions enhanced an idea of access that was mostly sponsored by low-cost airlines.[1]

Suddenly, cities were like the musicals that reemerged as a genre in new North American cinema. Thanks to Zara, Uniqlo, or Swatch, many old forgotten buildings in city centers started to sing and to smell. All the glories of past centuries responded to the arrival of all these tourists as if they were new wings in old art institutions presenting both the identity of the past and the city under a new form and a new light—and, of course, wearing new clothes.

The art world said "access" and access it was! The citizens started to open the doors of their houses. Did you say hospitality? *Et voilà*, millions of apartments were redecorated with white and bright elements and opened—in a competitive quest—to visitors. Who said that shelter was not the notion that would reign in the old continent? Who could now claim that the wishes expressed by art and its institutions were not listened to? Millions listened to the call … Never had it been possible to peek into the private houses of the Catalan bourgeoisie, for example, if you did not belong to their inner circle, but now, just log into an app and you can not only see their spaces, but also compare their prices with yours. It is true that this could be seen as an

[1] There is a very beautiful and unexplored aspect of this story: the word "star" and its function. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu remarked that "sociology and art do not make good bedfellows." His reasoning was grounded in the tension between the art world's desire to focus on individual creative genius, and sociology's insistent aim to explain phenomena in terms of social forces. No better term than "star" describes how easily men—no matter how many conscious public programs one has attended and despite how many women have warned about the dangers of assigning them power—have been able to sit as heads of museum boards and entice journalists to cover them. But the "stars" find their own Bourdieu-predicted predator: the influencer. The influencer is like an avenger defined positively in market terms: it modifies the course of a decision and reunites all like-minded thinkers—like a shepherd—under its influence. If a "star" is like a king or an old-fashioned boss, the influencers are the true children of the model developed by big companies in defining and putting to work indirect leadership—that is, acting upon very large structures in which the message reaches the recipient through an indirect source of command.

undesirable development, but this development still has everything to do with us, with the language and the desires we expressed with these words which cannot be entirely and independently blamed on tourism and the marketing of all the city centers of Europe. Tourism is the complex result of seeing the enormous importance and impact of the transit of people as an incredible source of income, as well as of using this type of transit as a veil to cover the arrival of those thousands of people that seek refuge and a future in the developed territories. These two forms of transit cannot be separated from one another.

But what has all this to do with art? Or contemporary art? One cannot truly claim that development occurred in the right direction, that museums and art institutions gained relevance, that curators were established in a new and unprecedented way, or that criticality and the new formats are visible, now that collectors and the market rule the art world in the absence of public money or foundations defending the common interest. I would say a lot of it has to do with how contemporary art sped up and was used to accelerate a transformation of our society in directions that, while overall positive, are at the same time rapidly growing dangerous as we are unable to create a political frame for them. Art has been obsessed with the tensions created between elites and public communities. No other field of practice and study has dedicated so much effort and speculative thinking to addressing this question. And it is this very question that determines today's development of technology and politics.

Ocean

The field of art has indeed contributed massively to generating a sense of experience about gender, nature, and race, and has served as an amplifier of other disciplines concerned with the same questions and rights. However, it is equally important to face and to discuss the transformation of our institutional structures regardless of their scale, to understand the interdependency of the evolution of our public sphere and the capital dedicated to it and the future of art, and to reconsider the relationships we are building not only with technology as an industry, but also as a substance that itself needs to be reevaluated in terms of gender, race, and in relation to nature.

Art and its world have been, since their origins, directly dependent on urban and industrial developments. Even if in the past—and also in recent years in a limited way—many have been pointing towards the nonurban as a possible context for future artists in which to make art, the fact is that it always sounds like a last resort and, in actuality, the countryside (read as an "other" to the wealthier urban centers) is neither fully considered to the extent of its possibilities nor stands to make a comeback. Art has never—for reasons related to the development of education and our physical and necessary dependency on demographics, on the presence of an audience—reflected properly on an "other" contrary to and outside of the modern models of production and transmission. Why should we? Art, in the way it has been conceived, has not needed fields and farmers but rather citizens and scholars. Institutions need to be where the bureaucracy is and where politics are formed. But are politics even really taking shape in cities today?

The question of understanding the nonurban context is a very complex one, and one that also relates to the rise of the internet in an intriguing way.

Art in nonurban contexts has historically taken other forms, ones that relate to craft and to community values, such as tradition, but also to traditional notions of gender and work. And, until now, projects proposing contemporary art in the countryside have mostly stressed the historical interest artists have in the landscape or the way they conceptualize certain elements of earth and nature but have failed to engage with the reality of the people inhabiting those areas. Probably only Canada and some northern parts of Scandinavia have created institutions with collections responding to indigenous art and First Nation concerns and views on the world. Otherwise, it is still very difficult to find examples of logics that defy empirical—even if some are critical—views on different knowledges.

Postcolonial theories and debates have raised enormous awareness about the realities of those suffering the normalization processes imposed by imperialisms of all kinds and yet those same realities have been the subject of an enormous fictionalization of local cultures and indigenous wisdoms. Somehow, our institutional and academic ways of reading the real have left space for exceptions of the best kind. Art has displayed an enormous interest in the testimonials of the oppressed, forcing those voices to sound oftentimes like factory workers displaced in a nonindustrial context. Furthermore, the antagonism towards technology, social media, and all the miseries left behind by the evolution of labor in our developed and service-oriented centers has created an idealized view of indigenous peoples as possessing an original wisdom that we have

lost. The rise of interest in ayahuasca and the growth of an industry dedicated to substances that are supposed to enhance our quality of life—like superfoods—go hand in hand. Many scholars—such as oceanographer Astrid Ulloa—have denounced the systematic construction of the indigenous as the original ecological subject, as if nearness to their lives will serve to provide benefits to ours that we can incorporate into our ways of production and consumption, without much change except a new empathy for their way of living. Indeed, there is a space for difference and an attention that were not there before, but these have come with a failure to deal with more complex differences that cannot be easily described. Further, the political situations of many indigenous communities are endangered like never before and any mechanisms to protect their resources are silenced in the face of public and private interests, such as capitalist extraction.

It is not only radical ways of conceiving life that are affected or at stake here, but the many millions living in territories that are of no interest—not even for an exercise in exoticism—to the powers that be. The reality of the countryside is leading to the rise of old-fashioned right-wing values. Poverty marks the lives of many who see how educational systems only shape individuals according to models of labor and life that have nothing in common with the reality in which they are living: a reality of millions of miles of country dispossessed of any beauty, sense of sustainability, or health, and also remote, disconnected, and suffering from endemic class, gender, and discrimination problems.

In these circumstances, it is a prerequisite to read the interest in nature not as a subject, but as a necessary turn towards new conditions of space, politics, action, gender, race, and interspecies relations. As of late, it is much more common for art practitioners to say "nature" than "countryside," for example. The reason is to be found in the philosophies common in the art sphere: those that proffer a systematic thinking against nature, on the background of nature, on the otherness of nature, in a dialectical manner with nature, which have made nature much more legible, in all its nonurban forms.

It is because of the prevalent discourses and understanding of nature that we are still nonspecific about the future of art in a nonurban context. Nature and art are other names for life, and life needs to be reintroduced into our thinking in a big way. But the interest in nature preserves—probably for good reasons—a level of indeterminacy regarding the actions that attract artists and inspire us to think about the spaces that exist outside institutionalized life. This seems easy to say, but it is radically difficult to imagine it in nonnegative terms. Institutions have been our language and the form we invented to organize ourselves. Therefore, every time a scientist says they have discovered a new species of fish, they are saying that there is a whole part of life—a sentient part—to which we have not responded. And this response is not just a question of "expanding" our aid or action towards it. Rather the contrary: intelligent life and sentient life should—and eventually will—function like an imperative to organize differently every structure that plays a role in our relationship to nature.

This idea of coexistence, interspecies communication, and so on, is not entirely new. Such notions have a long history, and yet it has been mostly science that has paid attention to intelligence existing in nonhuman realms but also, more importantly, to the different philosophical minds that have tried to describe the political and epistemological dimensions of this crucial phenomena. Humanities and the sphere of visual culture have been skeptical and conservative in embracing any theory or study taking this possibility seriously. The entanglement of the questions of rationality, language, and labor has acted as a barrier for those presenting ideas of intelligence based on forms and dimensions of consciousness that defy the classic parameters that safeguard the status of the human and uphold production as one of the most important functions of our human lives. Language and labor structure two of the pillars of our early, modern, and late capitalist life: education and production. Both go hand in hand, since the major goal of education—and more and more so—is none other than being able to work. Education makes labor possible, by producing capitalist subjects, and it has as a secondary mission to familiarize workers with future labor scenarios. Education for the sake of knowledge, or for the nourishment of our capacity to speculate or preserve old forms (classical studies, for example) through new forms (computer science and so on) has dramatically lost its importance. We speak of research, and there are a few who still believe that research does name the speculative worlds that ancient academia nourished and protected, but research nowadays is mainly a tool that extends hypothesis to the doors of industry.

Another of the big prejudices that culture and the visual arts have with regards to the idea of nature possessing an intelligence that may influence our political forms and languages has to do with gender. Women have historically been seen as those defending sensorial forms of

communication that defy classical—and narrow—understandings of rationality and the role it plays in the definition of social norms. Therefore, to accept expanded views on the sensorial implies accepting and undertaking a reform of the social norms that situate certain behaviors, knowledges, and artistic productions in a secondary realm in relation to the canons that cultural and artistic institutions have created. And this has been the case for centuries: a misogynistic prejudice runs all through the history of Western philosophy and art and has determined the silencing of so many other forms of relating to life that would have rendered the premises of, for example, institutional critique radically conservative and opportunistic towards the old order—as indeed they are.

While it would be wrong to think that when one says "ocean," one is naming a "subject," we might be so radical as to posit that to say "ocean" is, today, to say "art"—art without the burden of institutional life, without the ideological twists of cultural politics, art as a practice that belongs to artists, art facing the urgency of socializing with all who care about life. In other words, to say "ocean" is to replace the historical notion of the avant-garde with a code that is not determined by form and the invention of new gestures, but by an investigation of the substance of life, identifying this as the mission of art.

This would imply that all those artists directly interested in life underwater, in nature, in new forms of sensing from nonhuman-centered perspectives, are "in." But it also means that all those not directly interested in thinking along these lines—who do not identify the intelligence of art as lying in its radical interest in life—are even more important than those who are. Think about the

current situation of all the structures constituting the art world; about the impoverishment of a language inherited from past left and liberal social visions, and the impossibility of reinventing these dreams and their premises under a late-capitalistic economic system; and about the need for a new sensorium to invent new notions, to build new sentences, to embrace a new idea of equality and social justice. If we do, we can see that to say "ocean" is to say the expansion of museums, of public space … that the ocean is a source that reprograms our senses and contains a potential for transforming the future of architecture, of communications, of gender entanglement, of economy, of art.

The Teacher-Curator

At the end of 2017, I was invited by the TBA21–Academy to curate an oceanic expedition for their program "The Current," a series of three-year cycles organized around the state of the ocean. I was the third curator, preceded by Ute Meta Bauer, who successfully finished a three-year cycle, and César García-Álvarez, who did only one trip. For my cycle, the artist group SUPERFLEX and I were commissioned to curate three expeditions led by artists and scientists and three public gatherings the form of which would be defined by the person or collective in charge. The crucial part of this initiative and its programs was the problems it posed to curatorial practice and to my own individual work as a curator within an art institute.

The invitation not only provided me with an opportunity to see curatorial practice in a "new light" or an "expanded" field, but forced me to reimagine the whole question of the future of curatorial practice. Am I still a curator if I direct an art school but do not program exhibitions in a

consecutive and publicly accessible manner? Is the title "curator" needed for an organizer of expeditions that take their name from the old habit of exploring territories to enhance not only knowledge but also frontiers and possessions? Will there be a role for curators—as well-trained mediators—in a world where seeing is not only a human or animal trait but a technological threat?

Our field—as curators—is constituted by the questions we can ask.

When I moved to an art school, I was motivated by several inquiries. A very simple one: How are art schools to become part of the art institutions that nourish our social space through artistic and speculative production? Why has our view of art schools been so reductive? If they contribute to the development of artists and thus art, they should also actively participate in forming the field of attention and study around nature and around the questions about the future of race and gender that are so crucial to the future art practice. What does the term "education" include today? If education is the key to curing all our social ills—from doubts about the reality of climate change to gender and racial inequality—then why don't countries, private foundations, and all the forces in favor of a free and democratic society unite to create educational programs capable of responding to this?

Never has a term said so little. From literacy to digital skills, "education" names basic requirements to be part of a system, but it lacks the force of an approach to thinking that can tackle the biggest challenges we will face. No one seems to be ready to gather the many parties

—contemporary art included—that are searching for new modes of communication and pedagogical systems, for a collaborative effort towards bringing younger generations and populations with less access to art to experiences that would help them renegotiate their relationship to nature and formulate new knowledge.

Few people saw how my plan to introduce into the curricula of an art institute ways of rethinking nature, race, and gender could contribute—modestly, but steadily—to a transformation of a field otherwise bound to the processes of exhibition and the market. Moreover, as a woman my move towards education was perceived as a retreat to something minor—perhaps important in principle, but incapable of having the same impact as art spaces or galleries. Once the hype of education as a twist in exhibition-making—as reported by numerous articles in art magazines—had passed, the reality of art education returned to the way we knew it from the past. There seemed to be a big difference, as well, between an art school directed by a man and one directed by a woman, a difference that negatively affected the ambitions I had. When run by men, the schools are seen as still possessing some of the charm of the avant-garde heroic gesture of advocating for a free space, which resonates with radical politics. However, the very moment a woman was in charge, questions about teaching—versus curating—began raining down upon me. But if we once proposed the idea that artists can curate, surely today we should propose the idea that teachers can curate? What are the kinds of methods, exhibitions, and public exchanges this would generate? In post-liberal Western societies, we face a recurrent problem of failing to identify women—and all minorities—as capable of producing a meaningful and strong public sphere, and this affects and distorts the perception of what is possible in the future of our art and cultural systems. So the idea that teachers can curate makes sense. Teachers, understood as

practitioners of *paideia* (the rearing of citizens), aim to cultivate a closeness, an insight into a subject that helps each individual communicate their experience and therefore create a sensing system that goes hand-in-hand with a language to convey it, to make it communicable.

So, let's embrace the imbalance and all the imbalances that are needed to create new balance. Anyhow, the teacher-as-curator is nothing new. We accept the expert, the magician, the shaman, the leader, the CEO, the collective as curators, yet we seem to have a problem with curation by the harmless teacher or the person in charge of creating a bond with a group of young people.

One of my favorite examples of this exercise of turning everything into a classroom, then into an exhibition, was performed by a schoolteacher: Raphael Montáñez Ortiz. He worked in a public and very poor primary school in Harlem, New York City. He was asked by the parents of his students to create a method to convey their experience of being Caribbean and African—mostly of Puerto Rican descent—to their children, who were in an educational system that taught them in English and in a culture very different from their own. It was this teacher-curator who founded El Museo del Barrio, a museum that miraculously appeared in the classroom to perform the many operations of explaining, demonstrating, and translating cultural realities that were very far from the city.

In my short, but very intense, time at El Museo del Barrio, I had the great pleasure of talking to Raphael and many other artists of his generation about the challenges of conveying diasporic culture to children, such as introducing them to "the sound of the *coquí* frog." At the time, I did

not understand the meaning of this statement, and so I underestimated it, or perhaps more precisely, categorized it as a beautiful metaphor. But it was meant literally. The *coquí* gets its name from its mating song. The male of the species sings "coquí, coquí." For Puerto Ricans in the US, missing the sound of this song is one manifestation of the enormous pain that colonial processes of the past and present have created. Their exile is perceived as migration, and they have a political status that neither allows them to arrive at full citizenship, nor fully retreat into their native land and its symbols.

Raphael represents a specific paradigm in a theory of the teacher-curator that I want to put forward.[2]

He embodies a model that is helpful for understanding what this teaching-curating function may mean. In the late 1960s he was highly involved, alongside Gustav Metzger, in the question of destruction—a question that he never truly abandoned in his practice as an artist. In the 1970s, with the publication of his *Physio-Psycho-Alchemy*, he revitalized his research on behavior and creation. He very soon—at least in his thinking—identified in the myth of destruction the question of a potential new and authentic origin. One of the most interesting traits of his thinking is how it surpasses radical individualism, seeking profound political responsibility. His teaching was not understood—not even by himself—as part of his artistic and curatorial practice. And yet I would claim that his study of Mesoamerican rituals and of all kinds of therapies that allow one to be "born again" were part of a long research practice that worked to propose a vision of how

[2] Before I proceed, I would like the reader to set aside all prejudices against the word "teaching," as well as against the possible roles a teacher may have. Those prejudices are key to understanding the radicality of what these artists did and the potential of what I would love to describe as a proposal for the future of contemporary-art culture.

to deal with all we are not: how to deal with knowledge if we don't have it, how to deal with whiteness if you are not white, how to deal with feminine sensing if you are male, how to deal with wealth if you are not rich … how to deal with all these dualities if you don't want to be bound by any of them, and how all these poles and dialectical systems affect our ability to confront complex racial, cultural, and economic realities.

Like Ortiz and many artists of his generation, it is imperative now to learn to situate behavior inside art practice, inside artistic production, and to become aware of the *how*, observing not only the language we use to address problems, but also the conditions we create to allow for different experiences of volumes, symbols, images, power, connections, media, and so on. So doing holds the key to understanding the future of a practice of mediation that can be identified with the teacher-curator, and with all the hyper-pedagogical resources we may need to invent.

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