Ed Ruscha. Actual Size. *1962. © Ed Ruscha.*

HITO STEYERL

There is hardly a more famous watercolor than Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus.* Walter Benjamin described its figure as a hapless creature, helplessly carried away by the storm of progress, while staring backward at the ever-growing rubble heap of history.[1] Benjamin's aphorism is well known and quite overquoted, but it has a surprising consequence if we take its spatial arrangement seriously.

For there is no rubble depicted in the drawing. This doesn't mean, however, there is no rubble at all. Since the angel faces us as spectators, and—according to Benjamin—also faces the rubble, the wreckage must be located in the *hors-champ* of the drawing. The rubble is in our place. Or, to take it one step further: we, the spectators, might actually be the rubble. We might be the debris of history, those who somehow made it intact but not unscathed through the twentieth century. We have become discarded objects and useless commodities caught in the gaze of a shell-shocked angel who drags us along as it is blown into incertitude.

Yet the debris caught in the angel's stare might take on a different form today. Are rubble and wreckage not outdated notions for an age in which information can be copied supposedly without loss and is infinitely retrievable and restorable? What would refuse look like in a digital age that prides itself on the indestructibility and seamless reproducibility of its products, an age in which information presumably has become immune to the passing of time? Aren't the scars of history signs of an analog age, one which is irrevocably over? Hasn't history itself been worn out?

No: history is not over. Its wreckage keeps on piling sky high. Moreover, digital technologies provide additional possibilities for the creative wrecking and degradation of almost anything. They multiply options for destruction, corruption, and debasement. They are great new tools for producing, cloning, and copying historical debris. Amplified by political and social violence, digital technologies have become not only midwives of history but also its (plastic) surgeons.

Despite its apparently immaterial nature, digital wreckage remains firmly anchored within material reality. One of its contemporary manifestations is the

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1.   Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflection*s, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 257–58.

toxic recycling city of Guiyu in China, where mainboards and hard disks are being scavenged and groundwater is poisoned. In the digital age, debris is composed not only of destroyed buildings, torn concrete, and decaying steel, although digital-ized warfare, the computerization of production, and real-estate speculation produce these items in abundance. Digital wreckage is both material and immaterial; it is data-based debris with a tangible physical component.

There is hardly any better example of such digital debris than spam.[2] Far from being the exception in online communication, spam is actually the rule. Around 80% of today's email messages are spam. It forms the bulk of digital writing, its essence. And it, too, has a firm grasp on reality. Far from being secondary and accidental, spam is a substantial expression of a period that has elevated superfluity into one of its guiding principles.

To complete Benjamin's spatial equation: if the angel looks at us, we must be rubble. And if at present rubble means spam, this is the label that the angel bestows on us today.

You Shall Be Spam

"*Pharmacy 81% Replica 5.40% Enhancers 2.30% Phishing 2.30% Degrees 1.30% Casino 1% Weight Loss 0.40% Other 6.30%* "[3]

The contemporary use of the term "spam" for unwanted electronic bulk communication takes its cue from an appearance in a *Monty Python's Flying Circus* sketch from 1970. This act is set in a café, where two customers ask for the breakfast menu:

All the customers are Vikings. Mr. and Mrs. Bun enter downwards (on wires).

MAN: Morning.
WAITRESS: Morning.
MAN: Well, what you got?
WAITRESS: Well, there's egg and bacon; egg, sausage, and bacon; egg and Spam; egg, bacon, and Spam; egg, bacon, sausage, and Spam; Spam, bacon, sausage, and Spam; Spam, egg, Spam, Spam, bacon, and Spam; Spam, sausage, Spam, Spam, Spam, bacon, Spam, tomato, and Spam; Spam, Spam, Spam, egg, and Spam; (*Vikings start singing in background*) Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, baked beans, Spam, Spam, Spam, and Spam.

2.   Thanks to Imri Kahn for drawing my attention to this subject. A very helpful text on Spam is Finn Brunton, "Roar So Wildly: Spam, Technology and Language," *Radical Philosophy* 164 (November/December 2010), pp. 2–8, http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2187&editorial_id=29275 (accessed June 6, 2011).
3.   "Commtouch Online Security Center," http://www.commtouch.com/Site/ResearchLab/statistics.asp (last modified June 3, 2011).

VIKINGS: Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, lovely Spam, lovely Spam.
WAITRESS (cont.): or lobster Thermidor aux crevettes with a Mornay sauce, garnished with truffle pâté, brandy, and with a fried egg on top, and Spam.
WIFE: Have you got anything without Spam?
WAITRESS: Well, there's Spam, egg, sausage, and Spam. That's not got much Spam in it. . . .
WIFE: I don't want any Spam!
MAN: Shh, dear, don't cause a fuss. I'll have your Spam. I love it. I'm having Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, baked beans, Spam.
WAITRESS: Baked beans are off.[4]

Monty Python's sketch is the story of a conquest: Spam—the canned food—slowly but decisively invades every item on the menu as well as the whole dialogue, until there is nothing left but Spam, Spam, and Spam. This process is celebrated by a band of Vikings and other incongruous participants. Spam inundates the plot and even the final credits at the end of the show. It's a triumph by repetition, as cheerful as it is overwhelming.

In this act, "Spam" initially refers to the canned meat of the same name. But this meaning is stretched to emphasize verbal reiteration and the uncontrolled replication of the term itself. It is this second meaning that came to be prominent in the realm of newly emergent online practices.

In the 1980s, the term "spam" was literally used as a type of invasion within MUD (multi-user dungeon) environments: people would type the word repeatedly so as to scroll other people's text offscreen. Content didn't matter; bulk did. The word "spam" turned into an tangible material, capable of physically blocking out unwanted information.

> Sending an irritating, large, meaningless block of text in this way was called *spamming*. This was used as a tactic by insiders of a group that wanted to drive newcomers out of the room so the usual conversation could continue. It was also used to prevent members of rival groups from chatting . . . for instance, *Star Wars* fans often invaded *Star Trek* chat rooms, filling the space with blocks of text until the *Star Trek* fans left. This act, previously called *flooding* or *trashing*, came to be known as *spamming*.[5]

Spamming thus emerged as an online activity bent on displacing someone or something through verbal repetition. Words were used as extensive objects, which

4.   For a not totally accurate transcript of the dialogue in the sketch, see "The Infamous Monty Pythons Spam Skit," www.detritus.org/spam/skit.html (accessed June 3, 2011).
5.   Myshele Goldberg, "The Origins of Spam" (2004), http://www.myshelegoldberg.com/words/item/the-origins-of-spam. "When the *Star Wars* fans got tired of intelligent debate or angry arguments, they went back to their 'spam and tang' logic. 'Whatever,' they would write, '*Star Trek* is just about spam and tang.' Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang Spam and tang. They would copy the same message dozens, hundreds of times, filling up every line in the chatroom so nobody else could type."

had the potential to push away other words. Nowadays, spam has become more of a commercial calculus. Bulk email messages with commercial or fraudulent intent[6] flood data connections worldwide and cause substantial economic damage by wasting time and effort. Even though the number of customers acquired through this process is extremely small, it is still a viable business. Needless to say, effortless technological reproduction forms the economic framework of this venture. Spamming is the pointless repetition of something worthless and annoying, over and over again, to extract a tiny spark of value lying dormant within audiences.

Artificial Meat

But apart from these very obvious observations, what other conclusions can we draw? What else does spam as a chunk of contemporary digital rubble tell us about the present? Let's have a closer look.

Before "spam" the word became spam the object, it was, of course, an object already, the item celebrated by the Monty Python's Flying Circus number: the famous brand of canned meat produced by Hormel Foods Corporation. Its dubious composition has earned it many nicknames, ranging from "Specially Processed American Meats" to "Supply Pressed American Meat," "Something Posing As Meat," "Stuff, Pork and Ham," and "Spare Parts Animal Meat." Its elements look extremely suspicious; its essence is ersatz. And its cheapness is why it was included in many dishes in the postwar period, perhaps even too many, as Monty Python's sketch seems to suggest:

> WAITRESS: Well, there's egg and bacon; egg, sausage and bacon; egg and Spam; egg, bacon and Spam; egg, bacon, sausage and Spam; Spam, bacon, sausage and Spam; Spam, egg, Spam, Spam, bacon and Spam; Spam, sausage, Spam, Spam, Spam, bacon, Spam, tomato and Spam; Spam, Spam, Spam, egg and Spam; (*Vikings start singing in background*) Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, baked beans, Spam, Spam, Spam and Spam.
> VIKINGS: Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, lovely Spam, lovely Spam.
> WAITRESS: . . . Spam Spam Spam egg and Spam; Spam Spam Spam Spam Spam Spam baked beans Spam Spam Spam . . .
> VIKINGS: Spam! Lovely Spam! Lovely Spam!

Spam was, and still is, a cheap lower-class and army-food staple. It presents an uncanny mix between the natural and synthetic. Both organic and deeply inauthentic, it is an industrial product with some remnants of nature. Meat that has been ground so rigorously that is has leaped perhaps into another type of

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6.   One of the most interesting examples in this context is the sale of an edition of Andy Warhol's nonexistent work *Spam* in an online auction at http://us.ebid.net/for-sale/reproduction-24x30-andy-warhol-spam-18697408.htm (accessed June 3, 2011).

existence: a deeply phony foodstuff nutritious enough to enable military invasions and sheer subsistence.

Precisely its composite nature makes "spam" an interesting term to consider in political theory, especially within the discussion of biopolitics. For Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, flesh is a metaphor for a body not inhibited by social or any other restrictions. Hardt and Negri euphorically describe flesh as "pure potentiality" oriented toward "fullness," inhabited by angels and demons,[7] as well as bristling with a new barbarian counterpower.[8] Seen as an incarnation of vitality, flesh is imbued with religious and even messianic discourse about redemption and liberation.[9] It is a post-Nietzschean repository of pure positivity.

In contrast to the heroic description of living flesh, Spam is just humble hybrid meat. It lacks the pompous attributes of flesh. It is modest and cheap, made of bits and pieces, which may be recycled and are staunchly inanimate. It is meat as commodity, and an affordable one at that. But this doesn't mean that it should be underestimated. For Spam addresses the hybridized commodity aspect of forms of existence that span humans and machines, subjects and objects alike. It refers to objectified lives as well as to biological objects. As such, it may speak more of actual conditions of contemporary existence than can purely biological terms.

Spam has been through the meat grinder of industrial production. This is why its fabrication resonates with the industrial (or postindustrial) generation of populations worldwide, who also endured the mincer of repeated primordial accumulation. Cycles of debt bondage, subsequent exodus, draft into industrial labor, and repeated rejection from it have forced people back into subsistence farming, only to reemerge from tiny fields as post-Fordist service workers. Like their electronic spam message counterparts, these crowds form the vast majority of their kind but are considered superfluous, annoying, and redundant. They are also assumed to replicate uncontrollably. These populations are spam, not flesh; made of a material that has been ground for generations by a never-ending onslaught of capital and repackaged in ever new, increasingly hybrid, and object-like forms.

Electronic spam highlights the speculative dimension of these bodies. It is painfully obvious that most products marketed via e-spam are supposed to enhance bodily appearance, performance, and/or health. Email spam is a format that attempts to act on bodies: by cashing in on role models of uniformly drugged, enhanced, super-slim, super-active, and super-horny people[10] wearing replica

7.   Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "Globalization and Democracy," in *Reflections on Empire*, ed. Antonio Negri and Ed Emery (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), pp. 79–113.
8.   Ibid., p. 94.
9.   Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as a Parable of Human Labor*, trans. Matteo Mandarini (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 72.
10.   Ellen Messmer, "Experts Link Flood of 'Canadian Pharmacy' Spam to Russian Botnet Criminals," *Network World* (July 16, 2009), http://www.networkworld.com/news/2009/071609-canadian-pharmacy-spam.html (accessed June 3, 2011). "In this case, 'Canadian Pharmacy,' hyping itself as 'the #1 Internet Online Drugstore,' is neither Canadian nor a pharmacy. In fact, 'Canadian Pharmacy' doesn't appear to exist as an established Web site but only a shifting hyperlink in a spam message generated by about eight crime botnets."

watches so as to be on time for their service jobs. More than 65% of email spam pushes anti-depressants and Viagra—or rather rip-off pills boasting the same effects—thus selling fantasies of perfectly exploitable bodies; coveted production tools for superfluous crowds. Both forms of spam are post-carnal: they deal with the production of enhanced, altered, artificial, processed, upgraded as well as degraded forms of flesh.

But Spam is not without its own counterpower. In Ed Ruscha's admirable 1962 painting *Actual Size*, a resplendent Spam can is caught flying in a downward trajectory. A glowing trail makes it look like a crossover between a comet and a Molotov cocktail, Spam as a solid object, airborne, combustible, and imbued with kinetic power. Spam tins can be hurled into bank windows. They are sturdy and resilient.

In some cases, culinary applications of Spam also manage to overturn its relations with warfare and deprivation. One example is the Hawaiian use of Spam as a delicacy. Spam became popular during World War II when Japanese were banned from fishing. Thus "Spam became an important source of protein for locals."[11] But far from remaining a hallmark of scarcity, it was redeployed as an ingredient for inventive dishes like Spamakopita, Spam Musubi, Spam Katsu, Spam loco moco, Spam fusion fajitas, Spam somen, Spam chutney, Spam Mahi Carbonara, and Spamaroni and Cheese. Similar interpretations of Spam exist in Korea, where Spam spread after being imported by the U.S. military. The German version is called döner kebab,[12] an extremely popular form of orientalist roast Spam impaled on supersized skewers. This dish was invented by downsized Turkish migrant workers in the '70s. Since then it has become Germany's unofficial national dish. These uses of Spam highlight the composition of the constituency of its consumers and (sometimes) improve its appeal to the senses.

But even electronic spam has unexpected affinities to social composition. Indeed, it was initially explicitly defined as a *res publica*, a public thing. One of the first spam filters developed was based on the quite unlikely finding that any email containing the word "republic" would almost invariably end up being spam. (The other dubious keywords being, interestingly, "madam" and "guarantee.")[13]

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11.   Michael F. Nenes, "Cuisine of Hawaii," in *American Regional Cuisine* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2007), p. 479.

12.   In contrast to pan-Ottoman versions of the dish, the German rendition is generally made of preproduced Spam cones. Eberhard Seidel-Pielen, *Aufgespießt—Wie der Döner über die Deutschen kam* (Rotbuch: Hamburg, 1996), p. 47. Seidel-Pielen claims that the decline of Fordist production systems in German car industries forced many industrial migrant workers to become small entrepreneurs and open snack bars, thus paving the way for Germany's only important culinary innovation in the twentieth century. Döner kebab is supposedly made from many official and unofficial components including cookies, sperm, dog food, and salmonella. He also recounts how young German neo-Nazis would come running to the döner stands even while arsoning migrant workers' hostels during the early '90s post-unification purification campaigns, showing the Hitler salute with one hand and clutching their döner with the other. Alan Posener, "Auch Deutschland dreht sich um den Döner," *Welt Online* (May 30, 2005), www.welt.de/die-welt/article3831396/Auch-Deutschland-dreht-sich-um-den-Doener.html (accessed June 3, 2011).

13.   Brunton, p. 4.

Spam—in its different versions—is thus resolutely public. It is always made from several sources: things and bodies, letters, metals, colors, and proteins alike. Its element is commonality; a mix of components animate and inanimate, as impure as one could possibly imagine.

Spam transforms words into carnal objects, as in Ruscha's painting. This incarnation goes way beyond its religious precedents, though. Let's face it: the incarnation of words today mostly takes the form of spam, spam, and spam.

History

But spam is not only a passive substance, endowed with the power of blocking and crowding. It also brings about very different forms of social organization. It changes the ways in which a group of people is structured and organized in interaction. In Monty Python's sketch, Spam becomes a pivotal term that points not only at a change in the paradigm of labor but also, perhaps, in the form of history itself.

An insert at the very end of the sketch shows a history teacher sitting in a classroom and detailing the invasions of the Vikings:

SUPERIMPOSED CAPTION: "A HISTORIAN"

HISTORIAN: Another great Viking victory was at the Green Midget café at Bromley. Once again the Viking strategy was the same. They sailed from these fjords here *(indicating a map with arrows on it),* assembled at Trondheim, and waited for the strong northeasterly winds to blow their oaken galleys to England whence they sailed on May 23rd. Once in Bromley they assembled in the Green Midget café and Spam selecting a Spam particular Spam item from the Spam menu would Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam . . . . *The backdrop behind him rises to reveal the café again, the Vikings start singing again, and the historian conducts them.*

This unassuming scene demonstrates how the representation of history itself is transformed by the invasion of Spam. Initially, the historian gives an authoritative classroom-style account of events from a slightly elevated position and with a backdrop of maps.

But as Spam starts to flood the dialogue, the wall behind the historian is revealed to be a stage curtain. As the skit continues, the curtain is lifted, and the initial café setting reappears behind it.

The historian then produces a conductor's baton and joins in the wild celebratory Spam chorus. First he appears to direct this cacophony, but he gives up on mastery and breaks the baton in two.
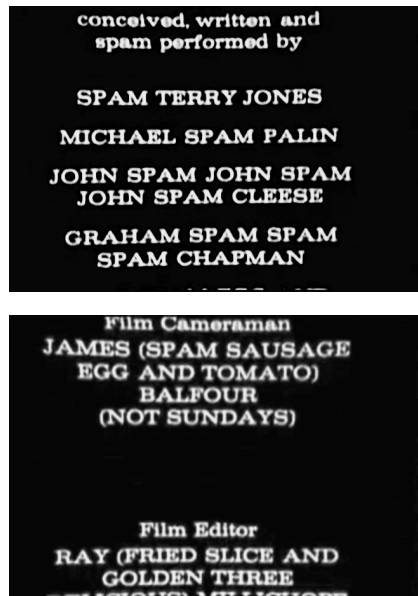

Two different modes of address are presented in this short sketch: first, the historian addresses the spectators as if inside a classroom. After the change of scenery the frontal address is abandoned, and our point of view is transformed into a mixture of a customer's and an audience's perspective. While the first mode of address presents a slightly authoritarian educational model, the second is clearly adjusted to a situation of service as performance or performance as service. This shift is catalyzed by the renewed invasion of Spam into the dialogue. Spam

expels the authoritative address and introduces a mode based on service and spectacle, sustained by customers suspended in midair.

The form of temporality inherent in the scene shifts as well: whereas in the beginning there is a clear narrative of invasion and progress, after the curtain lifts there is just the pure spectacle of incongruous, unsynchronized, profoundly multicultural, and salacious performative services. A joint celebration, which has no conductor, leader, or avant-garde, emerges spontaneously.

Spam's takeover transforms a pseudo-scientific account of history (and its "progress") into a performative chaos, in which actors, consumers, Spam, and service workers become indistinguishable. The linear and teleological progression of history, complete with its narration by academic administrators, is disrupted. The unity created by the frontal address of the classroom is gone. The mood shifts from education to celebration.

But the public composition of Spam is not merely about fun and merriment; it penetrates the framework of the production of spectacle, as the final credits, which start rolling immediately after this scene, demonstrate. Spam infiltrates job titles and names of producers and technicians. Exclamations from the service sector are interspersed: "not Sundays/Spam's off, dear." It's not as if Spam has erased labor; rather Spam has erased class by penetrating and invading labor and laborers alike.

conceived, written and
spam performed by

SPAM TERRY JONES

MICHAEL SPAM PALIN

JOHN SPAM JOHN SPAM
JOHN SPAM CLEESE

GRAHAM SPAM SPAM
SPAM CHAPMAN

Film Cameraman
JAMES (SPAM SAUSAGE
EGG AND TOMATO)
BALFOUR
(NOT SUNDAYS)

Film Editor
RAY (FRIED SLICE AND
GOLDEN THREE

Spam is thus given both as the description of labor and its performers. It is an activity, a subject, and an object, as well as an uncontrollably multiplying word that describes all of the former. People clearly are being included into the world of Spam and turned into potentially edible matter. Words are incarnated as

objects, and vice versa. And the only slogan that rallies the chaotic Spam and service work/workers is given in the final titles of the sketch:
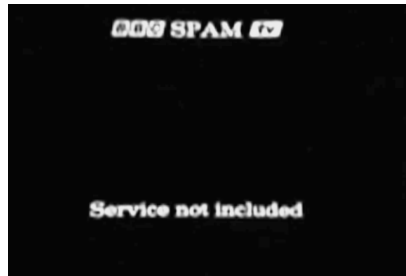
Service Not Included

This slogan is the inherent promise of Spam. While Hardt and Negri rave about the angelic potential of flesh and its relentless release of desire, the promise of spam is much more prosaic: "service not included" means simply that service should not be free. Even in the digital age, service cannot be reproduced indefinitely. At present, however, the line "service not included" is not a description but a claim that waits to be realized. In the world of service as performance (and performance as service), labor seems to be abundantly free; as if it too could be copy-pasted and duplicated digitally.

Of course, little of this issue is reflected in the piles of repetitive spam matter that clogs mail accounts and data lines worldwide. But why not see its material excess as anticipation of a time when the spam incarnated in service and spectacle workers, as well as in everybody else considered superfluous and dispensable, starts to speak and utters the slogan: service not included? Contemporary electronic spam tries to extract an improbable spark of value from an inattentive crowd by means of inundation. But to become spam—that is, to fully identify with its unrealized promise—means to spark an improbable element of commonality between different forms of existence, to become a public thing, a cheerful incarnation of data-based wreckage.

There is one question left to explore: how does Monty Python's sketch actualize a different form of history? At first glance the question might have been answered by the transformed behavior of the historian who gives up his vantage point of authority to wholeheartedly participate in the creation of chaos. But there is another aspect, too.

Lets return to Klee's painting. There is another mystery in this painting: the angel averts its gaze just slightly; it doesn't look at us straight on.

Is it perhaps distracted by something happening behind it? Could it have been caught at the very moment when the uniform background behind it starts lifting upwards, revealing itself as a stage curtain? Is it about to turn around to join in with a new scene instead of being torn between mourning past demise and a violently displaced future? And what will it order from the breakfast menu?