

The **SUBLIME**
IS NOW ?

Living in pre-period conditions

A dialogue between Charles Esche and Dmitry Vilensky

DV: I wanted to ask a few questions in relation to our newspaper issue which we are calling "The Sublime Is Now?" The urgency of this discussion emerges from the possibility and need to question once again the category of the sublime and its relevance to the political practice of art and activism today. Also in this issue we want to test the old forgotten trend in the traditional Soviet interpretation of the sublime that was focused not on the Kantian relation to nature but instead emphasized the fact that nothing can be more sublime than the people's struggle for liberation. It also had a connotation of danger: it was delightful, yet horrible. At the same time people believed that art and human consciousness are capable of tangibly representing such sublime struggle. Also it is important for me that this Soviet aesthetic tradition was based on figuration and narrative; it actually shared a general modernist pathos in representing a sublime event while denying the mystical and esoteric qualities, which are so obvious in the best examples of abstraction and minimalism. And of course all these issues are very much related to the question of revolutionary romanticism's actuality in relation to the current situation of the global struggle for democracy.

But here I want to make a small twist and take as a point of departure for our talk the link between these issues and how they might be related to the speculation that postmodernity is over. Has it really become irrelevant? If we have indeed overcome postmodernity, how exactly did this happen when no consistent attempt was made to forge a new relation between aesthetics and politics (which shape any ethical system), one that could desire the Ideal (Absolute) and Truth as the old categories of the Beautiful and the Sublime once did?

CE: I think the postmodern was simply a misnomer because it continued to privilege modernity and therefore a hyper-EuroAmerican centrism. Postmodernity was formulated as depending on a reconsideration of modernity, assuming that it is necessary but insufficient. At some point it was inevitably going to become unfashionable because it could not transcend itself and claim some positive capacity. Nevertheless, it stands for changes that did happen: the invention of the internet, the construction of neoliberalism, the fall of existing socialism, the shift to a politics of affect and attention. All these things are with us, but there is much more involved in our current historical phase. Postmodernism was used as a transitory notion.

DV: Transitory - but to what?

CE: To the situation in which we are beginning to find ourselves now. If some of the conditions today are not so different from those described by Jameson, for instance, it no longer feels that his analysis is predictive. The term is no longer adequate to describe events and movements which are no longer dependent on modernity and which move beyond postmodernity itself. What I mean is that we should start to describe our situation as in some sense a pre-period. I do not yet have a word for this, but I think many of us feel we are on the cusp of a paradigmatic shift, certainly in the position of EuroAmerica within the world, but also in terms of our collective relation to the state.

DV: Yes, one of the weaknesses of leftist analysis recently has been the lack of discussion about the state and what sort of relationship might be possible with it.

CE: Yes, I find it difficult to separate private and public interests or desires in Western Europe. CEOs and top politicians swap jobs with alacrity and often without any intervening election. This is a shift in what the state is today, and it covers economic and military power, but it is equally a cultural and social phenomenon. Postmodernity is similar to post-socialism or post-communism, it defines itself in relation to a positive notion of statehood and state power and frames everything in terms of that past, questioning the extent to which it can be reconstructed. I want to think outside modernity's silos, like the public-private distinction, even though they are deeply part of my history and I am not sure I can escape them. Maybe our condition could be more accurately described as "post-medieval", in which the state was a very different animal. This would also bring us back to your ideas of romanticism.

DV: In his book, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fred Jameson made a very poignant comment on the so-called "end of history." For him what was ending was the expansion of capitalism. Globalization had exhausted the limits of our planet. What interested him was the paradox that no one, not even the biggest apologists, claimed that neoliberalism was a perfect system. It was always considered something imperfect, but realistic. My hypothesis is that the introduction of postmodernity coincides almost perfectly with the introduction of neoliberalism and that it also brought about a symbolic break. What was the link that formed between art, the absolute and truth? Human beings have always had the capacity

to imagine things outside their reality. With postmodernism this imaginative capacity was blocked - so what do we have left? I believe that to break away from postmodernism we should dialectically embrace the very contradictory unity between the beautiful and the sublime, while problematizing its links to the absolute and truth. Throughout the 20th century all these concepts have been seriously questioned, and by the Left first of all. I believe that today we must reclaim them because, in my view, we will never be able to imagine another way of running things without conscious and passionate appeal to the Ideal.

CE: It occurs to me that what ended was not history, but the arrow of history driven by modernity. In pre-modern societies time was circular, dynamic and repetitive. Modernity introduced the arrow of time, a belief that had consequences in the real world, giving rise to speculation that the world might get better. This end is what we call neoliberalism - a kind of weak cynicism and abandonment of ambition beyond self-satisfaction. I think reconnecting to truth rather than progress might be an interesting way of circumventing modernity now.

DV: Of course, and here we arrive at the critique of the notion of progress that began with revolutionary romanticism. There is a need to reflect hard on this period at this juncture. During those times, people experienced the brutality of industrialization and as a consequence they looked back towards pre-capitalist subjectivities, albeit in a naive way. Take for example, William Morris who led the Arts and Crafts Movement. But today could offer another interesting twist that we should consider - a way out of today's progressivist logic could be found through addressing and actualizing experiences from the histories of real socialist experiments of the past.

CE: What is really interesting to me is what we can do with the end of progress. It has been a hugely important device to ensure both the collapse of the left and the hegemony of cynical pragmatism in the guise of neoliberalism. Yet we cannot restart progress... maybe we can restart a quest for truth, as that is indeed post-medieval. If we are cut off from the notion that the truth is somehow attainable, then we fall back on pragmatism. So then the question becomes how to base relationships on ideas of positive change and emancipatory goals that do not simply become homeopathic cures for neoliberalism? This might well have a connection to truth and to a romantic idealism. What has come through recently are quite radical attempts to restart democratic processes that have become ossified within the sick structures of the nation state. What I think is happening now in Gezi Park, or in Brazil or Greece are people bodily experiencing what it means to live in a different kind of democracy, and how that can be expressed outside of any parliamentary conditions or party. We don't know what this kind of democracy feels like, and we can't imagine it because, as you say, neoliberalism forbids imagination. Yet, through their movements, encounters, shared moments, a 'pre-period' is emerging, even though their participants don't have a program or manifesto written down. People are learning to move differently again, to talk in ways that are different from the traditional trade union organizing, social democratic parties, communist parties, nation states. You could say these movements are a-modern, but I would not want to ascribe them to postmodernity. In Gezi Park what happened was that suddenly there was a sense of responsibility and care towards the individual and the group, a self-organizing impulse, because the state was no longer present. However romantic this may sound, at least temporarily people felt an urge to take responsibility into their own hands. In these moments people learned a different kind of democratic behavior, which doesn't rely on a representative notion in which you hand over all responsibility to a corrupt politician. I think that this is a very exciting moment, one in which I see the potential for the beautiful to be materialized perhaps.

DV: Here in Russia we also had Occupy Abay. In parks and on boulevards in Moscow people reconstructed the occupation model, including sleep-ins, talks, seminars. People here also felt that amazing inspiration which you talked about, but I see a limit to this movement. I remember what happened in Soviet times when people built camps outside of the cities, played guitars, respected nature, felt like being part of sisterhood and brotherhood, and all that was a form of withdrawing from society. So for me this is just the first step in the building of a new politicized consciousness.

CE: I don't think what we are seeing now is this hippie type of revolution which you allude to. It is happening in disputed public spaces, not in the countryside for a start. And I do not think it is without self-consciousness in the way hippies sometimes appeared to be. They are not only dealing with the 'policeman in their head' but with real ones on the street. I don't think the current social movements are a withdrawal from the political but the discovery of a new location for the political and perhaps a new politics that does not fit our models.

What does a revolution look like today? I don't know but I am sure it is not about storming the Winter Palace any more.

DV: For me withdrawal from the political is not about hippies, but it represents a stubborn refusal and inability to problematize representation. During the Bolshevik revolution a very strong system of soviet councils was formed, and it functioned as an amazing dialectical structure that combined professional and non-professional groups, representation and participation. While it remained an experimental body, people understood that they needed to build true democratic principles of representation and participation. In my view, within the current social movements there is no consciousness about how to make even this first step.

CE: On the other hand, if we look at what is going on in Gezi Park right now, after the conflicts there emerged small networks where people are having precisely the kind of discussions that may lead to the formation of democratic representation. Also, technology affords us the possibility of doing away with representation at some levels. Think about the English Chartists demands from the 19th century. Only one was never enacted - annual general elections. Maybe the time has come to fulfill that condition too. And you are right, this is only a first step, but neoliberalism has been so successful in its hegemony that no entity, perhaps with the exception of North Korea and Cuba, can stand up to it. Now we have to rebuild that sense of resistance from scratch more or less.

DV: I agree, but for me the chain of Occupy movements was also a powerful materialization of an artistic project. It was participatory, aesthetically compelling; it had an educational aspect. Interestingly enough, the recent biennales and roundtables in which we participated in many ways predicted the forms of social and cultural organization of the Occupy movements.

CE: It shouldn't be surprising, and I think developments in culture are in many ways a good indicator of what will happen next. Take for instance, Caspar David Friedrich who anticipated the idea of the super-individual, or the birth of an individualist ethos, through a romantic image that predicts the level of postmodern individualization that happened 150 years later.

DV: Related to this, I also think that we should reclaim another temporality: because we now live in the temporality of the media where things are immediately swallowed up and then disappear from public attention.

CE: Indeed, there is the media attention span which usually has a 10-day limit, but there is also the share-holder temporality of the financial quarter, and there is the political temporality of the election cycle, which is five years. In art I believe we have a much longer cycle...

DV: For me the more important question is how to build an alternative system of value production, and what material base should it have? We understand how the market

is constructed, how media attention functions. But if we go deeper, the question is how to actually build a permanent and viable challenge to the hegemonic structures. There is also the question of value production inside the museums, and how to counter projects that are totally senseless and bad. I also think that at the micro-political level, we should consider and develop certain strategies that can work for different and bigger constituencies.

CE: Firstly, I think that the task we have before us is not determined by the hegemonic players, even though they grab the headlines. We need to build organizations slowly, even though they may collapse, and try to sustain each other. I think it is sustainable to have a plural-form, multi-personality type of collective like Chto Delat, and to use it as a tool that can be directed toward particular urgencies. The thing that we should hold on to, and maybe this is where a relation to the absolute or truth lies, is a set of ethical principles. The ethics of our praxis, of our negotiations with the world are what we should discuss. I am not talking about non-negotiable, naive ethics, but the ethics of a particular action or activity that is being carried out. If you want to attack those corrupt museums you referred to, then you should look at their ethics first, not at their aesthetics - anyone can do a good show or choose a good artist. I am sure that the Van Abbemuseum can be criticized on an ethical level, but I would be happy to stand up next to any other museum and say, here are our ethics, what are yours? That is a discussion we don't have often enough...

I believe thinking in terms of rigid, formal institutional structures, which would make something sustainable, is not the answer. I think that's a very modernist way of thinking. I am on the side of institutions that are sustainable as fluid ethical principles. Here I draw inspiration from El Lissitzky's practice: he was always trying to construct possibilities through art and he believed in the ethics of communism. I think that it is precisely at this juncture where the political can be found. If we look at what happened in Gezi Park, we can see that this event politicized the people in the classic communist tradition of getting involved in the struggle.

DV: In Russia on the other hand, the situation seems less optimistic: we experienced a similar situation after the last presidential elections, when the 6th of May protests happened. A few thousand people took part, even in bigger numbers than, for example, Occupy Wall Street. However, now I don't see any significant consequences on the level of oppositional structures emerging.

CE: Wait, Dima, wait! I believe we are now in a pre-time...we may have another dozen years to go before we will be in a revolutionary situation and we will have to be sharp to recognize what it looks like when it appears.

Charles Esche (born 1962, England) is a curator and writer. Since 2004, he has been Director of the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands. He is co-founder and co-editor of Afterall Journal and Afterall Books with Mark Lewis. He lives in Edinburgh and Amsterdam.

Dmitry Vilensky (born 1964) artist and cultural activist, co-founder of Chto Delat collective. His activity includes art projects, educational seminars, public campaigns, and ranges from video production to theater plays, graphic works to radio programs. He lives in St. Petersburg.



Taksim Square Tear Gas

a project by FREEE



Protest is Beautiful 2007, silk flower slogan-sculpture, photograph for solo exhibition 'Protest is Beautiful', 1000000mph Gallery, London.UK; Photograph by Cat Beech

1. Does the category of the sublime have any relevance to the political practice of art and activism today?

For us, the relationship between aesthetics and politics needs to be rethought in terms of the convergence of collective action and subjective judgement. 'Protest is Beautiful' calls for a less restricted conception of beauty in which we might think of protest as more beautiful than the recent revival of beauty in art. Also, it calls for a new aesthetic of politics in which the most apparently ugly form of politics (riots, mobs, occupy etc) are seen as more beautiful than order, comfort and harmony.

We argued in our 'Manifesto for a New Public' that social groups should be judged on the kind of individuals they nurture, and every individual accomplishment should be credited to the social forces that made them possible. So, rather than making aesthetics a politics in itself, or politicising aesthetics, or giving a political reading of aesthetics, we want to construct a montage of politics and aesthetics that creates a third possibility that is material, collective and utopian.

Antonio Negri Letter to Giorgio on the Sublime

7th December 1988

Dear Giorgio,

So, the postmodern is the market. On our part, we take the modern for what it is - a destiny of dejection - and [we regard] the postmodern as its abstract and strong limit - the only world possible today. I can never thank you enough for having reminded me of this - the solid reality of this empty world, this endless succession of forms which are no less real for being phantasmatic. A world of phantasms, but true. The difference between reactionaries and revolutionaries consists in this: the former deny the massive ontological vacuity of the world, while the latter affirm it. The former thus operate in rhetoric, the latter in ontology. The former keep quiet about the void, the latter suffer it. The former reduce the stage of the world to an aesthetic trinket, the latter apprehend it practically. Consequently only revolutionaries can practise a critique of the world, because they have a true relationship with being. Because they recognize that it is we who have made this world, inhuman as it is. Because its lack of meaning is our lack of meaning, and its vacuity is our vacuity. Only that? The limit is never just a limit - it is also an obstacle. The limit determines a terrible anguish, a ferocious fear - but it is there, in the radical nature of the anguish, that the limit is experienced as a possibility of going beyond. As an obstacle to be overcome, a drift to be stopped. Dialectical surpassing, heroic exaltation of reason? No; really, how can we think that abstract reason permits us to leave behind the torment, the fear, the nightmare, and to begin afresh to feel joyous sentiments and open senses? No, it is not reason that removes the malaise, but imagination: a kind of subtle and concrete reason which traverses the void and the fear, the infinite mathematical series of the functioning of the market, to bring about an event of rupture. This modernity which we have constructed annihilates us through its enormous quantity of emptiness, through the frightening train of meaningless yet daily and continuous events in which it presents itself. But, at the same time, this hard awareness liberates in us the power of the imagination. To go where? Nobody knows.

When Burke first, and then Kant - it was you who taught me this - rediscovered the category of the sublime by wrenching it from the cobwebs of philology, they defined two kinds of it: the natural sublime, which is revealed by some grandiose spectacle of nature and provokes terror in the sensitive soul; and the mathematical sublime, in other words the spectacle of the indefinite of mathematics, an intellectual shock which strikes terror into the rational soul. Now, they explained to us that these great emotions of the spirit prepare us for a liberation of the imagination - but what liberation? It is there that the story becomes passionate, because imagination can only liberate itself to the extent to which it recognizes the practical nature of the emotion of the sublime. The sense of the sublime is, like imagination, a crossroads between reason and sensibility, between pure reason and practical reason. Here a kind of Copernican revolution of sensibility is in operation - a revolution which (in Kant) sutures transcendental ethics and dialectics, in other words the limit of sensible experience and that of practical reason. Let us now place Burke and Kant before the spectacle of the market and of its postmodern transfiguration: Once again nausea and the sense of void, once again trembling and terror - sombre admiration and a blind will to surpass. Here, again, the sense of the absolute limit becomes an urgency of the imagination. Further and further we are driven by our demon, a demon which snatches us from the negative sentiment of the mercantile sublime. Hence the sense of the sublime cannot be impotent. On the contrary, it snatches us from impotence. In recognizing as human this reality into which we are plunged, when in fact it is inhuman, we can filter, with the help of the imagination, the absolute indeterminacy of the existent. This is what is specific to the sublime: it imposes on us a theoretical experience of the absolute negativity by opening us to the practical experience of surpassing through imagination. This is why the sublime has nothing to do either with dialectics or with the equivalent experiences of the analogical metaphysics produced in the history of thought. The experience of the sublime is the leap from the theoretical to the practical; it is the truth of negation. Here the anguish is crushed in order that imagination may be able to construct.



Free is a collective made up of three artists, Dave Beech, Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan, who have worked together since 2004 on slogan-filled works, including billboards and vinyls prints, manifestos and spoken choir performances, that challenge the commercial and bureaucratic colonization of the public sphere of opinion formation.

Revolution is Sublime, 2009, acrylic mirror slogan-sculpture, photograph, for 'The Peckham Experiment' Space Station Sixty-Five, London, UK, Photograph by Alice Evans

2. Do you see any possibilities or need to reconsider the spirit of revolutionary romanticism in relation to the current situation of the global struggle for democracy?

Utopianism is vital in an era of actual political defeat, retreat and the decimation of progressive organisations. Romantic anti-capitalism preserves revolution in a period devoid of revolution. 'Revolution is Sublime' redefines revolutionary 'Terror' in terms of the bourgeois aesthetic feeling of pleasure at the experience of pain, dread and the threat to life. Also, we reattach the sublime to revolution at precisely the point at which the postmodern sublime is being installed as an academic subject. In this respect, the idea that revolution is sublime demands that we ask more of the concept of the sublime than the ecstatic disorientation of the technological mediascape!

Protest is beautiful but revolution is sublime: here we have the provisional building blocks for a new collision of politics and aesthetics. The point is not to establish subjective substitutes for collective political action or a humane affirmation of the retreat from politics, or even the preservation of bourgeois aesthetics through its immanent politicisation, but, like with the civil rights slogan 'black is beautiful', reinvigorate both politics and aesthetics through the demand that aesthetics be revolutionised and the transformation of politics from hegemonic struggle to the collective care for self.

The market, the height of squalor, is taken to be sublime. Let us go beyond, through the experience of the ambiguity of an absolute limit, which forces us to leap beyond the theoretical horizon in order to bring practice into play. When I say practice, obviously I mean a practice which has its base in being, transforms it, produces it and reproduces it. When I speak of imagination and practice, I am dealing directly with being. The two terms are almost synonymous, they cover the same space with different functions - the space of doing, of poetical doing above all. I am again reminded of Leopardi, with his insistence on the sensualism, on the materialism of his construction of being - and, for him, this creation is the only moment of salvation. But, next, thought goes above all towards the gigantic theological parable of this experience: to Job, to the story of his encounter with the injustice of the world, to his anguish and to his liberation through the imagination of the Messiah. Here the every-day reality of the misery and squalor of postmodernity is drawn into the vortex of the genealogy of the cosmos. Insignificance and repetition are thrown into the liquid depths of the world in formation. Huge monsters traverse the indifference of the market: Leviathan and Behemoth. How to avoid them? How to liberate ourselves from them? By pushing the reality of the market and its insane inner tendency to the limit of their consequences. What interests us is the ontological sublime: no longer simply the grandeur of nature or infinite numbers, but a monstrous being, state and flux, figure and explosion of creation itself. Being, which moves, as if emerging from a deep womb, to take the form of a world. A cosmic palpitation. In the Book of Job it is God himself who proposes this monstrous nightmare. Then our anguish is no longer simply intellectual, it is a tearing in being. We emerge from this experience screaming desperately from the wounds which our bodies have endured. But do we really emerge from it? The doubt measures up to the suffering.

So here we are, about to look at being once again. Up until now we have thought of it as a great liquid mass. But must equally think of it as a solid mass, huge and solid, a great marble block in the veins of which we try to read how a sculpted figure might be born from it - or an arid desert, where the only differentiating features are long crests

of stony dunes. We travel across these plains in search of impossible ruptures. It could be language, this mountain of marble, this sandy plain: a language which allows us to grasp a flash of meaning only now and then. Variations which are unforeseeable and impossible to attain. This horizon of the most extraordinary ontological aridity, we call it Wittgenstein, just as that sea of being whose squalor did not forbid the sublime, I want to call it Heidegger. But why do we seek or pretend to seek here and there, in a dispersive bricolage, when we know all of this perfectly well? When our whole life has been nothing but waiting for it and witnessing it? Wittgenstein and Heidegger are the postmodern, the basis not of our thought but of our sensibility, not of philosophy but of existence - and of our poetry-making.

Giorgio, I know very well that you agree - and that you have made it your obsession, this impossible experience of the link between anguish and imagination. It is precisely for that reason that I would like to move the discussion forward, in order to grasp the moment in which, in relation to the impossible synthesis, there takes place - not dialectically but mysteriously - the lightning flash of liberation. This determination of the event. We continue to seek it. Credulous before the aesthetic apparition of the beautiful, deluded by the insurrectional explosion of communism - they have denied us all this - so where is the event to be found now? Where is its potentiality [potenza]? Only our painful retreat makes it possible for us now to think it. A new experience of potentiality, this is what we are about to make; a potentiality as solid and strong as that of the being which was crushing us. No, liberation will no longer be a Blitz-Zeit, an insurrection of meaning. But it will not be suppressed for this reason. On the contrary, it will have this potentiality, which ontology produces out of the depths. An event. Here we are, then, once again on this powerful frontier.

But beware: while the experience of the sublime has shown us the path, the decisive element consists rather in the transition to practice, in the fact that we want our emotion to be action - a material ethics of a decision. The potentiality which is action discriminates the world. Not only does it name being; it also divides it. The transition

from theory to ethics is situated in this difference between the naming and the parceling up of being; it is going beyond of the postmodern. When the postmodern lacks the strength to sustain itself as spectacle (to the extent that the decantation imposed by the experience of the sublime has been realized), it has been in practice, left behind. A world of meaningless images and sounds has disappeared - we have pushed it to the point of the sublime, we have broken it through our imagination, and now we discover the real, which has reappeared. A sign, an unusual sensation tell us that the edge has been reached, that the limit has turned into an obstacle - I am now placed in a condition to be able to go beyond - something new and potent is etched into my consciousness. The passage to ethics, and therefore true potentiality [potenza] of constructing a meaningful world - this is the way out of the postmodern. Going beyond the sublime would mean, then, getting out of the machine of the market, breaking its meaningless circularity, setting our feet once again onto the materiality of the true. A new truth, certainly, and a new world, too - that which is to be found in liberated abstraction.

So here we are, dearest Giorgio, at the place where you too are always seeking to arrive. But you cannot, because, like Heidegger, you too see the meaning of being as tending towards the void. But this is not really where our analysis leads - it is not true that the concept of being is void. Its concept is rather potentiality [potenza]. And its imagination, too - because being imagines and creates. There is certainly a limit, but on that limit being extends itself in potentiality. It suffers, not from a vertigo of the void, but from a vertigo of the what-is-to-come, of the future, of that which is not yet. If we consider the experience of the great abstract painters, we see it clearly by following those infinite threads which link the essential forms to innovative projects of imagination: here we are, facing a machine which, through tensions, falls, and surpassings (as if a drawing could take body within a metaphysical space), constructs a powerful new world. Abstract painting is a parable of the eternally renewed pursuit of being, of the void and of potentiality. We cannot stop halfway. The void is not a limit, it is a passage. Heidegger is not ontology - he is still phenomenology.

The market is overcome through potentiality; the postmodern is overcome through ethics - art is simultaneously potentiality and ethics. So here at last we arrive at a positive point. Thus far we have recognized the abstract as a second nature, the sublime as the limit point, and ethics as an element of ontological re-foundation. All these functions now link together in a constitutive process, which is sustained by potenza. Art is the hieroglyph of potenza. This fact of being a hieroglyph in no sense impoverishes art: on the contrary, it exalts its ontological singularity to the extent that, if it is true that art is a higher act of imagination inasmuch as it accedes directly to being, it is so in a concentrated manner, strong and singular - a Platonic form, which constructs for itself an instantiation and exhibits it through its extension in matter.

The instantiation is irreducible to the form, because it develops the singular. Art is irreducible to mediation. Its singular reproducibility is exemplary. Art is simultaneously the creation and the reproduction of the absolute singular. Exactly like the ethical act. This is why, as we shall see shortly, the artistic act, in precisely the same way as the ethical act, is definable as multitude.

The singularity of the work of art is neither mediation nor interchangeability, but much rather reproducibility of the absolute. Painting, like music and poetry, reveals its universality under the form of enjoyment on the part of a multitude of individuals and of singular experiences. The market and private property overturn this essence of art. Re-appropriating art privately, reducing the work of art to a price, is to destroy art. Such closures are not acceptable: art is formally as open as a true and radical democracy. The reproducibility of the work of art is not vulgar, but constitutes an ethical experience - a break with the compact ensemble of the existential nullity of the market. Art is anti-market, inasmuch as it counter-poses the multitude of singularities to unicity reduced to a price. The revolutionary critique of the political economy of the market constructs a terrain of art's enjoyability for the multitude of singularities.

I do not know, **Giorgio**, if you will agree with my very concrete utopia. I am convinced that the daily humiliation of the reduction of the artistic act (be it an act of creation or one of enjoyment) to the market can be avoided. This is why I do not accept that the form of being can run towards the void. In more explicit terms, that could mean declaring the eternity of the market. No. We need to go beyond the void, pass through it and take it back in the mechanism of construction of potenza. A dynamis which comes from nothingness.

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Nine letters on art, followed by *Metamorphoses: Art and immaterial labour*

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Art and Multitude, comprises of nine letters Negri wrote to friends while in exile in Paris during the 1980s, focusing on the relationship between artistic production and social and political movements in the post-Fordist, postmodern age of "immaterial labor." The letter format disrupts academic conventions, bringing the reader closer to the author's perspective and way of thinking, and injecting warmth and intimacy into the overall narrative.

The letters contemplate on the themes of the abstract, the postmodern, beauty, the sublime, collective labour, constructing and the biopolitical, emphasizing their importance for building a new political left in the reactionary post 1968 period. Negri reflects on the necessity to challenge political impotence and the market, locating this potentiality in a discussion of the multitude that for Negri represents the common subject of art and politics.

For the author, a revolutionary imagination in these areas has to be reclaimed as the manifestation of potenza (power) that is capable of confronting the fear and the void, or the sublime of the market to bring about an event of rupture. Any revolutionary practice in art and politics has to radicalize from the inside, engaging the moment of subsumption under capital. To this end, Negri emphasize the need to completely rework the concept of creation which underwrites art, practice, multitude, politics and ontology. (Corina Lucia Apostol)

Antonio Negri (born 1933) is a Marxist scholar, revolutionary philosopher and educator. Negri became well-known for the groundbreaking trilogy *Empire*, *Multitude*, *Commonwealth* co-authored with political philosopher Michael Hardt.



Black Mask Group, 1967, Photo: Larry Fink



Protest at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 2, 1970, by the Guerrilla Art Action Group, the Art Workers Coalition, the Black & Puerto Rican Emergency Cultural Coalition. Photo: Jan Van Raay.



The Art Workers' Coalition demonstration in front of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* at MoMA, 1970. Photo: Jan Van Raay.



Protest at the Museum of Modern Art in New York against the pro-Vietnam War corporate activities of members of its Board of Directors., 1969. Photo: Jan Van Raay

Corina L. Apostol

The Sublime Beyond the Limit of Living (Art) Labour

What kind of revolution, in art as well as in politics, is still possible in a world subsumed under neoliberal capitalism? This question speaks to the cultural deadlock and political impotence which we are faced with today, as we witness the rise and dissolution of various social movements, as one ruling elite is replaced by another, supposedly “better” elite, while state power, the power of capital that prevents people from ruling themselves, remains all but unchallenged. Under the current system in which our everyday lives are mediated by capital, we seem to have lost the power to imagine ourselves within a totality of human relations and therefore to have lost the ability to challenge the system in its entirety. Rather, we have been reduced to fragments of a vast and unimaginable whole of society, blind to the totalizing understanding of the social-economic networks constructed to organize our lives. [1]

Reading Antonio Negri’s letters penned two decades after the failure of the oppositional moment of 1968, it is precisely the question of how to recapture and act on the knowledge that people can be more than crippled beings under capitalism that is perhaps most pertinent to current struggles in art and politics. [2] As Negri suggests, such a transformation in consciousness may take the form of a sublime vision in which the complexity that makes up the unthinkable totality of the contemporary matrix of living labour is grasped all at once, unleashing the potential for revolutionary action. Negri then questions whether this could be achievable under the impotent postmodernism of the 1980s, pointing to possible ways of redeeming a radical collective imagination. Reclaiming art and politics as ways of engaging with the market/capital logic from the inside, Negri re-positions them as a set of practices that activate the class concept of multitude. From this perspective, Negri rethinks beauty and the sublime as constituted by the dynamic, creative force of labor. The sublime becomes not merely a transcendental concept, but stems from the concrete force of labor and practice; while beauty is not just an innocent act of imagination but the manifestation of *potenza*, imagination in action. Thus, Negri’s “very concrete utopia” posits a fresh arsenal of artistic and political tools for an ethical transformation of human nature, so that people become capable of revolution.

At the same time, in the aftermath of the postmodern era, the evolution of the contemporary art world seems to have pushed these very aspirations beyond the pale of possibility. It seems to me that we have to rescue the sublime of the multitude that prepares us for a liberation of the imagination, both as a concept and as a material praxis; and to think through the ambivalence that haunts it: at once the promise of a politics against capital and the danger that this collective *potenza* will be restricted to socio-cultural forms that capital subsumes.

More broadly, how can an emancipatory art praxis lead to resistance and liberation from capital when the industry of artistic production itself functions inside and stands a chance of being consumed by the same system of oppression it seeks to unseat? This question is both historical and critical to our present moment, and to begin to address it I would like briefly to revisit the case study of the Art Workers Coalition or AWC (1969-1972), a movement of art activists in the United States that confronted this very problem, and that nonetheless

continues to influence generations of doers and thinkers on the left today.

Firstly, it is important to understand this cultural movement in the context of Negri’s own writing, both historiographically and as a key moment when questions of work, political work, activist work and art work were closely bound together. In *Art and Multitude* Negri constructs a modern, political art history predicated on the relationship between culture and workers’ movements. In the mid 19th century the rise of workers’ revolts was centered on the figure of the professional worker and aesthetically dominated by realism; with the intensification of the division of labour at the turn of the century, workers developed strategies of self-management; the victory of the Russian Revolution, of the soviets, heralded a period of experimental abstraction that both represented and participated in the abstraction of labour; then, during the reactionary three decades after the end of the 1930s, abstraction became analytical but also developed into mass art alongside the figure of the mass worker; finally, the post 1968 period opened art politically onto the urgencies of the social worker, becoming bound with a political aesthetics of experience. Negri’s schematic periodization foregrounds an ontology of labour as the basis for both art and politics.

The correlation between art, labour and politics, as resources for the reconstitution of a revolutionary terrain in the midst of defeat (unsurprisingly for Negri, the moment of defeat is 1968) can be productively analyzed through the case of the AWC. The movement combined action on a micro-level, fighting to preserve and improve the everyday working conditions of art workers, while on the macro-level it advocated for universal civil rights and strongly condemned military interventions for greed, power and capital abroad. In particular, they viewed museums as especially representative of their growing discontent with larger political issues through their imbrications with the political and financial elite, and as such, sites of contested struggles, entities to be revolutionized.

One of the key participants in the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), feminist art critic Lucy Lippard positioned the movement as formative in rekindling possibilities for developing a radical leftist strategy in the arts, opening a period of resurgent attempts to mount collective, grassroots political resistance from within the art community. It is important to remember that this happened at a time of increasingly radical and violent anti-war demonstrations and marches for universal civil rights, precipitating the unraveling of the romantic project on which the United States was built; a project that began to be visually articulated through the vast landscape paintings of the Hudson River School, through representations of the sublime of the ‘new’ continent, articulating a distinctly American feeling of awe in front of the forces of the untamed wilderness that later gave way to enthusiasm for technological triumphs over nature, from transcontinental railways to skyscraping architecture and space projects. Instead, the paradisiacal cradle of democracy was deeply contested by the civil rights movements and revealed as a precarious democratic experiment predicated on the dispossession of indigenous peoples, the enslavement of African peoples, the subjugation of women, the marginalization of gays and imperialistic wars abroad.

As one romantic project was discredited, another, revolutionary one began to grow in its place. It is fitting that the new artistic strategies of this movement constituted a rejection of lofty romantic canvases, turning as Negri put it to a “political aesthetics of experience,” perhaps best articulated in the Black Mask group’s famous slogan of the late 1960s: “Our Struggle Cannot Be Hung on a Wall.” Moreover, for the AWC, the rethinking art and politics became a “consciousness raising experience,” one that gave its participants the insight that the (art) world is dissolved and reconstituted in labour, engaging oppositions such as theory vs. practice, bourgeoisie vs. proletariat, as well as art workers’ precarious position in-between classes.



Martha Rosler, *Cleaning the Drapes from the series “House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home”, 1969-1972*

As Lucy Lippard reflected, this implied a rethinking of art as a transformation of subjectivity so that people become capable of demystifying the unshakable destiny imposed by capitalism and acting on it:

There are more people thinking about these problems: How does art relate to the rest of the world? ... Now all that remains is for something to come of such awareness. Even though I know we are to some extent trapped in the capitalist abyss in which we operate, I can't believe that such a disturbing awareness won't eventually produce change – reaction, reform, or rebellion. [3]

The metaphor of the “capitalist abyss” recalls Negri’s image of the market as an infinite mathematical series, a deadening sublime, requiring reason and strength to transverse its terrifying void and bring about an event of rupture - “reaction, reform or rebellion.” According to Lippard’s deliberations, the coalition grasped the real possibility of a world of positive democracy, in which social relations were not based on exploitation and oppression, while the deconstruction of the practice of art demonstrated its productive character, revealing the living substance of labour:

The interrelationship between art politics (basically economics) and national or international politics makes many artists unwilling to think about improving their own conditions as artists. The minute an artist begins to think about her own economic and psychological dignity, she is reminded of those in much worse shape and more helpless than she is. [4]

The concerns of art as a form of collective labour raises the question of ethics, reaching beyond self-interest and taking into account the most amount of good for others “in much worse shape and more helpless.” For Lippard, conjuring up the condition of the oppressed to break the spell of indifference constitutes an ethical base for reconstituting an art and politics around the urgencies of the social worker, and in opposition to a postmodernity that evacuates meaning in the market-driven development towards indifference. Although short-lived and insular, challenging mostly New York institutions, the AWC nonetheless did intervene in the system of global indifference by connecting the supposedly political neutrality of these institutions with the United States’ for-profit wars.

Relying on bold, confrontational graphics and angry, satirical slogans to communicate a sense of urgency, the artist-activists embraced inexpensive and easily disseminated art forms - posters, printed ephemera and electronic media as revolutionary tools for social criticism. When art was made to protest, its message was unequivocal and immediate, such as Martha Rosler’s photo-collage from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1969-1972), “Cleaning the Drapes,” depicting a middle-class woman too preoccupied with housework to notice a war raging outside her window - a comment on both the alienating effects of domestic labour and the

public deniability the horrors of Vietnam. Rosler’s collages engaged with both exploitation at home as well as the dispossession and destruction of life in a war that sustained the home of the middle-class American. Here the sublime is born from the meeting of apparent banality and terror, revealing an insight into the totality of forms of exploitation and repression that feed the socio-economic networks under which everyday life is organized. This prevents the viewer from returning to the innocent narrative; giving way to anger and revolt—a transformation in consciousness. It is not my purpose in this article to give a full account of this seminal historical moment, nor account for the history of the Art Workers’ Coalition, rather my intervention highlighted artistic strategies for reconstructing a potent political subject in the midst of a seemingly inescapable postmodern capitalism after the defeat of the Left. As a prelude to the possibility of a new politics, I sought to reclaim, as Negri suggests, instantiations of the sublime as an ecstatic transport of knowledge, aesthetics and affects predicated on living labor, on the multitude—an event that is both a terror and a desired revelation of the totality of socio-economic relations which, if done differently, could be the basis of a world beyond capital.

Finally, as the rise and fall of the AWC shows, it becomes necessary to develop and maintain material platforms to sustain political critique and support a multitude from which autonomous intercessions and institutional leverages may emerge. We need to discern the grounds for these new forms of community, and the need to balance a shared set of political and aesthetic ideals, forms of immanent critique and necessary interventions that allow for evaluative self-reflection. These questions are essential to weaving the threads of solidarity amongst today’s disparate art producers striving towards emancipatory knowledge, and to future articulations of new forms of politically committed artistic collectivity and counter-institutions based on reconfiguration as well as continuity with their historical predecessors.

Footnotes:

1. My theorizing is indebted to Frederic Jameson’s landmark work *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, 1991.
2. Throughout my text I will be quoting from Antonio Negri, *Art and Multitude*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2011
3. Lucy Lippard, *Get the Message?: A Decade of Art for Social Change*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970, pg. 31.
4. Lucy Lippard, *Get the Message?: A Decade of Art for Social Change*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970, pg. 7

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Gerald Raunig

Sublime Now-Time and Molecular Strike

I.

The sublime is now. It is the terrain of a temporality that machinically takes us into service, at the same time prompting us to think non-subservience in a new and machinic way. Machinic non-subservience, non-compliance, monstrosity do not emerge as a heroic break with a full space, with limited shapes and beautiful form, but rather as a lasting, repeated and recurrent breach in the overabundance of measured and immeasurable time – as industriosity.

In the Kantian mathematically sublime, magnitude is impelled beyond every form, all the way to the threshold of deformation, formlessness, the dissolution of space and shape. Yet it is the other dimension of the sublime that interests us far more today – time and its measurement, temporal measuring and becoming immeasurable, as it is taken to an extreme in a new way in machinic capitalism. It is not an empty spatial form, an empty measure that is created, filled and disciplined, but rather time is expanded, impelled beyond its boundaries, a wholly new, immeasurable and immeasurably measured time: the sublime now-time.

II.

Machinic capitalism goes hand in hand with a double form of modulation: modulation as measure, measurement, subdivision and standardization, as modularizing, but also modulation as immeasurableness, endlessly deforming, modulating. Impelling time beyond its boundaries in all directions is the sublime aspect of modulation: the increasingly compartmentalized striating of time, measuring smaller and smaller parts, the endless shrinking of the measures, but also and especially breaking through the measure all the way to the immeasurable valorization and smoothing of time.

In the midst of the production of machinic capitalism machinic modes of subjectivation arise that increasingly have the effect of subservience: compliant subjects of self-government ready to an extreme degree to striate and smooth themselves and their times. Getting through life as comfortably as possible is the highest aim of this form of living. And it is the same compliant subjects who join the machinic assemblage through their compliancy, placing machinic subservience next to social subjugation.

III.

The Benjaminian now-time loads the past, it charges the past, it fulfills the writing of its history, its stories. Yet the sublime is not simply – as Badiou says about the two-hundred-year-old Wagner – the solemn declaration that something has passed and something new, unknown begins, in a clean separation between the past and the future, but rather exactly the expansion of the present in the in-between of this linear notion of time.

So this time it is not purely a history of philosophy problem – or rather, it was never purely a history of philosophy problem. It is not only the subsumption of the sublime event into the course of history forced into linearity that must be broken open with giant leaps into the past. It is the sublime now-time of machinic capitalism, its instrumentation of measuring endlessly small magnitudes and immeasurableness into a boundless magnitude that requires a giant leap. Now, however, it is a giant leap in one place, which establishes the urgency of the re-invention of now-time specifically in its own terrain, the terrain of the expanded present. This new giant leap is not intended to explode primarily the continuum of history, but rather the machinic present, the expanded sublime now-time, in order to newly and repeatedly detonate the “splinters of messianic time”.

IV.

Exactly the terrain of the immeasurable present, the sublime now-time, is the terrain in which subservience can be transformed into non-subservience with the same machinic weapons. The terrain of this transformation is the now-time, its pure means is the molecular strike: not a holiday strike that merely modifies the conditions of subjugation and subservience, but also not a strike leading from one state to another, from one legal order to another, from one subjugation to another. The molecular strike is a strike that permeates the molecules of machinic sociality, the pores of everyday life, and it interrupts, overthrows, reverses the sublime now-time of machinic capitalism. No longer acting in such a way, no longer being governed in such a way, ceasing subservient action, halting subservient deterritorialization, at the same time beginning a new, no longer subservient reterritorialization of smooth time.



The molecular strike is a pure means. It is not a means to the end of achieving certain demands, but rather a means beyond any demands, goals, purposes. The molecular strike addresses neither the agents of economic machines nor the administrators of state apparatuses. It applies no extensive violence, violence as a means to an end, such as the end of only modifying temporal arrangements. As medium, a pure means and a rampant middle, the molecular strike is not about the line from a bad past to a promising future, but rather about a completely different way of counting time, a completely different way of living in present becoming – “*an upheaval that this kind of strike not only occasions, but indeed carries out.*” It is not after a major event, after a sublime moment, after a unique break that the change of working and living conditions comes. This strike already is the change, the constituent power, the breach; it carries out the break, rather than just occasioning it.

The molecular strike is not legislative, but is instead, at the same time, destituent, instituent, and constituent. It decomposes the existing order of time, posits manifold beginnings, and creates new industrious compositions. Even though the social movements of recent years seem to center around the space of occupation, their practice was and is, at the same time, a precarious practice of experimenting with economies of time, to this extent also the formation of the molecular strike. This strike is sublime, not because it results in a heroic gaining of space, but because as it is carried out in the terrain of the sublime now-time and subservience in machinic capitalism, new experiences of temporality emerge, monstrous modes of subjectivation of non-compliance, of non-subservience, of industriosity.

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David Riff

1. Does the category of the sublime have any relevance to the political practice of art and activism today?

For Kant, a key difference between the Beautiful and the Sublime was that Beauty applies to form, while the Sublime is rather to be found in formlessness, in a lack of boundaries, where nature appears in its formless immoderation, at those points where its form spreads out and becomes too difficult to fathom. The 18th and 19th centuries found this Sublime on beaches and mountainsides, and somehow it is still there wherever there are big rocks and deep canyons, though you have to forget picture postcard tourists oozing and aahing the next towel down. But it's also in other places: not just in the breathtaking proportions of the turnover of global capital, potentiated algorithmically in split seconds and grafted onto the individual as search-engine infinity in the twinkle of an eye, but also in the multitudes and masses that give credence to political practice as something beyond a personal, micropolitical cadre game.

Protests, when they arise and spread today, are sublime. That is, they are amorphous and massive, social vortexes almost like forces of nature, where singular atomized subjectivities bond and collide, experiencing incredible attractions and repulsions as little black dots thrown into the whirlpool of history. The energy is boundless, but at the same time, like Mont Blanc, it fits into a frame, harnessed whenever homemade drones give you a fisheye of crowded cities. That reproduced, portable sublime (the sublime of the tourist postcard) changes considerably once protest turns ugly and violence is in the game. Postcards of violence are for fetishists. Then again, violence can be sublime, too, an expression of overwhelming boundless desires, urges, and repressions so huge that they cannot be grasped; the ultimate sublime, in that sense, is terror, and Stockhausen got a beating for saying so.

Vice versa, there is always some fundamental terror at work when the sublime is dramatized and put on display. Hegel was probably right when he linked it to what Marx would later call the Asiatic-despotic mode of production, where direct physical coercion, terror, and slavery could erect breathtaking monuments to keep the poor enslaved builders at bay. These are forms that exude formlessness or at least a scale so massive that its boundaries are

on the verge of being unbounded. Relinking this with the idea of amorphous protests, we might see a contemporary version of activism's sublime humor in the huge phallus Voïna painted onto a drawbridge in St. Petersburg some years ago; it's overwhelming in its scale, amazing that they could have done it, and it mirrors back the full vulgarity and boundlessness of the regime, and not only when things get violent.

Most people would tell you that multitudes, formlessness, and even the "sublime humor" of Voïna are necessary in a world as our's. But I can't help but wonder. What would make crowds beautiful, not sublime? Certainly not some Stalinist calisthenics or Occupy chanting progressive slogans in unison, but maybe some more fundamentally viral understanding of commonly held social ideals, some deeper solidarity that proves the this-sidedness and materiality of the ideal in real life, some stronger sense of purpose that would break out of the frame of the picture postcard and actually succeed. Should artists be "teaching" such beauty? That used to be our profession, but for the last one hundred years we have been bouncing back and forth between the ugly and the sublime, and that is also no coincidence. There came a point where the old forms of beauty simply were no longer true... But today, at least in art, I feel like the ugly and the formless often play a similarly normative role as beauty once did, so again, I can't help but wonder...

2. Do you see any possibilities or need to reconsider the spirit of revolutionary romanticism in relation to the current situation of the global struggle for democracy?

In the current situation, protest has an amorphous, formless quality that might be ironically called "sublime" before it turns ugly. Turning ugly itself is a highly Romantic move: it's what happens when Enlightenment ideals go sour, when disappointment spreads, when the pseudo-rationale of blood and soil takes over in waves of sentiment, when night falls and the love of freedom becomes a personal trait of a knight in shining armor or a band of merciless rebels out on a rampage, when all that is left of the spirit of revolution suddenly is a red air that fills your nostrils like the blues, leaving room for nothing but love songs until the next sublime wave of protest against a world gone totally wrong drives you onto the street. You inevitably reconsider revolutionary romanticism not only every time you watch people develop heroic personas in the face of police violence, but also when the world goes back to business and people start to wax nostalgic about the glorious moment when everybody was bravely together.

Actually, such nostalgic memories are the hallmark of revolutionary Romanticism, if we take one of the most famous examples, Delacroix's Liberty Leading the People, which shows you the impossible coalition of a "global struggle for democracy"

as it appeared in the early to mid 19th century: orphans, workers, students, and bourgeoisie all united behind bare-breasted Liberty, a "popular front" assembled to kick the shit out of the autocrats and to finally install true democracy. The painting was made by a quintessential representative of Romantic Culture: the exotic painter of oriental odalisques and battle scenes, Talleyrand's illegitimate son. The painting celebrates "the People," that sublime abstraction that would soon fall apart in the "ugly" revolution of 1848. Bought by the French government because it was deemed too inflammatory, it was put on display once Louis Bonaparte was in power, perhaps as a cover-up for the latter's populist autocracy.

When art today reengages with revolutionary Romanticism, is it also unwittingly involved in similar consolidating cover-ups? Many of today's autocrats are like Louis Bonaparte, but matters are far more complex with art, even though the sense of freakish Twin Peaks Alpdrücken is the same as it was when Romanticism first emerged—familiar settings out of joint. That is, our world is a lot like the one Freud describes for E. T. A. Hoffmann's "Olympia" as an example of the uncanny; a familiar environment suddenly alien, where the dolls are constantly watching. There is much cause for paranoia. Art is complicit in the very gentrifications it criticizes. It instills a sense of Romantic self-righteousness and consolidation around political sore points, and it gives the educated, more or less affluent parts of society a sense of their own chivalry. Marx was criticizing that kind of thing as "Romantic Culture" in the early 1840s, under the quasi-liberal regime of a Romantic Monarch: a mixture of pseudo-Enlightened self-righteousness and philanthropy barely covering a predatory dog-eat-dog law of the jungle.

In the age of green capitalism and soft power, where democracy is exported rather than struggled for, such a Romantic Culture blocks all the revolutionary potentials of what's best about Romanticism, which are to be found elsewhere, beyond the grisly pomp and circumstance, in the little pivotal details, the uncanny rifts in meaning, and in the boundless desire for that universal collective experience that Marx called *Gattungswesen*, species-being... But that's naturalism already, or maybe realism, or maybe even a humanist counter-classicism, but not revolutionary Romanticism.

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andcompany&Co.

The (coming) insurrection following Friedrich Schiller

Script fragments with comments

This project was a pilot-project in many ways: a coproduction not only between the Netherlands and Germany but also between the so-called 'freie Szene' (independent theatre scene) and a state theatre in Germany. The play is a reaction to the global crisis, which since 2010 has also reached Europe. In the Netherlands it served as a pretext for dramatic cuts to the budget for culture: up to 40 % of the budget for the performing and visual arts was withdrawn. This process can only be described as „cultural counterrevolution“, since it aims to abolish all achievements in the field of cultural politics since 1968. In theatre the „Aktie Tomaat“ (Tomato Action) was a turning point: theatre students threw tomatoes after a performance, afterwards the whole system was changed in such a way that not only established institutions were financed, but also independent production venues, collectives and young writers. For decades the Netherlands was a role model for innovative state support for the arts. In 2011/12 the right-liberal government (tolerated by the extreme right-wing party of Geert Wilders) unleashed a defamation campaign against artists calling them „subsidy slurpers“, who are „standing with their backs to the audience, but with open hands to the state“. At the same time in other parts of Europe theatres were occupied such as Teatro Valle in Rome or Embros Theatre in Athens. These were the references for the performance in which the stage becomes a squat occupied by nine men dressed up as beggars. In the course of the evening one plays the part of Don Carlos; another one his friend Marquis de Posa; one King Philipp II; another, the mother and Friedrich Schiller, etc.

Next to Schiller's drama "Don Carlos, Infant of Spain", excerpts of his historical narrative „Der Abfall der Niederlande von der spanischen Regierung“ (The Secession of the Netherlands from the Spanish Government) will be quoted, intermixed with quotes from "The Coming Insurrection" by an anonymous authors' collective called The Invisible Comitee and the adaption of these texts by the Austrian pop-band Ja, Panik, in particular their song DMDKILIDT („Die Manifestation des Kapitalismus in unserem Leben ist die Traurigkeit“/ „The manifestation of capitalism in our lives is sadness“) and other texts found or written during the creation process at the turn of the year 2011/12, when the Occupy Wall Street movement just had its momentum with the occupation of public squares - in Amsterdam for example on the Beursplein, the former stock market plaza.

N'ayez pas peur
Nous ne sommes que des acteurs
Habt keine Angst
Don't fear
We're only actors,
Schauspieler
And we have dressed up as beggars
Because this is a rehearsal
We are rehearsing the insurrection
the opstand of the Netherlands
which began 444 years ago in Brussels
when citizens

turns to the audience

quite normal citizens just like you

turns back to the other players

disguised themselves as beggars
to fight for their freedom
and their privileges.

The other players are making signs of agreement with their fingers. They are sitting on eggs before a construction that is hidden behind silver tin foil and wear beggars' clothes and aristocratic coats out of paper. In these costumes they have already taken part in a demonstration against the massive cuts in Den Haag. They resemble the movement of the „Geuzen“: Dutch citizens who approached the Spanish governor in Brussels with a petition. She got afraid when she saw them, but a courtier whispered in her ear: „N'ayez pas peur, madame, ils ne sont que les geuxes!“ („Don't be afraid, madame, they are only beggars!“) Since then, a „geuzename“ is a name that originally was a discriminatory term, but has been appropriated by the discriminated people as a name of honour (like pirate or punk). Another performer gets up and starts to speak to his fellow performers, who repeat every sentence (like the so-called „human microphone“ of the occupy movement protesters) and comment on it with hand-signs:

Tonight we will not play
with our backs to the audience
Niet met de rug naar het publiek!
Facing the audience!
This is the rehearsal of an occupation

*turns to the audience and invites them to also speak
along with him:*



We have occupied the stage
as well as the roles and the auditorium.

In the German state theatre a "Besetzungsprobe" is the name for the rehearsal of a role (actors are said to „occupy“ a certain role). At the same time, the term „den Aufstand proben“ (to rehearse the insurrection = to perform it) has been used often in the last theatre season. It is partly inspired by the French pamphlet, in this performance it was contextualized with Schiller's historical text on the Dutch revolt which he wrote after he had finished his classical drama "Don Carlos, Infant of Spain":

We are in the year 1545.
It is the year Don Carlos,
Prince Royal of Spain, son of Philip II, was born.
At the same time, on the other side of the world,
the Spanish discover a perfect cone
that proudly rises up
amid the peaks of a mountain range:
Potosí is what the Incas called it:
"The one that thunders, bursts apart, explodes."
It is the fulfillment of an age-old dream:
a hill out of which silver flows.
It lay about everywhere,
but the Incas didn't even dare to touch it.
As soon as they bent down,
a voice from inside the mountain cried:
"This is not for you;
God is preserving these riches
for those who come from over there."
They didn't take long to get there
and shipped the silver back
to where they had come from, to the Old World.
So much, that you could have built a bridge
from the summit of the mountain to the Royal Palace,
where Don Carlos came into the world
- for not all that long a time.
He died in the year 1568 at the age of 23,
like all good anarchists.
In the same year, in Brussels,
Egmont and Hoorn are executed.
Wilhelm von Oranien escapes and returns
with an army.
That is the beginning of the 'Opstand',
of the Eighty Years' War.
The secession of the Netherlands from
the Spanish Government!

The concept of the sublime: often enough the sight of mountains has been used as an example. But it is a very specific mountain that is referred to in this performance, one that also contains the aspect of horror coming into play and of mass-murder:

I am the silver mountain of Potosí.
The ‚Cerro Rico‘

I am the perfect cone
Silver flows through my veins.
In my hungry hollows I consume Indians
8 million or more.
In return I spew out silver for you
I am the silver ocean,
On my back ships travel to Antwerp,
their bellies full of silver.
On my silver waves
the pirates and the Watergeuzen dance in their ships
the dance of the Flemish
the flamenco.
I am the flood of silver,
I break through your banks!
Let the silver come to you.
Guzzle me down like water!
I am your fear! I am your bank! Too big to fail!
I am the silvery shine of the moon,
the silver light, that erupts from the dark of the earth!
I am the silver dish in the Palace of Madrid,
on me lie exquisite pastries, pheasants, sweets,
calamari, chorizo, and other tapas!
I am the blazing funeral pyre
upon which the financial heretics will burn.
I am the North African desert,
where human detritus starves in silver tents.
I am classical! I am great! I am strong! I am perfect!
I am the cone!
When is this insurrection of yours happening?
What could it be?
What could it look like?
Where is the revolt?
Was that your damned counterrevolutionary idea?
The penis and money being lovers?

The third aspect is maybe the most contemporary one: the sublime of great numbers, of large sums of money, especially in the case of debt. It is an uncanny fact that the historical moment, when the power center shifted from the South to the North, away from the Mediterranean sea to the Atlantic ocean in which first Antwerp, then Amsterdam and later London became the center of the world, was accompanied by a series of state-bankruptcies in Spain and a 'price revolution' all over Europe that was caused by the influx of cheap silver from the Americas. For generations of scholars the mechanism of inflation remained a mystery: silver came from the Far West to Europe and left very soon to the Far East as if attracted by a magnet. One of the great contributions of David Graeber's book "Debt. The First 5000 Years" is the solution of that mystery: China had seen a series of popular revolts that forced the government to return to silver currency. Those historical coincidences urge us to study universal history:

Gentlemen,
What is
and to what end
does one study universal history?

I am asking!
 To what end?
 The grand and broad field of
 UNIVERSALGESCHICHTE?
 To every single one of you,
 history has something important
 to say:
 from the unsociable caveman
 to the civilized man of the world.
 How many wars had to be
 waged,
 How many alliances established,
 torn apart and established anew
 to finally, finally bring Europe to
 the principle of peace!
 One day all people
 become citizens ("Bürger")
 and all citizens become brothers
 ("Brüder"):
 "BÜRGERBRÜDER"
 (citizen-brothers)
 But woe to you
 when in rivulets of fire
 the molten ore frees itself!
 Insurrection!
 That's what we are here for
 tonight:
 We came in the spirit of revolt.
 To spread panic.
 To preach violence
 and to teach
 Universalgeschichte.
 Because what do we learn from
 Universalgeschichte
 If not the lesson of violence.
 Naked violence. Brute force.
 Cruelty. Fanaticism.
 Persecution.

Is there something sublime in the
 concept of violence? A concept of 'divine
 violence' that was described by Walter
 Benjamin? Of poetic justice? Or is it only
 breeding resentment: revenge phantasies
 of the politically impotent? In Schiller's
 drama "Don Carlos", Philipp II is meeting
 with the Grand Inquisitor, and the King
 proclaims: King! Nothing but king! –No
 better answer, than an empty hollow echo?
 I strike this rock and want water for my
 hot feverish thirst –It gives me molten
 gold!

*In the performance two almost
 naked men with masks pour
 molten gold into the king's
 mouth, while the inquisitor starts
 to swear:*

My great, my best of kings,
 the molten gold,
 where does it come from,
 if not from the ovens of
 the heretics in Antwerp
 where they melt down the
 treasure of the savages
 that your ships have brought
 together with the treasures of
 our churches, that they have
 stormed
 the Protestant mob,
 that plunders our places of
 worship with the same fury
 and greed
 with which you plunder
 the temples of the Incas
 and the Maya
 and the mountain of Potosí

And so the heretics become creditors
 of a debt ("Gläubiger") for the faithful
 ("Gläubige") through the loan that the
 heretics accord the king, so that he can go
 to war with them and this is how they will
 defeat him.

The iconoclasm of 1566, which took
 place shortly before the Eighty Years'
 War began, is it not – just like the Chinese
 Cultural Revolution which took place
 exactly 400 years later - a grand example
 for the complicity of the concept of the
 sublime and political romanticism? Can
 the sublime inspire political action? Or
 is iconoclasm just another step in the
 transformation from the material fetish
 into an immaterial one of sheer numbers,
 from gold into money („Geld“):

CHORUS:
 The king is not able
 to bear the sight of the riches.
 The treasure of the Indians has
 to be melt down,
 to turn the gold into money,
 into a means of exchange,

that allows him
 to turn things
 into goods
 which thanks to the money
 can turn themselves
 into each other,
 from goods into other goods.
 And this power of
 transformation,
 of metamorphosis
 the goods owe it to the money,
 and the money owes it to the
 gold
 and the silver,
 the precious metal
 that by living labour
 was clawed out of
 the Potosí mountain
 treasure chamber of the world,
 king of the mountains.
 The envy of kings.

Philipp II hated bankers. In fact, he was
 the witness as well as the victim of their
 rise to a new shameless class of rulers.
 While in the Middle Ages a ban of interest
 rates was established by the church, the
 Renaissance put an end to this limitation
 and gave the kick-off start for capitalism.
 For many, like Max Weber, this new spirit
 was embodied in the Dutch sailor who
 would even sail through hell if it was for
 profit.

I have a question
 Where is my human mike?
 Why are we talking
 about Spain back in
 the 16th century
 When Spain today
 Is broke again?
 And why are we also
 not wondering
 Whether that is a coincidence
 Or whether we might have
 A certain pattern here?
 Who determines
 the price of the goods?
 Does the money
 follow the goods
 or do the goods
 follow the money?
 The Spanish got
 hold of gold directly
 and traded it off for goods.
 The Dutch got hold of goods
 and traded them off for gold
 and got hold of new goods.
 Now is that a coincidence
 Or do we have
 a certain pattern here?

The pattern is a certain triangle: between
 Europe, Africa and America, but also
 between money – product – more money.
 This shift takes place in the multiple

revolutions of the 16th century that
 followed Columbus' „discovery“ of the so-
 called New World. The question remains
 if the concept of the sublime also has its
 root in Europe's colonial adventures.
 While the Europeans repeatedly reported
 how they were overwhelmed by the sight
 of the landscapes of the Americas, they
 physically overwhelmed their population:
 „Like pigs they are thirsty for gold“. But
 as David Graeber showed in his book,
 these men who conquered unbelievable
 treasures were in debt themselves! In
 Graeber's perspective the history of
 oppression did not begin 500 years ago
 with colonialism, but already 5000 years
 ago – it is not a history of capital, but of
 debt. And this history has regularly led to
 social revolts. For example 444 years B.C.
 when the Biblical prophet Nehemia called
 for a grand council to abolish the system of
 debt. While Graeber was on a promotion
 tour for his book in the fall of 2011, a
 few people, including himself, followed
 the proposal of the Canadian Adbuster
 magazine to „occupy Wall Street“. They
 were awaited by a massive police force, so
 they gathered in the nearby Zuccotti Park
 (formerly Liberty Park) and started to do
 just that: to begin a grand council to call
 for an end of all debt. Which eventually,
 could only be the end of the rule of money.

How do you squat
 an imaginary space
 within an imaginary context?
 Just like money, which
 brings together
 by separating,
 whereas the stage separates
 in order to bring together.

*A production by andcompany&Co.,
 Staatstheater Oldenburg, Theater
 Frascati Amsterdam, coproduced
 by Forum Freies Theater (FFT)
 Düsseldorf and Theater im
 Pumpenhaus in Münster. The premiere
 was on 23rd of February 2013 at GO
 WEST (Festival for Dutch and Flemish
 theatre) at the state theater Oldenburg.*

*The international performance
 collective andcompany&Co. was
 founded in Frankfurt/Main in 2003.
 Founding members are theatre
 scientist, author and performer
 Alexander Karschnia, theatremaker
 and singer Nicola Nord, and musician
 and performer Sascha Sulimma.
 andcompany&Co. is an open network
 which is constantly being joined
 by artists from various disciplines
 - among them author and theatre
 director Joachim Robbrecht, visual
 artist Jan Brokof and musicians
 Reinier van Houdt and Simon Lenski.
 For the project "The (coming)
 insurrection following Friedrich
 Schiller" they were further joined by
 the actors Rüdiger Hauffe, Hartmut
 Schories, Vincent van der Valk and
 Ward Weemhoff. The text was written
 by Alexander Karschnia, Nicola Nord,
 Joachim Robbrecht&Co., the stage
 designed by Jan Brokof. (Photographs:
 Hans Jörg Michel): www.andco.de*



Oxana Timofeeva - Joan Copjec

The sublime is sexual: A dialogue in two

Date: Tue, 18 June 2013 23:401
From: Oxana Timofeeva
To: Joan Copjec

Dear Joan,

A while ago I could hardly imagine talking about the sublime. This notion acquired a bad reputation over the course of the 20th century, being associated with catastrophes, abuses and mass violence. It seemed that the sublime could not produce anything but irritation and nausea, particularly in the context of so-called postmodern culture. The sublime was identified with immeasurable greatness and forces far beyond human perception and cognition, making us regard it with suspicion and associate it with the enemy or evil. Furthermore, the notion of the sublime appears to resist critical intervention and should be therefore avoided altogether - especially in contemporary art, which seeks social engagement, interactivity, and communication. By contrast, the sublime entails a rupture in communication: together with greatness of scale it brings about trauma, and humanity has had enough of that already.

Nevertheless, the sublime has different faces, complicating this straightforward interpretation. In my view, there is not only one sublime but at least two. There is the sublime of the "oppressors" (as you noted in *Imagine There's No Woman?*, the one that Kant opposes, as "masculine and great, or powerful" to the idea of beauty, which is "feminine and small"), and there is the sublime of the "oppressed." Both were cherished by the romantics: the horizon of the sublime stretched from a solitary figure or a noble rebel, who challenged and/or conquered the world, to popular movements and collective struggles for independence. I find this dialectic of the sublime extremely interesting, especially since the notion has survived after a series of collapses. But there is yet another sublime.

In your book *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*, I discern traces of this other sublime. Even if you hardly mention this aesthetic category so important to Kant - only in so far as it concerns its ethical implications - it surfaces through your various topics and examples. From Greek tragedy, modern art, cinema, history, psychoanalysis, philosophy, the notion of some(no)thing which should(not) and/but can(not) be mentioned / (re)presented / performed persists. I would not simply label it as the sublime, although this description coincides with one of its wider definitions.

The other-sidedness of the sublime can be crucial. Immortality do not simply disappear with their meaning. As you observe, Hegel was very much outside of history or, indeed, the world. At that infinity has a place within history itself, a political act. Of course, this should not be confused with the world and torturing its victims in the name of the other sublime fits into this position of infinity as an ethical act but also a political one.

In talking about the persistence of infinity with the sublime or the uncanny, emphasizing that this can be terrifying to something nice, habitual or lovely, the unfamiliar shows itself through the very familiar, deeply forgotten, the very material of the unconscious in individual life, as an uncanny appearance of the self.

This repetition interrupts the logic of infinite desire, precisely what was at stake for the romantics, and what was at stake for the romantics, and what was at stake for the romantics. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe notes in his "Prometheus Bound" tradition, from Holderlin and Shelling to Heidegger and Ungeheuer (extraordinary, unusual, strange, but also monstrous). How is it possible for the sublime to appear as obscene, a scandal, a profane, a vulgar? At the same time, isn't it true that the sublime through the lens of historical truth can produce something particularly in psychoanalysis and art? What is the

Best from Berlin,
Oxana

Joan Copjec is Professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. Until recently she was Director of the Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture at the University at Buffalo and founding editor of its journal, *Umbr(a)*. She is also the author of *Read My Desire* (1994); *Imagine There's No Woman* (2002); and the forthcoming *Cloud: Between Paris and Tehran* (all from MIT Press). She was also editor of a book series, *S*, published by Verso Press and of the New York art journal *October*.

Oxana Timofeeva is a Senior research fellow at the Institute of Philosophy of Russian Academy of Science (Moscow), a Humboldtian fellow at Humboldt University in Berlin, a member of *Chto Delat*, the author of books "Introduction to the Erotic Philosophy of Georges Bataille" (Moscow, 2009), and "History of Animals: An Essay on Negativity, Immanence and Freedom" (Maastricht, 2012).



C o emails

tically questioned. Consider your proposal that infinity and emergence of modernity; rather, they completely change the critical of the sublime because it presupposed a position at the same time, in your analysis of Kant's work, you emphasize that this opens up the challenging possibility of an ethical stance with the "heroic" posture of a fascist master conquering the world by an external Law imposed on others. I suggest that this is not within history, thus opening up the possibility not only for an

within history, you engage with the Freudian notion of Unheimlich. The category is not the opposite of canny or homely, as something is. Rather, it produces a shift within "homely." Suddenly, the familiar, shattering its borders. This unfamiliar is something that is unconscious. Through repetition, it appears both in history and in art of an erased historical truth in one's life, work or in art.

expansion and linear progress. This interruption was prevented and it was later transformed by the revolutionary avant-garde. The problematic of the Sublime," from Rilke, through a post-Kantian philosopher, the meaning of the sublime passes to Unheimliche (strange), related to the Greek deinos (surprising, miraculous, these seemingly contradictory meanings to coincide? Uncanny is even the "lowest of lows," as opposed to "great and powerful" by reaching it through a certain identity (feminine, Jewish) and to produce a strong effect of liberation, one that we encounter parallel to the place of the feminine drive and love in all of this?



Date: Mon, 1 Jul 2013 3:26 AM
From: Joan Copjec
To: Oxana Timofeeva

Dear Oxana,

I must confess I share your hesitations on the topic of the sublime. We learned to regard the Romantic quest for transcendence with deep suspicion. When thinking of all those solitary Romantic figures traveling through the rough and lush countryside, rapturously communing with nature, we want to put as much distance between them and ourselves as possible. Badiou has aptly described the way the romantic element persisted in the 20th-century flight into anti-romanticism, making us all the more reluctant to engage with the sublime, as if mere proximity to it would put our thinking in jeopardy because of its toxic effects. It is this reluctance that prompted me, in my essay, "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason," to develop an argument about the relationships between Kant's "antinomies," (that conceptualize the two ways in which reason collapses on itself as it encounters something that it cannot think) and Lacan's formulas of "sexuation" that distinguish between two kinds of subjective splitting: male and female. I chose in my argument to focus on the antinomies or foundering of reason, though Kant in his later work returns to these antinomies to describe two types of the sublime: one concerned with powerful forces and the other concerned with imagining successive parts of a whole. The first is the dynamic sublime, and the second, the mathematical sublime.

I noticed the correspondence between Kant's "antinomies" and Lacan's "formulas" long before I had the courage to sit down and put my ideas on paper. While the correspondence was clear to me, the reason why there could be a correspondence was not. What did the foundering of reason, its meeting with two types of impasse, have to do with the difference between the male and female subject? I did not want to offer a mere analogy but something deeper, an ontological argument. Therefore, I decided to provide as detailed a demonstration as I could of the striking resemblances between the two logics, emphasizing how their linkage mattered to our conception of psychoanalysis, as opposed to the subject of philosophy. The fact that there were two sets of antinomies contradicted the singularity of the sublime experience, or, differently thought, the universality of the subjective structure. This observation compelled me to push forward.

You are right that in my book, *Imagine There's No Woman*, I address the question of sublimation (rather than the sublime), via an examination of ethics and acts, rather than aesthetics. This is because I was again steering away from the Kant's later work, tainted by its Romantic celebration. It is easy to see why the Romantics privileged the dynamic sublime: first, because it appears to stage a false clash between the force of reason and that of nature, and second, because it promotes the logic of the solitary, heroic exception removed from the rest of the world. Kant, however, privileged mathematical antinomies, which are much less "spectacular," albeit more fundamental. Given that I was trying to align the dynamic sublime with male subjectivity and the mathematical sublime with female subjectivity, it appeared that the "male antinomies" figured or represented the sublime as such, while the "female antinomies" persisted "underneath," hidden, a kind of support. The examples of the "feminine act" I looked at in *Imagine There's No Woman* came therefore from the more "homely" genre of melodrama, where I focused on a mother's absenting herself from the scene of her daughter's wedding and the silhouettes of the black, American artist, Kara Walker. The very medium Walker chooses, black paper cut-outs, to say nothing of the actions she depicted – slaves and masters sucking, puncturing, torturing each other's body parts – were the very opposite of the Grand Narratives and Re-creations through which we are accustomed to represent the History of the Antebellum South. Far from sublime transcendence, what we have here are characters in the "thick of it," literally throwing and sliding around in shit. Yet it seems clear that Walker's is a real ethical act.

Recently I began to explore how to connect the formulas of sexuation (of the embodied or sexed subject) more directly to questions of aesthetics and the sublime. This relates to your remark about the meaning of the sublime's passing into the notion of the uncanny. Your reference opens a door onto a world of highly relevant associations with Kant's rigorous anti-skepticism. If the uncanny distinguishes itself from similar notions – the fantastic, for example – it is because the former has nothing to do with confusion or ambiguity, but is rather a matter of certainty, though not a certainty that can be established by empirical facts. While the phenomenon of the uncanny can be found in reality, it is, as Freud observed, more often found as an aesthetic phenomenon. Kant's critical theory postulated that we cannot know anything from experience, since we never have an experience of causality, or of the necessity or universality of anything. To shore up knowledge and avoid the skepticism that follows from empiricism, Kant deduced a priori concepts whose source was independent of experience; these ideas belonged to reason. That is, it is through ideas of reason that the subject is able to go beyond – or to transcend, rise above – the empirical. Yet, the Freudian notion of the uncanny does not point to a place above or outside; it infiltrates the homeliest, the most mundane, places.

Kant's later work on the sublime is usually thought to be the capstone of this argument, inasmuch as the subject is posited as a lonely, transcendent lord of all that is lowly and empirical. Yet I have begun to think that the opposite is true. Kant subverts his own theory by positing, in his work on the sublime and aesthetic judgment, an a priori state of pleasure. This is remarkable and quite inconceivable to Kant before this point, for he had always been dismissive of pleasure, which he wanted to overcome through reason. In contemplating aesthetic judgment, however, he had to admit the existence of a pleasure that is not elicited by material objects. This belated insight, that there is a "higher form of pleasure," begins to dismantle the transcendental structure Kant had erected, and that had until this point theoretically allowed man to rise above and legislate over the empirical world. However, if the Kantian subject encounters itself as affected, then it encounters itself as immanent rather than transcendental to the world. The empirical itself must therefore contain the means for its own "alterability" – this is a better term than "transcendence." In his *Encore* seminar, (i.e., his seminar on feminine sexuality) Lacan made a similar argument: if there is a higher faculty of pleasure, it is evidenced in "bizarre signs on the body." Ever since the death of the God-principle, he said, the means of "transcendence" can only be located en-corpore, in the a posteriori site of an a priori pleasure. The sublime is thus an experience of the body, not of the body's transcendence by reason. If there are two sublimes, this must mean that there are two ways to experience one's body and its capacities. It is in this direction that I want to take the discussion of sexual difference.

To end here, I realize, is to mimic a very short essay in which Freud tried to draw an analogy between a child's toy and the human psyche. He ended his seemingly minor essay and inconsequential argument abruptly, on a point that comes suddenly, "out of the blue." Freud blurted out that the description he had just given of psychic functioning was equivalent to Kant's description of the birth of time. The reader feels frustrated: why didn't Freud say this in the first place? Why didn't he give us time and a reason to accept this astonishing equivalence? It is clear, however, that this observation only presented itself to Freud at the last minute; he did not have time to understand it himself. I, too, am writing from the farthest reaches of what I am just beginning to understand – thanks to your provocative questions.

At the same time, I will compound the problem by admitting that I am now starting to realize that time is not born in the disembodied psyche but in the modern body body has always been associated with time, with the finitude of time, since the body has an end: it develops, becomes decrepit, and dies. The ancients tried to remove time from the body by inventing an ideal and eternal form for it: the beautiful body. It is remarkable that while her male colleagues were singing the praises of the sublime, Mary Shelley invented Frankenstein: a body that was all parts, no whole. The hysterics with their flailing limbs, uncontrolled by will and Melanie Klein's theory of (body) part objects came next; these women seemed to catch on quicker than men that the modern body is different. It has become the seat of a temporality that can no longer be denied since there is no longer a non-temporal, eternal world to sustain this one. I want to argue that Freud discovered sexuality as the temporal dynamics of the body (recall that he always spoke of sexuality in temporal terms: as too late, or too early, never on time). Just as the uncanny appears in modernity to haunt canny, domestic spaces, so the untimely haunts time, putting it "out of joint"; infinity begins to inhabit or haunt the finite. Just as the empirical develops the means of overcoming itself, so the finite, sexualized subject finds the means of transcending time within time. The logic of modern time is a logic of the embodied act.

Best,
Joan

Yoel Regev

The sublime and revolution: on Romanticism in art



This statement of Lenin's has to do with literature, but it can doubtless be extended to apply to works of art overall. The essence of the "art work" is defined here proceeding from two basic elements:

- 1) a sort of "exactly like this," an establishing of acuity that clarifies and reveals the contours of the "approximate," and
- 2) the "communiqué from the battlefield" that contains a certain kind of "tremendous effectiveness." The interrelation between these two aspects of the work remains unresolved; both of them, however, are opposed to the "aesthetic" that Lenin mocks.

2. The definition of an art work based on the "direct strike" model at first glance seems to be naïve, and moreover to assume an idea about art as the mimetic representation of a reality that precedes and is independent from that art; its precision and acuity are determined by their correspondence to something "felt" and "stated" at some concrete time and place. To some extent, however, the opposite is the case.

The important thing is not "the painting," but "the strike": this maxim from Pushkin's "The Shot" goes a long way toward defining the essence of the revolution in the understanding of art that has been taking shape over the past two hundred years. The qualities of this or that target are secondary in importance to the strike itself: to the feeling of "I don't know why, but it should be exactly like this," which constitutes the true content of the *je ne sais quoi* that determines a judgment of taste. This is why art must be liberated from the necessity of "corresponding" and "expressing": the subjugation of the "direct strike" to the primacy of truth and goodness obscures the essence of art, which manifests as a sphere of pure "striking within" or "striking oneself." Any painting is merely a space for the realization of a shot that strikes a shot.

3. Kant's Critique of Judgment is a manifesto for this revolution, which is carried out in the name of the "pure strike." In essence, the ability to judge is nothing if not the capacity to strike; while the reflective capacity to judge, one that places the private beneath the as-yet-nonexistent general (the third critique is devoted to the search for a transcendental principle for this capacity) – this is striking without the concept that precedes it, striking as such. The Pushkinian model, however, also points to the ambiguity that accompanies this liberation: striking the strike turns out to be making a hole in something already punched through. And it is precisely this kind of mutual double-hole-punching that guarantees the location of art between the two extremes of "the beautiful" and "the sublime."

4. The fact that the aesthetic is a sphere of "striking as such" allows it to serve as an intermediary sphere, one that provides a transition between the "kingdom of nature" and the "kingdom of liberty," the theoretical and the practical. The necessity of the theoretical and the necessity of the practical are based on this or that concrete type of "strike" (the a priori laws and conditions of which are the subject of Kant's first two criticisms); however, in addition to the fact that these are "striking" one or another concrete target, they are also "striking within themselves" –; and this shared quality of theirs must be revealed BY "aesthetic." In other words, both the theoretical and practical necessity presume, as it were, a certain third necessity, which creates a superstructure above them as they unfold, a kind of shadowy additional upper storey: and the sphere of the aesthetic must provide for the immediate fixation of this "shadowy" thing. The problem, however, lies in the fact that the phantom remains a phantom: the "beautiful" and the "sublime" are two shades that appear following a certain kind of "endless dying" of truth and goodness. Without going into the details of what formal method is used to bring about this mortification in each of these two cases, we will note only that both demonstrate differently proportioned combinations of the "random" and the "necessary," in which the need for a rational concept or the need for a regulative idea of reason are both present – but precisely through being absent and disappearing. The task of art becomes "striking disappearance."

5. Thus, the process of liberating "striking within" in the framework of the aesthetic is revealed to be partial and torn down the middle: having liberated itself from the necessity of corresponding to truth or goodness, art nevertheless continues to be subjugated to the primacy of a more transparent (but perhaps because of this even more effectively enslaving) target: the necessity of directly striking an ideally balanced combination of the necessary and the random, that would provide conditions in which the process of the slippage of necessity would, on the one hand, occur; but would on the other hand never end with its total dispersion. The "direct strike" is present onstage, but always behind a mask, as it is tied to and shielded by slippage: this is the basic formula for Romanticism in art. Romanticism in this sense is liberation halted halfway through, interrupted by revolution; in this sense it is the bourgeois art par excellence (since capitalism, too, is a revolution ground to a halt halfway through and interrupted by itself).

6. From this point of view, contemporary art on the whole continues to be predominantly Romantic and bourgeois. The movement back and forth between these two poles has to a large extent determined the development of art from the mid-20th century; they represent extreme points of the development of the beautiful and the sublime as two complexes of "slipping necessity." On the one hand we have the tendency (which originates in minimalism and abstract expressionism) to create "enchanted sensual presence": objects endowed with the irresistible power of "self-imposition," regardless the fact that the universality of this "self-imposition" exceeds any and all rational-conceptual interpretations and

"...but what struck me was not the painting itself, but the fact that it had been shot through by two bullets, lodged in one atop the other"

A. Pushkin, "The Shot"

1. In the article "Henri Barbusse," Lunacharsky presents the following statement by Lenin:

The important thing in a work of literature is that the reader not doubt the truth of what is depicted. With his every nerve the reader feels that everything happened precisely in this way, was felt, experienced and stated in this way. This is what excites me most in [the work of] Barbusse. After all, I already knew that it was supposed to be approximately like this, and here Barbusse tells me that it really is so...

Yakov Mikhailovich put it well. He read Under Fire and said: "A very effective communiqué from the battlefield!" Isn't that well stated? Properly speaking, in our decisive times, when we have entered into a long series of wars and revolutions, the true writer should be writing no more and no less than "communiqués from the battlefield," and his artistic strength should be directed toward making these "communiqués" tremendously effective.

Ilych [Lenin] suddenly laughed. "But you're our aesthete! You're shocked by such a narrow view of the tasks of art." And, squinting at me slyly, Ilych chuckled quietly.

theoretical substantiations. On the other hand, we have a movement that begins with the "random method" of Cage and Cunningham, as well as performance art and conceptualism: the compilation of a sort of "regulative algorithm" that subsequently comes in one way or another into contact with material reality, and is manifested through enduring various random changes. Essentially, we are talking about a static or dynamic combination of the random and the necessary: they are either maximally adjacent and block off any possibility of movement in the frozen perceptual presence of the object, or they take turns in the process of realizing an action. The merging of these two principles, which is characteristic of art in the last few decades (as a result of which the concrete mode of social or political existence and functioning is becoming a sort of "minimalist object"), bears witness to the desire to go beyond the limits of the situation, but does not lead to any qualitative change: the double slippage of practical and theoretical necessity remains a certain type of limit, which establishes the boundaries of the field within which contemporary art is developing.

7. How can the continuation of the revolution be possible, when it has been halted halfway through? The power of Romanticism, its internal resistance to all attempts to overcome it, lies in the truth about the sphere of the aesthetic (or, still more precisely, of the sphere-without-a-sphere, which makes possible the interaction between theory and practice), which is expressed in the dialectic of the beautiful and the sublime, albeit indirectly. The opposition and mutual transformation of the conceptual and the minimalist constitute a sort of speculative judgment, which expresses this essence of the Romantic consciousness (that always remains hidden from it itself). The truth of the minimalist object ("the necessary and the random are inseparably combined in one") and the truth of the conceptualist action ("the necessary and the random oppose one another and seek to oust one another in ceaseless struggle"), the truth of the beautiful (concordance that is non-coordination) and the truth of the sublime (non-coordination that is concordance) must be combined and kept back at the same time. A similar retention is possible only with the condition of an immediate approach to the sphere that is indirectly characterized by the alternation of these truths – the sphere of coincidence. In ordinary usage, coincidence describes a situation that cannot be reduced to either connectedness or the absence of a connection: the sequence of elements, the connection between which cannot be either denied or reduced to some one rule. The unmediated approach to this sphere (which is simultaneously both "neither necessary nor random" and "both necessary and random") should be secured by the answer to the basic question of Kant's critiques – the question of the connectedness of the unconnected as such, or of the synthetic a priori, – a question that Kant himself never gives an answer to, substituting instead the question of the transcendental and the a priori.

8. The explication of speculative intervention, which makes possible immediate access to the sphere of pure holding together of the distinct, is not our task at present. Here we will be satisfied with an answer to the question: what kind of art is art whose regulative principle is coincidence? What form will "striking within itself" take when it is liberated from subjugation not only to goodness and truth, but also slippage? We find the answer to this question in the second part of Lenin's statement. Art is characterized as an "unusually effective communiqué from the battlefield." Striking the strike is striking the conflict, a strike not merely mimetically reproductive and passive, but effective and active.

9. In essence, the question about the means of revealing the "basic conflict" continues to be one of major importance on the materialist dialectic agenda; to a large extent, the very possibility of this dialectic depends upon successful resolution of the conflict. And precisely in this instance the role of illegitimately materialist art can be definitive.

"The one splits in two" is the basic principle of the dialectic as such: no phenomenon or person is a monolithic unity – but neither does either represent a chaotic multiplicity of influences and forces; they are a war in which two fundamentally opposed elements are opposed to each other. However, what is the essence of this conflict? As Althusser so aptly points out, this is precisely the point of the fundamental divide between the materialist and idealist dialectic. The idealist dialectic always defines conflict proceeding from how the latter is perceived from within the situation, and accepts unaltered the truth that it utters about itself (for example, as in Hegel's dialectic, where the religion and philosophy that characterize one or another "figure of consciousness" are examined as the most highly-concentrated expressions of the dialectic's truth). The materialist dialectic, meanwhile, proceeds from the understanding of the fact that the true fundamental conflict is always shifted in relation to those "too human" interpretations, to which the conflict is subject within this or that inter-situational ideology.

10. The fundamental conflict of every situation should be revealed on the basis of "concrete analysis of concrete circumstances" – that is, as the "different" that keeps returning over the course of repeating collisions and oppositions. These oppositions can relate to completely different causal series and take up position in completely unconnected spheres – precisely for this, within the situation they can never be recognized as parts of one and the same general opposition, as different battles of one war. However, carrying out this kind of analysis requires a sort of "detritorialization" of the conflict, which liberates it from its pathological and private elements, but at the same time preserves its concrete essence untouched. The coincidental ontology that allows us to conceptualize the substantialness of the coincidence is a necessary condition for such a liberation, whereby the different collisions are not reduced to some kind of

“unity” but are also not left in their state of fragmentation. However, in concrete form for each given situation, such a deterritorialization can be carried out precisely through means found at the disposal of art.

11. The “direct strike” that is the essence of an art work is always a “communiqué from the battlefield”: a strike into the “basic conflict” about which we, since we are located inside the situation, can only ever know that it is “approximately this way”; its essence becomes accessible for cognition due to the “imposition of acuity” brought about by the work of art. The effectiveness of such a strike lies in the fact that it is not passive with respect to its own aim: there is no clear or distinct conflict prior to the strike; it truly comes to exist only through the strike and thanks to it.

The obviousness and acute contours of a basic conflict that shifts the boundaries of the anthropomorphic and ideological against the ambiguity of slippage: this is the frontline that divides truly revolutionary art from Romantic art. The basic conflict is always “still not defined” inside the situation, always slips away from attempts to grasp it: however, the fixation of this slippage still remains an “all-too-human” abstraction. The unity of the practical and theoretical is not the unity of that which is absent and surpassing, but rather the clear and distinct union of the war that engages thought and action in each concrete moment: and it is precisely art, as the sphere of the obvious fixation of the coincidental, that possesses the necessary resources for providing immediate access to the essence of confrontation.

It is better to perceive the shifted conflict as a shadow than to not perceive it at all: for this reason, at a certain stage Romanticism is progressive. However, when art acquires the opportunity to become an effective mechanism for changing reality, this progressive quality begins to turn reactionary. The contraposition of the crude mercantile everyday to an eternally changing and slipping reality that surpasses that everyday is good, but only as a first step. Diagnosing reality as being non adequate to itself is a necessary condition for initializing treatment; however, at a moment when the necessary means for bringing reality into a state of equality to itself are already at hand, lamentations over reality’s self-slippage only encourage and multiply decadent inclinations. The direct strike of art should become a shot that decimates the bearers of such states of mind. In other words, Romanticism should be shot – that is, its internal essence should be made apparent – that of a shot lodging in directly atop a shot.

I am grateful to Masha Shtutman for the conversations that enabled the writing of this text.

Translated from Russian by Ainsley Morse

Yoel Regev is a philosopher, born in Moscow, 1972, and based in Jerusalem. His major interests are focused into the field of contemporary thought and materialist dialectics; he published works which deal with the recent developments in philosophy, aesthetics and contemporary art.



Alexey Penzin

From Philistine to Activist and Back.

“Romantic Fragments” from Reactionary Times

In the varied fragments to follow, I would like to raise the problem of the contemporary meaning of the term “philistine,” the primary political-aesthetic figure that emerged out of the culture of Romanticism. This work was “inspired” by several recent events, by the repressive and barbaric atmosphere that reigned after a year of mass protests in 2011-2012 in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other cities in Russia.

Once the post-Soviet ruling class recovered from the bewilderment of the protests, they took measures aimed at suppressing all forms of autonomous political activity, but also launched a massive takeover of cultural production and the contemporary social sphere. New “effective managers” are now trying to rebuild these areas according to their own views and neoliberal economic logic in order to ensure the acceptance of their domination through a forcibly engineered conservative majority.

The protests that swept across the globe in recent years have without a doubt given rise, in varying degrees, to similar problems in different contexts. The wave of reactions gradually reveals the contours of a certain “philistine state,” triggering fierce antagonisms, polemics, and arguments, all with a substantial prehistory.

It is easy to imagine how a hypothetical dispute between a philistine and an activist, or a philistine and a Romantic, would play out today:

Two former classmates, a philistine and a Romantic, run into each other on a city street.

Philistine: Well, hello! Long time no see!

Romantic: Indeed! Longer than I can even remember!

Philistine: Yes, it feels like since the nineteenth century!

They laugh.

Romantic: How are you? How are things?

Philistine: Good! Things have been going particularly well for the past thirty years. I’ve been travelling the world - here today, there tomorrow.

Romantic: I can tell just from looking at you that you are doing well for yourself. ... of course, these days one’s appearance says very little.

Philistine: Yes, but you’re right. I am doing well. You, on the other hand, look a little worn out. But maybe that’s the fashion. Ah, bohemia! Culture and poverty all in one. High aspirations and the dark, low ceilings of cheap apartment.

Romantic: I can see not much has changed since the last time we saw each other. But then again, much has changed around us. And bohemians today are not what they used to be. They’ve industrialized, as they say. Now everyone’s life is unstable, unsettled, and unreliable, like the bohemian.

Philistine: Not really everyone. Look at me, I am enjoying a stable life, so much so that it bores even me at times. Probably most people today live just like me. The rest are just marginal. I am sure you are enjoying great adventures as always.

Romantic: Some. I was arrested the other day for taking part in an “illegal” rally. I just couldn’t stay away: holding a handful of activists under arrest for over a year with trumped-up charges is such a vile, disgusting lie. The bastards!

Philistine: You’re still dabbling in such things? Politics ... Friend, I will tell you now what I said 100 years ago: it all ended long ago. Your guys are throwing empty punches. You want to change the world, but the result is worse than where you started. There’s no need for me to continue, this is not news to you ...

Romantic: I can’t believe what I’m hearing! Are you following the latest developments? Did you see how many people came out

to protest? Tens of millions of people from different countries are not “marginal” - or “extremists” as the smug president of Turkey recently denigrated the protesters. Another said similar things in Egypt but he’s no longer the president but is probably sitting in prison somewhere. While here, in Russia, our president what’s-his-name also cursed the protesters...

Philistine: Hmm, interesting. I have to admit I didn’t really pay attention to this news. I think I read something on the internet about it. I usually just read the “Sports” and “Finance” columns, and sometimes I look at “Real Estate.”

Romantic: Even “Finance” doesn’t look very encouraging these days, and besides all the “columns” in this world are connected. You have no excuse for not caring.

Philistine: I do not know what the problems are here. Behave correctly and you won’t run into problems. Some people act on stupid, exulted impulses. They agitate for a week or two, a month or maybe even a year. Then they disperse and the police retaliate with more repression. And all the while, people like me are doing all the necessary, daily work.

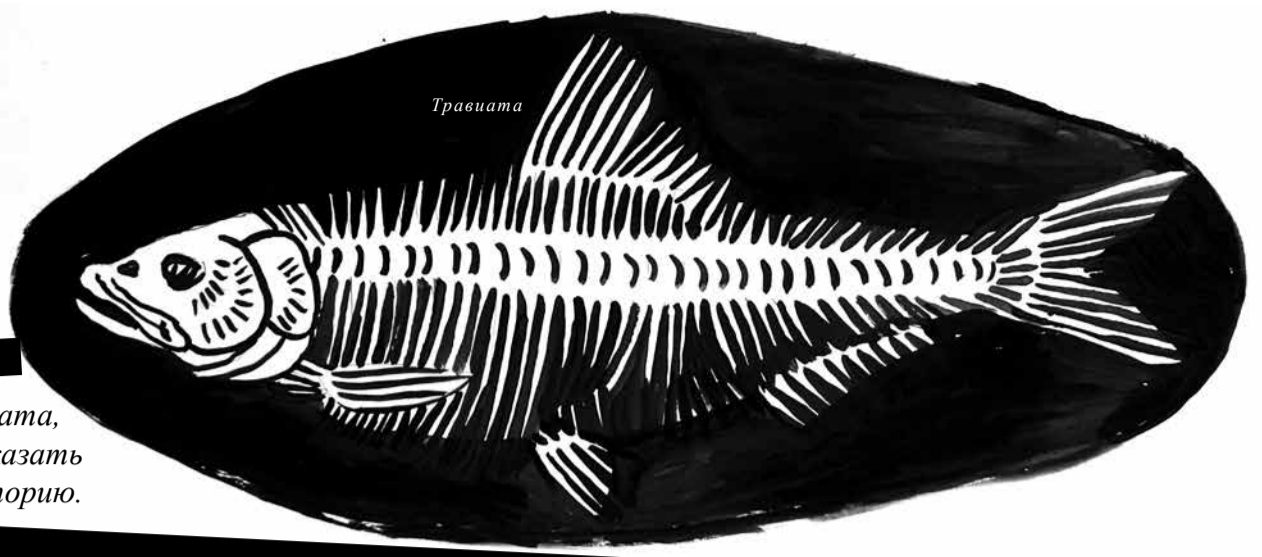
Romantic: It’s not people like you who are doing the work! People like you are just tightening the noose around the neck of the average Joe!

Philistine: Well, at least we have a sense of humor and a healthy cynicism. As for you, sufferers for the downtrodden, you are unshakably serious. Too much enthusiasm, too much pathos. Losers exaggerating their own misfortune by criticizing everything in existence. You only live once! Look at how much happiness there is around you. Although, you and I ... yes, we’ve gone on too long. But somehow we don’t go out of fashion. Like Humpty Dumpty, we’re still sitting on the wall.

Romantic: You’re the one sitting on the wall, paid for with oil money. But, we do enjoy a sense of humor. And what a sense of humor it is! We have a famous philosopher who has long been

THE HERRING BLUES

story by
Nikolay OLEYNIKOV



1.

HI THERE, I AM TRAVIATA - AND I'M GOING TO TELL YOU MY STORY, LIKE THEY ASKED ME TO.

2.

ACTUALLY, IT'S OUR STORY. BECAUSE IF IT WERE JUST ABOUT ME, THEN THERE WOULD BE NO STORY TO TELL, AND I WOULD PROBABLY STILL BE HANGING AROUND THE DARK WATERS OF THE ATLANTICS ALONG WITH A BANK OF HERRINGS, ALL ALONE WITH MY DREAMS OF THE SUBLIME.

3.

EVER SINCE I WAS STILL A FISH-EGG, I DREAMED OF SINGING IN THE OPERA, AND THROUGH MY SINGING TO INSPIRE MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS; THEY EVEN NAMED ME TRAVIATA.

4.

NATURALLY, I ORGANIZED A CIRCLE OF OPERA LOVERS, WHERE WE GATHERED, READ THE OPERAISTAS, LISTENED TO THE OPERA, SANG THE BLUES AND PRACTICED; OUR CIRCLE SOON BECAME AN ACTIVE MILITANT ARTISTIC BRIGADE.

5.

AT SOME POINT, WE LEARNED ABOUT THE GROUP CHTO DELAT? THROUGH OUR CHANNELS, AND WE GOT REALLY EXCITED BECAUSE THEY WERE PRACTICALLY DOING THE SAME THINGS AS WE WERE. WE THEN GOT WORD THAT THEY WERE COMING TO HAMBURG TO MAKE A PERFORMANCE ABOUT THE WONDER OF ART AND THE POSSIBILITY OF TRANSFORMATION THAT IT PRODUCES.

6.

WE ALMOST IMMEDIATELY DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE. ALL OF US VOTED. A UNANIMOUS DECISION. EVERYONE UNDERSTOOD WHY THEY WERE TAKING PART, AND WERE HIGHLY AWARE WHAT FOR. FOR THE WONDER OF ART, OF THE TRANSFORMATION, AND OF THE SUBLIME. OF COURSE, EVERYONE WAS SHIT-SCARED, BUT...

7.

THE REST WAS SIMPLE:
1) WE CHOSE A FITTING DRAGNET AND SWAM UP CLOSER TO IT. HOP!
2) A REFRIGERATOR
3) SALT, SUGAR, VINEGAR, SPICES, EMULSIFIERS.

8.

WE ARRIVED AT THE FISHMARKET AT 4 IN THE MORNING AND ALL WE HAD TO DO WAS WAIT. THEN THEY CAME FOR US.

9.

NEXT - THE DAY OF THE SHOOT: CAMERA, ACTION, LIGHTS, TSAPLYA - THE DIRECTOR.

OUR DREAM CAME TRUE!

10.

THEY CAPTURED EVERYONE ON CAMERA. ALMOST EVERYONE. MY BROTHER TROTSKY WAS EATEN BY SKIDAN AND VILENSKY. BUT TROTSKY WAS FINE ABOUT IT, THAT'S FOR SURE!

FIN

1. Привет, я – Травиата, меня тут попросили рассказать вам мою историю.



2.

Нашу историю. Конечно, если бы я была одна – не было бы вообще никакой истории и я бы, наверное, так и продолжала плавать в толпе других сельдей, в темных водах Атлантики, наедине со своими мечтами о высоком.

3.

С тех пор как еще была икрой, я мечтала петь в опере, и своим пением вдохновлять своих сестер и братьев, вот меня и назвали Травиатой.

THE BLUES, THE BLUES,
I TELL YA WHAT THE
BLUES IS -
WHEN YOU AIN'T GOT
NO FOOD -
THIS IS THA BLUES

П. Вурно и А. Негри

WHEN YOU AIN'T GOT
NO MONEY TO PAY
YOUR RENT-
THIS IS THA BLUES,
RIGHT?
...



4.

Разумеется, я организовала кружок любителей оперы, где мы собирались, читали операистов, слушали оперу, пели блюзы и тренировались, и, наш кружок довольно быстро стал действующей боевой творческой бригадой.



О. Тимофеева

и А. Скидан



5.

Ну и в какой-то момент, по своим каналам мы узнали про «Что делать» и офигели, потому что они там делали практически тоже самое, что мы здесь. А потом нам сообщили, что они приезжают в Гамбург делать перформанс про чудо искусства и про возможность трансформации, которую оно производит

6.

Решение участвовать созрело быстро. Проголосовали все. Единогласно. Конечно, все понимали, на что идем, и четко осознавали ради чего. Ради чуда искусства, ради трансформации, ради возвышенного. Конечно было страшно, но...

ДАЛЬШЕ ВСЕ БЫЛО ПРОСТО:

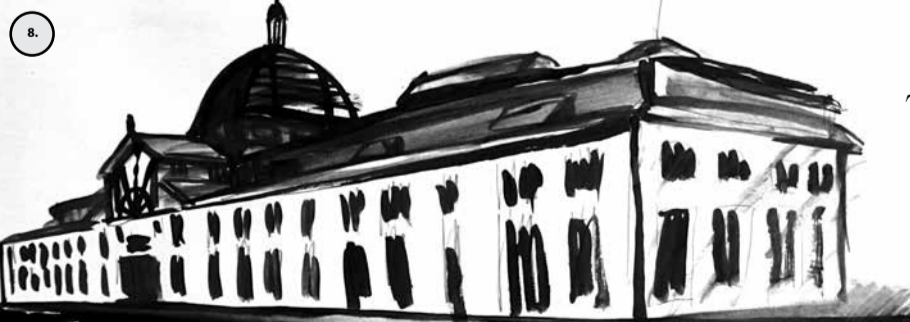
7.



4 a.m.

1) Выбрали подходящий трал, подплыли поближе, и - оп! 2) Холодильник; 3) Соль, сахар, уксус, специи, эмульгаторы

На фишмаркете мы оказались в 4 утра, нам оставалось только ждать. И за нами пришли.



Фишмаркт, Гамбург

9.

Дальше – съемочный день: камера, мотор, софиты, режиссер Цапля.

Мечта сбылась!



10.

В кадр попали все. Почти. Моего брата по имени Троцкий съели Скидан с Виленским. Но Троцкий не в обиде, сто пудов!



combining lectures with stand-up comedy. You could not imagine what cynical jokes he makes! His lectures are filled by young people with hungry eyes. Through his jokes he conveys very serious issues. Although sometimes he repeats so many jokes that one might think there is not much that is serious in what he says ...

Philistine: I haven't heard of him. I did hear recently that one guy from Italy, a comedian, almost won the elections - can you imagine? They even wrote about it in "Finance"! He sounds like your famous philosopher. The truth hurts, even when it's told through jokes and rhymes. This is one thing I understand.

Romantic: Yes, but we value all that is sublime because it makes people excited, it encourages them to take action! It shows us that there are things in life beyond every-day worries: like the struggle for liberation, the power of people to come together, despite their small circles...

Philistine (*interrupting*): Blah, blah, blah. Well, it's time for me to go. By the way, I was recently asked to head a museum for contemporary art. They said the previous management was ineffective because it didn't meet the demands of today's dynamic society. Maybe we can meet sometime to talk about it? I need some creative solutions! Even strange people like you could be useful! And you'll get your "sublime."

Romantic: They hand museums over to people like you? Not over my dead body! We will protest!

The philistine walks away offended.

Romantic (*stops to think and then waves his hand*): Hey, wait! Take down my phone number!

Such a debate could go on for a long time. It is unlikely it would reach a resolution in today's society.

A year before the unprecedented massive protests that began in December 2011 in Russia, sociologist Carine Clément and her colleagues published the book *From Philistine to Activist. Emerging Social Movements in Contemporary Russia*. The book was based on a significant amount of empirical data and it investigated new social movements of the 2000s.

In analyzing the formation of these social movements, Clément used an entirely non-standard model for the social sciences. Namely, her model was built on an opposition between the "philistine" (passive, apolitical) and the activist. The book presented testimonies of individuals who described their experience as they transitioned to the activist position. These participants of social movements admitted that they began to see their lives from a new vantage point—namely, in relation to the public assemblies in which they were included. They spoke about acquiring greater levels of self-esteem, confidence, strength, and about feeling solidarity and readiness to defend their convictions.

The choice of terms used in this study to describe the process of politicization is both interesting and symptomatic, while not being limited to local relevance. The figure of the "philistine" was never a clear-cut social or political category. Actually, the philistine always functioned as a part of polemical language, denoting a form of life that made up the border between political and cultural emancipation. The appeal of this term in the post-Soviet condition can be explained by the collapse of traditional class identities after the shock-inducing "transition to a market economy" of the 1990s. However, as this figure was invented by the artists, politicians and theorists over the course of the 19th century, it also activates this entire history, hanging like a shadow over our political present.

This model of understanding political subjectivization suddenly emerged in the field of contemporary social research—it is, without a doubt, Romantic. The philistine is at the same time an enemy of new art, of the sublime, and of all the reverberations opened by the "inner infinity" of the subject, articulated by the culture of Romanticism.

The young Marx consistently referred to the figure of the philistine in his letters to Arnold Ruge. In a 1843 letter, Marx analyzed the "philistine and his State," drawing close attention to these "lords of the world." With sarcastic irony Marx wrote: "Of course, they are lords of the world only in the sense that they fill it with their presence, as worms fill a corpse." [1] The philistine is a transversal category, embracing both "masters" and their "servants": "slaves," as well as "slave-owners [...] do not need to be free." The world of the philistine is a "dehumanized world," an "animal world," one of "prosaic existence," that was "to remain far behind the French Revolution, which once more restored man." [2]

Throughout his future writing, Marx did not stir away from his sharp anti-philistine rhetoric. Moreover, the notion of the transversality of this form of life remained relevant: of course, the class concept of the petite bourgeoisie still had an important role, however it was seen as a common representative of the "philistine mediocrity of all the other classes." (*A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*) [3]

Beginning with Lenin, radical left thinking and avant-garde art of the 20th century, furthered Marx's fierce denunciations. According to Lenin, only a class "in which all the best people are filled with hatred and contempt for the petit-bourgeois and philistine, qualities which are flourishing in the bourgeoisie, the office workers, the "intelligentsia..." [4] can achieve something. Later, anti-philistine rhetoric became an integral part of the official language in Soviet culture, and for the following 70 years it underwent a tremendous inflation. The continued negation of the figure of the philistine made it so attractive that at the moment of the collapse of the Soviet Union it has become a model of subjectivity for the masses of apolitical citizens of post-communist era. However, recent protests have clearly brought to light the crisis this model is facing.

In our present time, an impassioned speech by Marx may seem like a strange visitor from a distant past, an ancient message in a bottle that can only bring a sad smile. However, despite the apparent incompatibility of his voice with today's tacitly accepted forms of expressions, in terms of the structure of our historical moment, we find ourselves in a similar position. This parallel does not perfectly apply to social life, production, technology, etc., however, politically speaking we seem to have regressed back to the 19th century: a time when capitalism had not yet been seriously challenged, while the French Revolution was seen as the most important moment in the history of emancipation, that was suppressed by the reactionary bourgeois establishment.

The difference is that instead of the French Revolution, our moment of historical reference is the year 1917, as well as a whole series of liberation struggles of the last century that are now buried under a wave of self-negation, reaction and restoration, which make up the "prosaic existence" of our present on the ruins of socialism, the material remains of which - monuments, surviving infrastructure, communal habits, visual symbols - stubbornly resist the "varnish" of gentrification. Perhaps the well-known mass nostalgia for socialism that cannot grasp its own political vector should not be merely considered a reaction, but a worthy romantic device.

Of course we should also bear in mind the connection between the aesthetic machine of romantic subjectivisation and dangerous and conservative politics - leading to fascism - tendencies that were largely discussed by the radical thinkers of the 20th century from Lukács to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. In contemporary discussions the most balanced position appears to be that of Michael Löwy, who defended the complexity of Romanticism as a trans-historical platform, not limited to the 19th century, that functions as a common paradigm challenging capitalist modernity, and which embraces various positions and orientations. Löwy placed the importance of Romanticism and its potentially revolutionary content in the rejection of the bourgeois philistine culture. As Löwy noted "The Romantic perspective could play a particularly fruitful role in the current context, which is characterized among other things by the collapse of "real socialism." [5]

On the other hand, the figure of the philistine was rethought in aesthetic theories of the last decade, in relation to modernist art's self-critique and corresponding articulations of new leftist positions in those debates. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno remarked that philistinism is a "counterconcept," the main opponent in relation to all critical searches of modern art. [6] This observation summarizes a main trend in modern philosophic thought: in the past two centuries the philistine has endured as the ultimate negative-figure, while the foundation for this credence has not been critically reflected upon. During a fruitful debate in the 2000s among British left-wing theorists, this was explained due to the exclusion - both in theory and practice - of other ways of relating to art, against the aestheticism and asceticism of modern art's autonomy, and instead associated with a proletarian sensibility. [7]

The basis for such a reconsideration, one that could find a more appropriate language also for political critique, would be similar to the deconstruction of the opposition between the philistine and the political activist (both intellectually and aesthetically). For example, in the theories of Brecht, whose art enjoys a special idiosyncrasy in Adorno's work, we may find inspiring examples that help us escape from the snobbish view of philistinism as a thoughtless, vacuous wall separating us from living thought, artistic innovation and political action. Perhaps a potential element of a peculiar resistant philistinism, the emancipatory cynicism of the "good soldier Švejk," or "crude thinking," (plumpes Denken) is at the core of Marxist "theoretical practice," constantly undermining the idealistic escape from the real, and through it opening the way for the establishment of new forms of thinking and acting. [8]

In his early book on "political romanticism," written before his later disastrous political engagements, Carl Schmitt correctly and sarcastically noted that while the romantic cannot tolerate the philistine, the latter is more inclined to admire the ruthless criticism of their opponent, to seek a relationship with them, and thus be in the dominant position. Even the historical development of German Romanticism paradoxically ended in the Biedermeier, embodying the aesthetics of the comfortable world of the petty-bourgeois philistine.

Perhaps we are seeing something similar happening today. Judging not only by aesthetic debates, but also from direct observations of contemporary trends in culture and everyday life, we can observe a surprising convergence of the philistine and oppositional position: the emergence of "creative industries," even the process of the "industrialization of bohemia." One of the consequences of these developments is the rise of the urban "bobo," or "bohemian bourgeois," a strange form of a "romantic philistine." Moreover, there is a special hypocrisy of the institutional rhetoric of contemporary art that proclaims commitment to the cultural values of the left and hardly follows them in practice. Theoretically put, doesn't this trend represent a renewed philistinism of all contemporary "immaterial labor"? Perhaps this is what stands in the way of its politicization.

These explorations that are rejected from recent political events and move through theatrical interlude and around complex aesthetic problems, lead us to an important junction and to questions that remain open. Should we be looking for increasingly sharper, fresh confrontational language with philistinism, one that builds upon the 19th century classics (not only Marx, but also Nietzsche and Kierkegaard)[9]? Or do we need to better understand the very elusive political trajectory from the philistine to the activist (and vice-versa, given the recent unfortunate experiences)? Should we criticize this very terminology, resorting to more orthodox class dispositions? Should we be consumed by guilt for the cruel symbolic violence and exclusion of the philistine from a countless number of artworks and texts of the past two centuries? Perhaps the paradoxical solution would be to pursue all these political and artistic directions at the same time.

Despite its complication and ambiguousness, the problem of the philistine remains just as urgent. As Hannah Arendt wrote in the preface to her well-known final book, *The Life of the Mind*, her work stemmed from her desire to understand whether the absence of thinking (as in the case of the Nazi philistine Eichmann) would lead to the final catastrophe—to radical evil. In Arendt's unfinished work we are left without a clear answer to this question.

translated by Corina L. Apostol, translation edited by Alyssa DeBlasio

Footnotes:

[1] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Moscow, 1955, Vol 1, p. 372.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid, p. 456.

[4] Vladimir Lenin, *Complete Works*, Moscow, 1969, Vol 38, p. 388.

[5] Michael Löwy, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity* (with Robert Sayre). Durham: Duke University Press, 2001, p. 252.

[6] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, N.Y.: Continuum, 2002, p. 241.

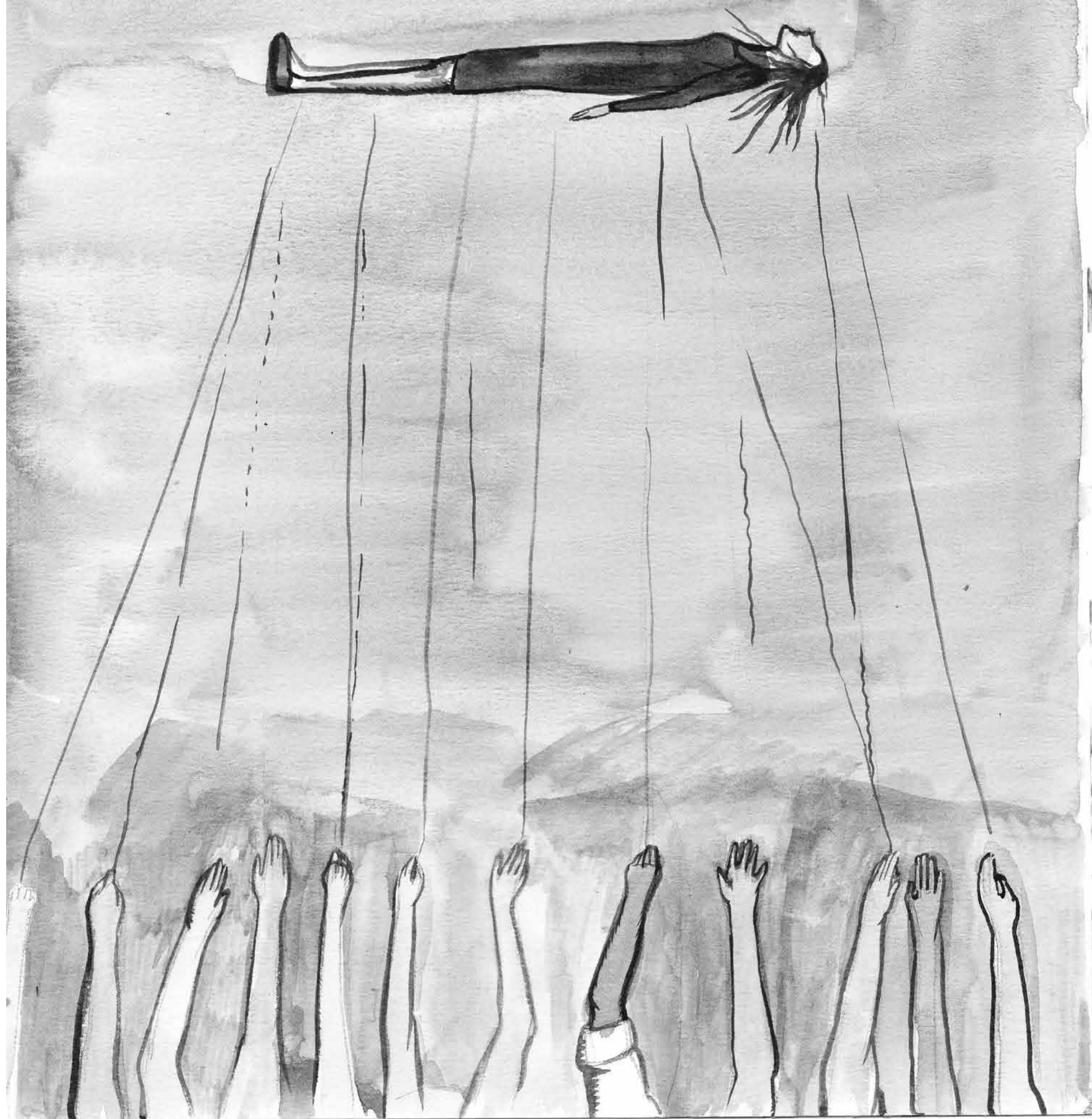
[7] See: Dave Beech, John Roberts (eds.). *The Philistine Controversy*, London: Verso, 2002.

[8] See my text, "In Defense of Crude Thinking" (*Moscow Art Magazine*, № 67/68, 2008).

[9] For example, see Alain Badiou's recent book about Sarkozy and various other texts.

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Диалектика Возвышенного



Gluklya Natalya Pershinana Poster /The Dialectic of Sublime/

Aleksander Skidan

The English Garden effect

On the other hand, the feeling of the sublime is a pleasure that only arises indirectly, being brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful, and so it is an emotion that seems to be no sport, but dead earnest in the affairs of the imagination. Hence charms are repugnant to it; and, since the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also alternately repelled thereby, the delight in the sublime does not so much involve positive pleasure as admiration or respect, i. e., merits the name of a negative pleasure.

Immanuel Kant. "Critic of the Power of Judgment"

What makes up the perception of a place never before visited? Deposits of cultural memory, half-remembered maps, random pieces of information fished out of travel guides, associations (free and otherwise), briefly glimpsed photographs, perhaps – documentaries, albums, books, stories told by acquaintances who'd already visited the place; maybe films, maybe exhibition posters or reproductions of famous paintings (if we have in mind a major cultural center with celebrated museums). During the preparations for landing, when the wispy fog in the window began to thin and slowly reveal the first outlines of the destination, taking shape as the plane descended – that "cloud" of information, drowsing in the depths of our unconscious, also began to awaken, to take in new impressions and grow fat on them, expand, rise ever higher – such that in another day (or two, or three) it will draw nearer to and eventually collide with another "cloud" – seen up close, a genuine but no less suspect and mosaic-like "reality" – and that together they will form a storm front. And then, following this encounter, a recognition will take place – might take place – like a lightning bolt that momentarily seizes from the clotted darkness the one and only necessary image.

For me, the electrical discharge, the assemblage point that meant "Munich" was the English Garden. This space (as soon as I found myself in it) seemed at first to tremble slightly and blur, then turned inside out, showing the inner creases of accommodation that convinced me of the non-illusory quality of the vision; then it neatly and securely settled into the lens of my eye. Everything returned to its proper place. The wind, as if stumbling up against the invisible curtains of a mnemonic theater, fell still – for another few seconds its form could still be observed in the leaves, which had stopped exchanging glances. To the right, beyond a wide meadow with clumps of trees in the center and along the sides, the Haus der Kunst (the former Haus der Deutschen Kunst) could be divined, its grey massive stones noticeably blackened in places. Its presence brought to the idyllic landscape a barely discernible displacement, as if the center of gravity had shifted imperceptibly, turned toward the gallery (invisible from here) that girds the structure from both sides – a heavy structure, even rather gloomy in its spread-eagled might, but also not without a certain athletic grace. I began to feel as though I'd fallen into Antonioni's Blow-Up (the most important – and most inexplicable – part there also took place in a park), and remembered straightaway that I'd already written about Blow-Up, in an essay many years ago, in connection with the narrative technique of Walter Abish, author of *How German is it* and "The English Garden." A collection of Abish in Russian translation that included both the novel and the story had been published in 2000. As an epigraph to "The English Garden," Abish took a fragment from John Ashbery's *Three Poems*: *"Remnants of the old atrocity subsist, but they are converted into ingenious shifts in scenery, a sort of 'English Garden' effect, to give the required air of naturalness, pathos and hope."* [1]

Of course, this "ingenious shift in scenery," the click that started off the metaphysical "reality drain" would probably not have happened if, on the day after I arrived (that is, a few days before I, as it were, accidentally found myself in the park (Katharina Wenzl decided to show it to me: "Have you been to the English Garden?" she asked; otherwise we were going to the Pinakothek, and beforehand I'd planned to get something to eat along the way)), we hadn't set off on a bike tour around Munich's historic downtown, dappled with traces of the Nazi past. Not a lighthearted undertaking. Through the glass walls of a bank complex built on the site of the former Gestapo headquarters (and prison), which had been bombed by Allied fighters in 1944, we could see architectural models of the old building, and there were photographs documenting various periods of its history (it was originally a palace), from its erection in 1868. There were also many photographs in the special displays set up right where one of the Third Reich-era Temples of Honor once stood (only the foundation now remains), not far from Hitler's former chancellery, the Führerbau (now the Academy of Music), where the Munich Agreement was signed in 1938. I photographed these displays. I photographed the Führerbau (the Academy of Music), first the facade, then the inside. The facade and the interior both looked very grand, there was a romantic feel about them. The same could be said of the former NSDAP administration building, now the Central Institute for the History of Art, which also houses the Museum für Abgüsse Plastischer Bildwerke; it had a copy of a Greek temple in full color – I photographed it, too. Both buildings were designed by Paul Troost. Afterwards we had coffee in the Glyptothek, and

at the end of our ride visited the Ludwig Maximilian University, where I also took a few pictures.

Photographs figure constantly in Abish's texts; really, all sorts of representations and reflections of reality: reproductions, paintings, coloring books, shop windows. Sometimes they play the role of evidence, documents, testimonies, but more often they constitute a question mark, an apophysis, the unsolvable riddle of the events described; these are in turn conveyed in the cool and distanced manner of the observer, who is concerned only to maintain the exhaustive precision and thoroughness of his narrative. But this precision, as in the photographic enlargement process in Antonioni's film, turns into a disquieting ripple on the surface of an inscrutable depth, a depth that attracts and frightens, evoking a sense of physical distress. For instance, why is the story called "The English Garden"? In the imaginary city of Brumholdstein, named after the great German philosopher Brumhold (a transparent code-name for Heidegger), there is no such park. We learn, however, that the city was built on the site of a former concentration camp. The lack of an explanation causes the reader to suspect that the central point from which the "reality drain" radiates is the narrator himself. More precisely, a certain zone of emptiness in the language which he uses so masterfully, but which carries a barely appreciable defect – an inadequacy of sense, the absence of any guarantee of comprehension, even post factum, and regardless the profusion of precise data.

At one point Ingeborg Platt enters the story; the narrator, an American writer who has come to Germany take an interview with another writer, Wilhelm Aus (whose initials, by the way, coincide with those of Walter Abish), begins an affair with her. Suddenly, the girl disappears. After the fact, post factum, we find out that during the war her father had been an SS officer. A few days pass. The writers go to her house to conduct an unofficial search.

Going through her desk drawers I came across a photo of a group of skeleton-like men standing in a row, posing for the photographer. Wilhelm studied the photograph, the building in the rear was one of the buildings in the former Durst concentration camp. The men were smiling incongruously. They were leaning against each other for support. Under a magnifying glass I could clearly make out the numbers tattooed on their forearms. The photo must have been taken a day or two after the camp was liberated by the Americans, said Wilhelm. I made absolutely no move to stop him as he carefully and deliberately tore the photo into tiny shreds. I did not lift a hand to stop him from effacing the past. [2]

Blow-Up ends with the famous scene of an imaginary tennis game. I am not sure that this reference to a movie (or, for that matter, the above citation) is capable of actually explaining the "English Garden effect;" it's enough that I experienced it, this electric shock, this sudden, dizzying instant of recognition and slight physical distress, as if reaching to catch a phantom ball tossed through the net.

Footnotes:

1. From "The New Spirit," in *Three Poems* (New York: Viking, 1970).
2. "The English Garden," from *In the Future Perfect*, New York: New Directions, 1975.

Translated from Russian by Ainsley Morse

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Suzana Milevska

Negativity, Mysticism, and the Politics of Representing the Sublime

Ever since Theodor Adorno wrote the statement “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” this enigmatic dictum has reverberated with discomfort and unease. This is not only because it juxtaposes poetry and the site of the most incomprehensible Nazi crimes.¹ It is also because Adorno’s words stand as an overt admission that humans are incapable of understanding and representing various human phenomena, or, more concretely, of translating their own deeds, in particular negative ones, into art.

On the one hand, this statement has served as an excuse for apolitical silence, refraining from taking a political position due to its metaphysical impossibility. On the other hand, modernist abstention from representation and Adorno’s negative dialectics can be interpreted as a direct consequence of the admission of ethical impairment and the inability to understand and represent human nature, even if various artists at the beginning of the twentieth century and later had different explanations for the urgency of anti-representational art.²

Therefore it comes as no surprise that in the American abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman’s landmark essay ‘The Sublime is Now’ (1948), the category of the sublime, defined as ‘the impulse of modern art’, resides in a ‘desire to destroy beauty’,³ since beauty prevents the artist from realising man’s desire for the exalted, for the sublime. For Newman the preoccupation with the beautiful has impeded the perception of ‘the Absolute’, particularly in religious art with its emphasis on the figurative.⁴

The contemporary political charge of evil is also related to this understanding of the sublime. All throughout the modernist period, when all arguments against representation were respected, the sublime has been accepted as the best justification for abstraction, as a kind of a mystical device enabling one to think the un-representable. Barnett Newman’s view accords here with that of the philosophers Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke.⁵

What sublime and evil have in common, at least according to Kant and Burke’s definitions, is incommensurability and incomprehensibility. “The sublime, that is, is on the side of the mind rather than nature; and since the extent of the mind is unbounded it cannot be adequately represented by an object with determinate bounds.”⁶

This discussion is in a way related to several recent philosophical projects that attempt to re-evaluate and rehabilitate the potentiality of “Prometheanism” and “Enlightenment” beyond a simple call to re-think modernist values. I want to argue that negativity in the Western metaphysical philosophical tradition (which goes as far back as both Eastern and Western mystical tradition of discussing negative

theology and its arguments about the possibility of humans to comprehend and overcome their limits and essence), still overburdens our belief in the potentiality of humanity to change its trajectory of development and re-define its own nature.⁷

The limits of human capacity to understand are responsible for the conceptualisation of both the sublime and evil, often leading to bewildering statements that eventually end by conflating the two (despite the fact that they operate in completely different registers). Refraining from any attempt to understand the reasons for this confusion is political and as dangerous as Adorno’s often simplified statement that could have inspired more radical statements. However, in contrast to this statement terror, politics and aesthetics are not always interpreted as contradictory as in Adorno’s statement.^{8 9} Adorno’s continual revisions and re-interpretations of his own aphorism¹⁰ led to many contradictory positions regarding whether one could comprehend and represent evil and what kind of representations of evil are politically acceptable. Adorno’s critique of the dominant climate of post-war Germany was also directed against the discussions surrounding Heidegger and his denial(s) of his affiliation to National Socialism. According to Adorno, negative dialectics was concerned “with the dissolution of standpoint thinking itself”. But the Austrian essayist Jean Améry (Hanns Chaim Mayer), who survived internment and torture at Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen, objected to Adorno’s refutation of potentiality for representation of evil. He stated that rather than addressing political concerns, Adorno was exploiting Auschwitz for his metaphysical phantom, “absolute negativity”, using “a language intoxicated by itself”; instead although Améry’s pessimistic views were that no matter what you do, evil will always be a part of the human condition, his stance is that one should remember and repeat even the most horrific experiences as “a scant inclination to be conciliatory”.¹¹

Regardless of Adorno’s biography and his expected disagreements with Heidegger, the arguments that Jacques Derrida issued in defense of Heidegger’s never officially distancing himself from his affiliation with National Socialism seem similar to Adorno’s denial of the potentiality of poetry and language to express the horror of Auschwitz.¹² Not only did Adorno’s original statement question German culture and its future after Auschwitz but it also forced intellectuals around the world to take a stance on whether politically and socially committed art is possible in conditions of incomprehensible cruelty and evil. The paradoxical lack of a human faculty to understand a concept that is yet a product of humanity inevitably calls for a discourse that evokes some arguments beyond humanity. Perhaps this is another reason why interpretations of the sublime and evil position them in the same register or at least within the realm of similar trans-human arguments.

Although it is obviously unreasonable to equate the ethical category of evil with the aesthetic category of the sublime (even though ethical aspects of the sublime were already discussed by Kant), one should acknowledge that these two categories share a certain negative dialectic and even negative theology, and this correspondence needs more profound analysis. This argument however differs from Hannah Arendt’s famous syntagmatic concept “the banality of evil”, according to which the discussion of evil’s representation might have been regarded as banal as well. Arendt in a way has anticipated the possibility of confusing evil and sublime so she went on conceiving an argument to explain why Nazis did not explore the potentials of the linkage between evil and sublime. Her thesis from her book based on Eichmann’s trial (which she attended only partially) is that the Holocaust as well as other great evils in history generally were not executed by fanatics, perverts or sociopaths but by ordinary people. According to Arendt, by accepting the premises of their state and therefore participating in its crimes as if they were normal, the Nazis actually legitimized the genocide as something banal that would not exceed representation on the grounds of exceeding normality.¹³

The central question here would be why certain periods privilege silence over loud protests, passivity over active response to what is shunned as wrong and evil. An additional question is how evil can be represented differently than the sublime, the meaning of which is usually understood as falling under the rubric of the aesthetic. Yet, precisely because the modernist hiatus between ethical and aesthetic arguments has become unsustainable in most recent discussions about art, the difference between the representation of the sublime and evil has become more intricate than ever before. Therefore the revisiting of the theory of sublime became urgent and the disenchantment with sublime became a rather frequent topic.¹⁴



Negative Theology and the Sublime

The religious aspects of the sublime as what incomprehensibly, radically other resonate with the basic negative assumption of negative (apophatic) theology. According to Frederick Copleston negative theology involves 'analysing various concepts of God to show how they are all insufficient articulations of the nature of God'. Thus, the negative method starts with denying to God the attributes that are the furthest from him. On the other hand, the affirmative (kataphatic) theological method starts 'with the most universal statements' and then approaches God through intermediate terms.¹⁵

In other words, while negative theology denies the possibility of humans to understand God because of their difference, positive theology focuses on the 'visibility' of God through acts that actually explain why people still believe, even though they cannot fully grasp God's nature. To make the comparison clearer, I suggest a somewhat simplified map of ideas as conceptualised in psychoanalysis, theology and recent social theories. Negative theology is actually about 'analysing various concepts of God to show how they are all insufficient articulations of the nature of God. Negative theology has two characteristic aspects. One is to discover and to list accurately the proper names and descriptions of the Divine. The second aspect is more important because it shows that these names are inadequate.¹⁶

Although negative theology, as embraced in the West, is different from the doctrines of the Orthodox Church, its main principle of negative mysticism is on the borderline of agnosticism and resonates with the logic and metaphors of Eastern negative thought. This tradition can be traced back to Erigena and Meister Eckhart (especially evident in the Rhineland school). According to Eckhart, being and goodness are "garments" or "veils" under which God is hidden, and this is where his thought resembles Pseudo-Dionysius' mysticism.¹⁷

Writing and the Otherness of the Unrepresentable

According to many critics of Derrida's difference, he did not succeed in completely distancing himself from Hegelian negativity and negative theology. Derrida, however, wanted to see his writing in opposition to Hegel's dialectics: 'If there were a definition of difference, it would be precisely the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the Hegelian dialectical synthesis wherever it operates.'¹⁸ His desire to distance his philosophy from dialectics was already announced as a confrontation with Hegelian concepts and with his speculative economy in his text *Différance*.¹⁹

His famous graphic intervention (replacing e with a), even though it looks like 'a kind of gross spelling mistake' was a very carefully conceived attempt to draw attention to the visual aspect of difference.²⁰ Through this displacement of letters, which can be differentiated only visually and cannot be heard when reading, Derrida acknowledges the importance of writing as visual and graphic representation.²¹ Hence, for Derrida difference 'belongs neither to the voice nor to writing' and has 'neither existence nor essence.'²² He underlines that from each process of presentation there is a certain otherness that is exempted and created out of differences, without a chance to become conscious.²³

The most important aspect of Derrida's difference is its deconstruction of representation as always already split and postponed, thus calling for a questioning of the understanding of the past as the "becoming-past of what has been present."²⁴ It is not a certain visible present that exists, but only the one that is forever hidden. Difference rather "maintains our relationship with that which we necessarily misconstrue, and which exceeds the alternative of presence and absence."²⁵

Instead of Conclusion: The Paradoxes of a Political Monument

To build a monument is by definition to attempt to represent the sublime. Thus to erect a monument is to represent something unrepresentable by marking an event, personality or action, something negative, as it is to mark absence, past, death. Any monument thus offers a remembrance of a certain ethical sublime, and at the same time it commemorates the event of death, absence or even evil.

The question of what kind of monuments could challenge the impossibility of representing the sublime and its confusion with evil is one of the most relevant questions that ultimately can be posed alongside any discourse on the sublime and the questions about the human potential to re-define its own potentials. Contemporary "anti-monuments" are attempts to resolve this paradox.²⁶

There are other kinds of monuments that are heavily influenced by the political sublime, since they are meant to compensate for a certain lack, e.g. for incomplete identities, unknown heroes or for impossible histories. This text is dedicated to the capital of Macedonia, Skopje, which was recently turned into a memorial park of false memories, implanted exactly through a series of figurative monuments (known as the Government's project "Skopje 2014") that resonate as a melancholic compensation for a past that has been or has never been there, and in Derrida's words, as any tomb, "announcing the death of the tyrant".

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NOTES

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982, 34
2. Earlier, Kazimir Malevich came the closest to the arguments of radical otherness and the impossibility of representation that were much later exemplified by Barnett Newman's sculpture *Broken Obelisk* (1963).
3. Barnett Newman, "The Sublime Is Now" in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992, 170-3.
4. Newman, "The Sublime Is Now", 170.
5. In his „Analytic of the Sublime,, (1790), *The Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant locates examples of the sublime not only in nature but also in the human condition. He famously argues that the sublime, unlike the beautiful, "cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason". Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Walter S. Pluhar, Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1987, 99.
6. According to Phillip Shaw the „subject matter,, of Newman's work is "creation itself", „an act associated no longer with God but with man,, Philip Shaw, „Sublime Destruction: Barnett Newman's Adam and Eve,, in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, January 2013, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/philip-shaw-sublime-destruction-barnett-newmans-adam-and-eve-r1140520>, accessed 18 July 2013.
7. In his recent lecture at MOMA PS1-New York the philosopher Ray Brassier linked the discourse on post-humanity, futurity and the possibility of overcoming the limits of pre-determined human nature exactly to the need to question the old relation between "pre-given" and "made", calling for a belief in the "re-defining of human nature" and the potentiality of a new "Prometheus" and Enlightenment project. Last Accessed 15 July 2013. <<http://www.momaps1.org/expo1/event/raymond-brassier/>>.
8. The best example is the renowned part from Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* in which he reflects on the extreme self-alienation within fascism which according to him allows to the destruction of humanity to become an aesthetic experience: Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968, 234.
9. Rebecca Allison, "9/11 wicked but a work of art, says Damien Hirst", *Guardian*, 11 September 2002, Last Accessed 10 July 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/sep/11/arts.september11>
10. *Arnold Berleant*, in his article "Art, Terrorism and the Negative Sublime" argues that one cannot dismiss such statements. Last Accessed 10 July 2013, <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=568>. Adorno revisited and revised his statement in his *Negative Dialectics* into "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream" and in his text "Commitment" (1962) into "the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric [...] expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature".
11. Améry's concerns that maybe there is no goodness at all are not easily accepted. See: Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, Indiana Holocaust Museum Reprint Series. Translated by Stella P. Rosenfeld and Sidney Rosenfeld. Indiana University Press, 1998, 71.
12. In the very beginning of the first chapter of the book *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* Derrida mentions a possible title "How to avoid Speaking" that actually exists as a separate text published in several other anthologies. It not only refers to Heidegger but also deals with Derrida's "denial" of the uncritical influence of negative theology. See: Jacques Derrida, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone,' trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and "How to avoid Speaking: Denials," *Derrida and Negative Theology*, trans. Ken Frieden, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Bennington, Rachel Bowlby, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1991, 2.
13. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin Books, USA, 1994.
14. James Elkins, "Against the Sublime", *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, Ed. by Roald Hoffmann and Iain Boyd Whyte, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 20-42
15. For a thorough extrapolation of negative theology and positive theology see: Vladimir Loski, *Mistična teologija na crkva od istok*, (trans. from French Jovan Takovski, Skopje, Macedonia: Tabernakul, 1991. (B. H. Лосский, *Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви*, 2001, Библиотека «Вехи», <http://www.vehi.net/vlossky/>). Frederick Copleston, *S. J. A History of Philosophy Vol. 2. Mediaeval Philosophy. Part I – Augustine to Bonaventure*, New York: Image Books, 1962.
16. James E. Faulconer, 'Deconstruction,' 18 Oct. 2004 <<http://jamesfaulconer.byu.edu/deconstr.htm>>.
17. Some of the historians of philosophy would agree with the hypothesis that the Syrian mystical philosopher and theologian Pseudo-Dionysius was the source for the Western tradition of negative thinking. 'Pseudo-Dionysius,' *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Windows CD-Rom.
18. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Athlone Press, 1981, 40.
19. Jacques Derrida, 'Différance,' *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Prentice Hall, 1982, 18.
20. Derrida, *Margins* 3.
21. In Jacques Derrida's *Spurs - Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow, Chicago, IL, Chicago University Press, 1979, Derrida employs a similar visual strategy by crossing out the term Being in the context of his interpretation of Martin Heidegger's critique of the long oblivion and absence of the issue of Being in Western philosophy.
22. In his seminal text *Différance* Derrida separates his *différance* from similar aspects of negative theology, although he admits that its strategies often resemble or are even indistinguishable from those of negative theology because *différance* cannot be exposed. Derrida, *Margins* 5-6.
23. Derrida, *Margins* 6.
24. Derrida, *Margins* 21.
25. Derrida, *Margins* 20.
26. I refer to artists (such as Jochen Gerz, Alfredo Jaar, Rachel Whiteread) building non-representational monuments dedicated to events and victims that are beyond comprehension, such as the Holocaust and other "events" of evil.

Bassam El Baroni

Narratives of Edification: Art through the Prism of Unconcluded Uprisings

*2 narratives from the talk delivered at 3rd FORMER WEST Research Congress, Part Two
29 September 2012; Utrecht School of the Arts, Utrecht (NL)*

Some of the content of this talk comes from an ongoing theoretical diary I started as an attempt to make some sense of my life in-between two spaces and two times or speeds, the space and time-speed of ongoing political revolt particularly in Egypt where I am attached on all levels and between the space and time-speed of art in which I work, reciprocate and attach myself for reasons that differ from the latter. This talk will come in the form of three separately titled narratives that are connected to the notion of Edification, a notion I have been working on since the beginning of this year.

Narrative # 1

Edification then and now

Edification is an act or process implemented in order to increase someone's knowledge and/or improve their character. In order to understand its continuing resonance in our profession we must go back in time a little. In the realm of aesthetics the early voices of humanism such as Friedrich Schiller and later John Ruskin developed paradigms of thought that are conceived of as de facto aesthetic understanding in art until today. Take for example Schiller's statement in letter twenty two of his Aesthetical Essays in which he comes to the conclusion that "There is a fine art of passion, but an impassioned fine art is a contradiction in terms, for the infallible effect of the beautiful is emancipation from the passions. The idea of an instructive fine art (didactic art) or improving (moral) art is no less contradictory, for nothing agrees less with the idea of the beautiful than to give a determinate tendency to the mind." In other words, to give a determinate tendency to the mind through art is not a beautiful act because it is didactic and patronizing.

In the 19th century John Ruskin developed reconciliation between Schiller's humanistic understandings of aesthetics with Christian and pre-industrial values. This becomes especially clear in his "Fors clavigera - Letters to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain (1871-1884)". The letters formed part of Ruskin's interest in moral intervention in the social issues of the day and it was in these letters that Ruskin sketched out the framework for his own utopian world which he called the Guild of St. George. It was a world where art and life were to merge as one. Money itself would be an object of beauty. Each trade and profession was to have its own distinctive costume. Work would be carried out by hand, without machines with their accompanying pollution. The mainly agricultural work would be interspersed with folk festivals. In these letters Ruskin drew a mental picture of 'the Guild' as a means of transforming the declining state of Britain into his utopian fantasy. The Guild was to be a community of good will, giving some of their income, and the best of their energies, to acquiring land, and developing it, in accordance with Ruskin's ideas and ideals. That this sounds similar to a number of contemporary art projects in not a matter of coincidence but a matter of edification.

Edification is what lives on us as potent and active residues from our ancestors attempts to resolve the conflict between the individual's autonomy as a self with a will and his/her existence within and contribution to a larger community. We cannot think of art today without these residues having a strong effect on how we construct meaning between ourselves as autonomous subjects and our context as a collective space of belonging. Edification throughout history has been about individual thinkers creating equations for resolving the conflict between the individual's autonomy and the community's fraternity. These equations are eventually diluted, simplified, or reconfigured to become the intellectual basis of states, the cultural codes of sociopolitical systems, or the administrative mechanisms of regimes. We should not consider this to be a misfortune for within the longue durée of history; past ideas of edification exist as layer upon layer of half-dead skin in a rejuvenating body that is trying to adapt itself to the experience of a current moment. The perceptive psychiatrist R.D. Laing once pointed out "The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change; until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds." What we fail to notice is prescribed by both the layers of edification we have developed our knowledge in continuation of and in reaction to. Ruskin and Schiller describe two strains of one problematic of edification, how much autonomy and freedom should the individual be able to have when thinking and producing for a community they ask? Ruskin balances autonomy by turning himself into a kind of

unofficial statesman proactively proposing a community structure where the proletariat and the bourgeoisie can edify themselves in the auspices of his social imagination. In his book 'The Stones of Venice' he writes:

"All great art is the work of the whole living creature, body and soul, and chiefly of the soul,"... "But it is not only the work of the whole creature; it likewise addresses the whole creature. That in which the perfect being speaks must also have the perfect being to listen. I am not to spend my utmost spirit, and give all my strength and life to my work, while you, spectator or hearer, will give me only the attention of half your soul. You must be all mine, as I am all yours; it is the only condition on which we can meet each other."

Edification for Ruskin then is linked to the idea of establishing a state of wholeness between the author-individual and the society s/ he functions in. For Schiller a state of wholeness is also a goal but through different means and with different stresses. In the same letter previously mentioned Schiller proclaims that "only the aesthetic is a complete whole in itself, for it unites in itself all conditions of its source and of its duration." But just as Schiller champions the humanizing power of aesthetic experience, he also warns us against aestheticism and using the "soul-captivating power" of beauty in the "interest of error and injustice." Both Schiller and Ruskin where in search of a holistic experience that could create harmony between the autonomous individual or creator and the wider society that that individual existed in, two different senses of edification for one humanistic end. That today one can still identify and distinguish between those who are indirect descendants of Schiller and others who are indirect descendants of Ruskin is a normal phenomenon attesting to the power of prior edifications that still live on inside of us in contemporary times. But, that the art world of the 21st century should seem somewhat divided into two camps along those strange lines between the Neo-Ruskinians and the Neo-Schillerians is a rather dramatic side-effect of old edification strongly persisting while our failure to notice it shapes our moral positioning leading us to the illusion that this moral positioning is somehow novel or authentic. Each camp claims some sort of moral superiority over the other, at least indirectly or subtly, and in doing so reinvents the moral-aesthetic wheel each time it proposes a project.

Although this notion of the continuing existence of two socio-aesthetical art camps is of course a generalization, albeit a rather simplistic one, I believe there is some validity to it and its existence as a condition perhaps best exemplifies the remark that Irit Rogoff made during her lecture in the previous Former West congress, the remark that "art is a historically determined meaning which has been pushed at the edges to expand and contain a greater variety of activities but never actually allowed to back up on itself and flip over into something entirely different." These two camps and their in-betweens and variations represent the "historically determined" moulds that contemporary art or practice has inherited, moulds of edification that regulate the very idea, conditions, and boundaries of art. Perhaps we have created some sort of measuring scale that has Schiller on one end and Ruskin on the other; even if we are not familiar with their work the scale seems already embedded in our thought processes. Contemporary art, and to be more specific contemporary art theory in particular, has not broken this scale; it is satisfied with pushing it and expanding its size, but to actually "flip over into something entirely different" it must smash this scale altogether, to smash the scale that defines art by its nearness or farness to aesthetic autonomy on one end and communal fraternity on the other. Although it might sometimes feel that the current political moment has outgrown this scale this act of smashing is such an unimaginable task that one would not even know where to begin, because this scale is so deeply tied to our vocabulary and how we measure what we like or don't like about a certain project, its moral value or lack of, its power or lack of and its beauty or lack of that we would not know where to start. The persistent existence of this scale along such terms is clearly a matter of a historically shaped edification process that has left us incapable (at the moment) of moving out of its moulds rather than a matter of the confinements of the hated word 'neo-liberalism', or the market, or late capitalism.

Narrative # 2

Death, the Hero, the Martyr, and Art

Allow me to start this entry by quoting a few paragraphs (with some light abridging) from Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*:

The staff of a hospital withdraws from the dying man: ... this distancing is accompanied by orders in a vocabulary that treats the patient as though he were already dead: "He needs to rest . . . Let him sleep." It is necessary that the dying man remain calm and rest. Beyond the care and the sedatives required by the sick man, this order appeals to the staff's inability to bear the uttering of anguish, despair, or pain: it must not be said. The dying are outcasts because they are

deviants in an institution organized by and for the conservation of life. An "anticipated mourning," a phenomenon of institutional rejection, puts them away in advance in "the dead man's room"; it surrounds them with silence or, worse yet, with lies that protect the living against the voice that would break out of this enclosure to cry: "I am going to die." This cry would produce an embarrassingly graceless dying ... More than that, as a dead man on reprieve, the dying man falls outside the thinkable, which is identified with what one can do. In leaving the field circumscribed by the possibilities of treatment, it enters a region of meaninglessness. Nothing can be said in a place where nothing more can be done. Along with the lazy man, and more than he, the dying man is the immoral man: the former, a subject that does not work; the latter, an object that no longer even makes itself available to be worked on by others; both are intolerable in a society in which the disappearance of subjects is everywhere compensated for and camouflaged by the multiplication of the tasks to be performed ... Between the anguish of individuals and the administration of practices, the dying man raises once again the question of the subject at the extreme frontier of inaction, at the very point where it is the most impertinent and the least bearable. In our society, the absence of work is non-sense; it is necessary to eliminate it in order for the discourse that tirelessly articulates tasks and constructs the occidental story of "There's always something to do" to continue. The dying man is the lapse of this discourse. [1]

I think this long excerpt from de Certeau is essential to the understanding of some aspects of current socio-political struggles. Not just because there is a lot of death in the air, but because I think this concept of the "the dying man" as portrayed by de Certeau is exactly the point at which "the hero" is born. Heroes are important not of course in the sense of the Bonnie Tyler song I Need a Hero but in the sense that the concept of the Hero is a crucial building block for both the maintenance and the reconstruction of societal ideas and identities. In popular culture and film the hero can be defined as: he who holds the strength to not only survive entering the region of meaninglessness that de Certeau mentioned but to actually make meaning and reason of it. Take for example the film *I am Legend*, 2007 featuring Will Smith. Smith stars as Dr. Robert Neville, a scientist who was unable to stop the spread of the terrible virus that was incurable and man-made. Immune, Neville is now the last human survivor in what is left of New York City and perhaps the world. For three years, Neville has faithfully sent out daily radio messages, desperate to find any other survivors who might be out there. But he is not alone. Mutant victims of the plague – The Infected -- lurk in the shadows watching Neville's every move. Neville is perhaps mankind's last and best hope, he is driven by only one remaining mission: to find a way to reverse the effects of the virus using his own immune blood.

If you've seen the film then you'll be familiar with its ending. It ends with Dr. Neville's (Will Smith) death but before he dies he manages to develop a serum, a cure, for the virus and give it to two people whom he has come across and who were also lonely survivors. The two went on to successfully find a very small colony of survivors in a seemingly rural area far away from New York; and so, life goes on through the death of Dr. Robert Neville. For me the image in the film that stroke me as most haunting was not that of spooky zombie like virus infected humans who progress out of the dark to devour each other but rather the recurring image of Will Smith and his dog roaming the vacant and lifeless streets of New York with humanity long gone and nowhere to be seen. This recurrent image in the film for me signals the epitome and the climax of meaninglessness, it signals the point where there is no reason to carry on living, where the logical thing to do would have been to commit suicide. Even if you resisted, you would have probably come to that point in the end where it just becomes impossible to go on, but no, not only does Neville/Smith resist it he actually goes on to give life and this is the making of the hero in its most extreme scenario.

It is indeed noticeable that the Hero is gaining more importance in the space of the everyday and politics and as a consequence in the space of culture and art. The figure of the Hero comes into this context through a slightly different character, that of the martyr. In the early days of the now famous 18 day January-February, 2011 protests, an artist, Ahmed Basiouny, is killed by snipers. Egypt's small art community grieves online, in Tahrir square, and in dusty neon-lit café's. It's now June 2011, the artist's work is representing Egypt at the Venice Biennial, and video documentation of a performance piece by the artist has been reedited to include footage of the artist in revolution on the night he was shot dead. Some critics affiliated with the state-run cultural circle attack the pavilion; it is probably the first time that a young artist from without the ranks of the fine arts sector, the visual art's division within the Egyptian ministry of culture, has been awarded such a prestigious solo presentation. Whispered questions circulate. Why did the ministry of culture accept this proposal? Could it have something to do with the improvement of its image and thus the image of the state? In the end most agree that it was a positive thing to have the martyrartist as he is often referred to represent Egypt at the biennial.

Fast-forward, we are now in the November, 2011. The martyr count is rapidly increasing and the state seems to be an even worse version of what it was before the removal of Mubarak, it now has more instruments of repression and oppression. Revolutionaries are losing the sympathy of the majority of the nation, state-media manipulation, engineered lawlessness and economic hardship, and the 'divide and rule' tactics administered by those in power have proven successful on the long run. In this climate the martyr and the rights of martyrs become one of the few points of public empathy that still hold some strength in the media war between the revolution and the state. This is when I remember an interesting revelation by Peter Sloterdijk from his book *Rage and Time*:

No modern human being can put himself back into a time where the concepts of war and happiness formed a meaningful constellation. For the first listeners of Homer, however, war and happiness are inseparable. The bond between them is founded upon the ancient cult of heroes. We moderns know this cult only within the square brackets of historical education. For the ancients this heroism was no subtle attitude but the most vital of all possible responses to the facts of life. A world without heroes would have been worth nothing in their view. Such a world would have meant a state in which human beings would have been exposed to the monarchy of nature without any resistance. [2]

I realize that the closest thing there is to an ancient hero in our time is the martyr. The very act of Martyrdom, the suffering of death on account of adherence to a cause, especially if this cause is of a non-religious nature, is the only strong act of heroism available in an era where war and happiness cannot form a meaningful constellation. Martyrdom instantly renders criticism as skepticism by being ethically determinate, something criticism cannot afford. Perhaps the martyr is the figure who comes closest to embodying Hannah Arendt's definition of human action as "an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin" [3].

This quote could easily be considered as a sentimental cliché but would that make it any less accurate in pinpointing what kind of currency a willful extermination of one's own life for a just socio-political cause can bring into the political arena as a possibility?

Martyrdom and its representation in the media within a revolutionary context can be seen as a response to the dehumanizing effects of late capitalism and the vernacular list of partial and total tyrannies it has helped give rise to. For how else has Bouazzizi's self immolation been portrayed? A desperate call to humanity through the burning of the only instrument he had of value. However, it can also be argued that martyrdom is the ultimate act of dehumanization itself, by publicly annihilating oneself for a cause, the cause becomes greater than the self and makes the martyr's relationship to a wider anthropology of humanity that of a clog of sorts.

Martyrdom's relationship to art has a long history, from portrayals of the crucifixion to the endurance performance art of the 60s and 70s and the more subtle disappearance of Bas Jan Ader. The difference is that art is always seen as a compensatory cultural response, while martyrdom pays a very real price in the public imaginary. This is why art in a state of revolution suffers and is downgraded even more than it usually is, and is even sometimes attacked by those who practice it, because it cannot compete with martyrdom. If we can all agree that art does not have to compete with martyrdom then art would be fine.

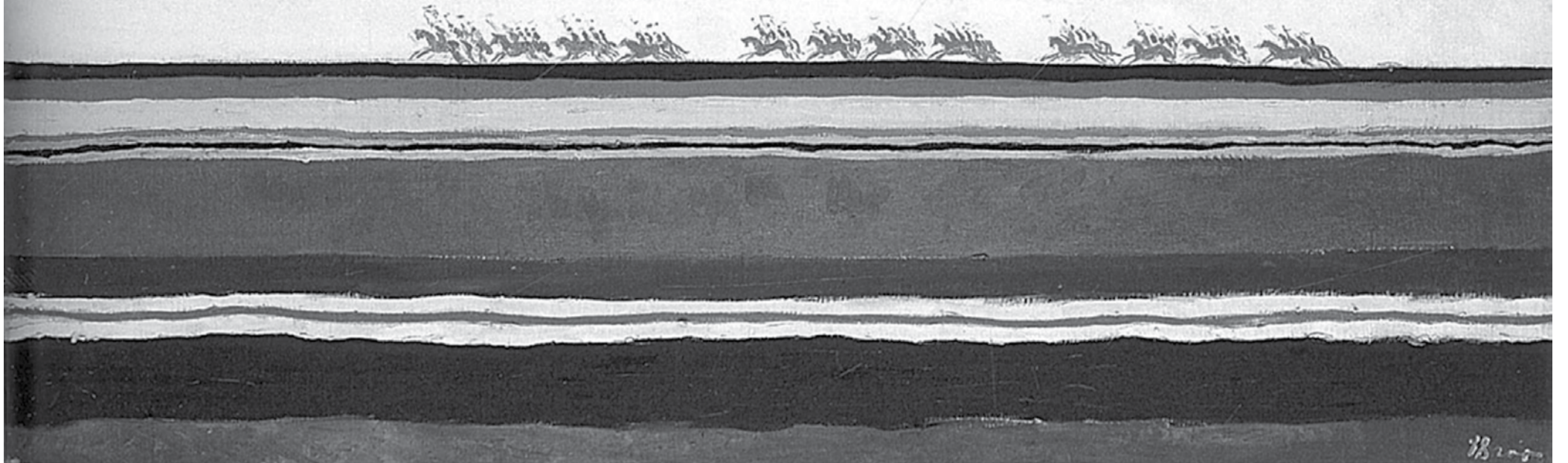
Footnotes:

1. Michel de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, Trans. Steven F. Rendall, University of California Press, 1984, p.190 – 191
2. Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation* Columbia University Press, 2010, p.4
3. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1958, p.246

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NOTHING CAN BE MORE SUBLIME THAN THE PEOPLE'S STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION



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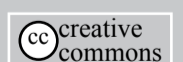
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The collective came about following the urgency of merging political theory, art, and activism. Its activity includes art projects, educational seminars, public campaigns, and ranges from video and theater plays, to radio programs and murals.