I FORGOT TO REMEMBER TO FORGET #15
I Forgot to Remember to Forget

The title for the second installment of Manifesta Journal’s engagement with the theme of “the politics of time”, “I Forgot to Remember to Forget”, is borrowed from a jukebox country music classic, written by Stan Kesler and Charlie Feathers, recorded at Sun Studio by Elvis Presley on July 11, 1955, and released on August 20 of that year, with Mystery Train on the B-side. Besides our commitment to irreverent tributes to pop culture, the song’s title seemed to encapsulate the thematic and poetic directions that guided the contributions. Manifesta Journal 15 thus engages with questions of official amnesia versus collective memory, with coerced erasures and resilient significations, and with memorializing and commemorating: whether from the purview of the state, civil society or individual subjectivities. “I Forgot to Remember to Forget” playfully pokes at the purported antagonistic relationship between forgetting and remembering and underlines the role of subjective agency. Our intention was to undo and transgress this tightly knit binary, in addition to the other binaries it foregrounds, namely, perpetrator/victim and public/private. Our contributors, and the projects they engage with, propose and instigate a process of reversing and transforming the power relations from which contemporary historiography is woven, legitimizing forgotten histories as well as making them accessible, and inscribing them in a realm outside that of the simple public/private binary, namely, “the common”. We are delighted to inaugurate Manifesta Journal 15 with Fawwaz Traboulsi’s “Guilt Matters?”, which critiques culturalism and its imperious coupling of “guilt/West” versus “shame/East”, in addition to revisiting the rapport between remembering and forgetting in the context of the legacy of the Lebanese civil war.

As artists and filmmakers from all over the world have been representing, re-presenting and re-enacting repressed histories, we have invited writers, poets and scholars to meditate on the knowledge and poetics produced by these artistic practices. Genocide, collective trauma and the resilience of memory: Başak Ertür’s “Plenty of History” interrogates questions of visibility and access to knowledge in public repositories through her reflections on the artist Hrair Sarkissian’s photographic series, Istory; Gareth Evans contemplates “thinking through time” in Patricio Guzmán’s Nostalgia for the Light, in the filmmaker’s foray into the time-suspended traces of the victims that disappeared from Pinochet’s gaols, and in an exploration of how notions of future and present are fabricated. Then, liberation struggles, reifications and failures of memory: Emeka Ogboh’s “The Ambivalence of 1960” is a counter-memorialization, made from a sound montage of speeches by Nigeria’s liberation leaders on the eve of independence. Meshed with contemporary everyday Lagos street recordings, it weaves a soundscape that draws the gaps of unfulfilled promises and betrayed
history, fifty years after independence. Later, in Zero Gravity Revolt, an exhibition curated by Elena Sorokina, 1930s Soviet science-fiction texts are (re)enacted to embody the promises of scientific communism that the regime proposed in popular fiction, in which the conditions of production transform labor and the proletariat to the extent that levitation in trans-planetary revolutionary realms becomes possible. Furthermore, using video clips and audio recordings from YouTube, radio and her own personal archive, curator Regine Basha’s “Tuning Baghdad Notes: ‘Fog il Nakhal’” takes us on an intimate journey through her lived experience of geographic and cultural belongings that history has rendered impossible. Later, in “The Black Panthers in Israel—The First and Last Social Intifada in Israel”, Sami Shalom Chetrit shares the photo album of an uprising that even though is entirely unimaginable today, is significant in its successful appropriation of race and class consciousness from the Black Panther’s movement. Traveling the bitter realities of race and class segregation in American cities between the 1960s and now, Haig Aivazian riffs on an untitled work by artist Edgar Arceneaux from his Hopelessness Freezes Time exhibition that revisits the fraught history and legacy of the struggle for civil rights in the U.S. Neoliberal capital’s production of time defends its narrative by co-opting and voiding the subversive potential of what it represses. Anna Colin’s “Deviance as a Space of Resistance” conjures the figure of the witch as a “surviving deviant” who embodies a realm of resistance to normalization and forms of knowledge that cannot be confiscated. Gregory Sholette’s “Artists, Embrace Your Redundancy”; investigates the potential for insurgency that permeates the “hidden surplus” in the system of art production and consumption and the way today’s Occupy movements attempt to (re)activate the “dark matter” of that universe. Filipa Ramos’s “The Absent Spectator 1: The Present Was Now”, constructs an imagined memory of Contemporanea, (arte 1973–1955), a controversial milestone exhibition that took place in Rome in 1973, thereby bearing witness to an event she never attended. In 2007, Xenia Kalpaktsoglou, Augustine Zenakos, and Poka-Yio, curators of the Athens Biennial, revived the infamous 1944 proclamation, Destroy Athens, by poet and artist Yorgos Makris, as a provocation to the artistic, intellectual and political establishment of Greece at the time. In her essay, “Destroy Athens?”, Marina Fokidis reflects on the implications of that revival, as well as her experience with the Thessaloniki Biennial, in light of the country’s devastating financial crisis. Another dimension comes into play when thinking through these questions from within the physical landscapes of colonization, military occupation, civil war, genocide and collective trauma; sites upon which narratives of memory and forgetting are both forged and contested. In “Where Everything is Yet to Happen”, curators Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača propose to (re)condense and stall the conventional time frame of a biennial (set in Banja Luka, Bosnia-Herzegovina), for the purpose of freeing artistic and intellectual production from the time-abbreviated and, in the psycho-physical space of post-Yugoslavia, so heavily-loaded categories of perpetrator, victim, accomplice and observer. Then, in their long-term and multi-disciplinary explorations of the politically vexed notion of Palestinian refugees’ right of return, the West Bank-based collective Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency debunk the stunted categories of private versus public domains (both captive to the regime of military occupation) and propose to revive the notion of “the common”, a set of resiliently remembered collective practices that clear a ground for transgression and resistance. Demystifying the charged metaphor of alien and citizen, artist Yazan Khalil’s “The Aliens” caustically imagines the visit of aliens from another planet into the sordid landscape of the occupied West Bank at an abandoned, unfinished amusement park.

It would not have been possible to have come this far in our investigations of the “politics of time” without Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History making an appearance. It does, and in a rather uncanny form of reverie scripted in poetic verse, titled “She Was a Party Image”, by writer and philosopher Ashkan Sepahvand, who meditates on historiography and translation. Finally, Manifesta Journal 15’s game, designed by Joseph Del Pesco and Al McElrath, titled “Bringing Home America’s Army”, is a war-simulation network game that “never forgets”. Nonetheless, we conclude this editorial with Fawwaz Traboulsi’s last sentence: “An Arab adage claims that man is called ‘insan’ because he is ‘nasin’, or oblivious. Forgetting can be constructive; even human.”
Culturalism as a grand narrative

Post-modernists pretend to be against all grand narratives. They have nevertheless raised one notion to the realm of a grand narrative: Culture. 1 Let me call this Culturalism, an interpretation of life, social phenomena and the behavior of men according to imitable essences and sole identities usually grounded in religion and language. Its founding fathers in geopolitics, Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, attributed to communities and collectivities essential cultural attributes and singular identities, which always implied hierarchies, distinctions and inequalities—as in Samuel Huntington's having pronounced the uniqueness of the West, the West and the Rest, and so on. The qualities that one culture possessed, others necessarily lacked.

In his book, The Geopolitics of Emotions, 2 Dominique Moïsi explored how emotions define—and even embody—cultures. He provided an alternative theorization of what has previously been attributed to ideology. In his argument, China and India are recognized as cultures of hope, but “hope” is not the cause of what he identifies as the “extraordinary humiliation” that he associates with the “culture of fear”. In his book, The Meaning of Life, Oxford University Press, 2007, he claims that the “extraordinary economic accomplishments” of China and India are due to the region's historical decline, its role as a subservient political conduit for the interests of the West, and the creation and expansion of the state of Israel. This culture of humiliation is represented as the crucial for terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism.

Assuming that humiliation is the emotional leitmotif in these societies, it is mystifying how it might so suddenly produce the tidal waves of anti-authoritarian popular democratic movements that we have most recently seen. Would Moïsi argue that the Arab insurgencies are the birth of another culture altogether, or might he come to reckon that culture should not be dealt with so lightly? With the impact of the September 11, 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center, and the West's fixation on terrorism, Moïsi attributes to Europe a “culture of fear”; a fear of the continent's regression and loss of its role as superpower to the supremacy of America. His “theory” leaves the rest of the world unclassified in terms of “culture” or “emotion”, and the hard cases that do not fit his culturalist straightjacket are simply eluded: cultures such as Iran, Israel, or Russia, to name a few.

Another stain of culturalism has quite a bit of currency, and is coupled with a neo-liberalist purview. It proposes an “over-the-counter, take-out” version whereby dominant values, emotions and moods can be transmitted by means of education, training, and advocacy. The Arab world has been a great consumer of this packaged promise of “acculturation” offered over the past two decades. The curriculum of the transfer of knowledge is on a “menu” in addition to questions of democracy, interpretations of its absence, and its relationship to Islam. Thankfully, the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions have simply turned almost all of its assumptions and presumptions upside down, in devastating, novel and imaginative ways.

To illustrate in more detail the programs of the packaged transfers of “culture” served to Arab consumers, a notable amount of workshops were conducted in cities across the region to teach Arab youth the “culture of optimism”, after a survey of 300 Egyptian youth (out of a population of 85 million) found that ninety percent confessed to being more pessimistic than optimistic. Another survey conducted in Jordan surfaced that Jordanian males had a strong proclivity to frowning, so workshops were held to inculcate “hope” and “joy”. There were also workshops on the “culture of leadership” to facilitate the attending youth's joining the club of those who “made it.” Eventually, attendants adhered to an association called the “Young Arab Leaders”, in which the “leaders” were upwardly mobile businessmen in their thirties or forties. In Lebanon, a political movement enlisted the services of the advertising firm Saatchi & Saatchi to produce a campaign around the slogan “We Love Life”, to promote their creed, the “culture of life” in contrast with their political adversaries, who glorify the “culture of death.” The said adversaries in this context are Hizbollah and his allies, accused of glorifying a “culture of death”—a no less dubious notion that resonates with the Shiite tradition of martyrdom, but was implied by the party’s exclusive hold on “culture”, in their armed resistance against Israel.

A third vein of culturalism confronts the West's “culture of guilt” with the East’s “culture of shame.” The difference between the two is supposed to shape uneven temperaments and dynamics that privilege the West’s culture of guilt. Ronald Sharp expounds “the seduction of guilt” that leads to the acquisition of new knowledge and propels the “guilty” towards the future. 3 This binary division is paradigmatically orientalist because it regards cultural superiority to the West as a given, and argues by essentializing, generalizing and stereotyping. It is also the product of a comparative gaze, cast from a modernizing and individualist West to a traditional East, enduring “transition”, harnessed by irremediable patriarchy and tribalism.

The guilt / shame binary has arisen from two interpretive starting points. The first is religious, while the second is historical. Consider, for instance, the frequent references to the story of Adam and Eve and the original sin as foundational myths of guilt. Indeed, Adam and Eve may have felt guilty because they ate the forbidden fruit, but the story of their fall is also a story of shame, because their nudity was exposed. On the one hand, that story is not exclusive to Judeo-Christian writ; it is very much present in Islam. On the other hand, Islam has its own remarkable lot of traditions of guilt.

Another important element of the West's culture of guilt is the Holocaust. A number of revisionist historians and scholars have been arguing that the legacy of the Holocaust is shame rather than guilt. In her book From Guilt to Shame, Ruth Lecsya, as Giorgio Agamben, 4 proposes an interpretation of the Adam and Eve story using the code of shame rather than guilt. The shame of being human, shame of this camp, shame of the fact that what should not have happened did happen, and the shame “we” endure because of our basic nudity. 5

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leadership, as well as its American overlords, had no 800 Arab men. It should be added that the Zionist irregulars of the Salvation Army). In numbers, some Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia in addition to the Arab than double the numbers of troops of the eight 1948, the forces of the Israeli-David totaled more militarily overpowering Arab Goliath—an everlasting state, Israel has represented itself as the defenseless and enduring propagandist representations of the quotidian, because it is one of the founding myths literature.

Apart' 1947–1949” Irene Gendzier, “Role Reversal: David and Goliath” Despite the fact that the story of David and Goliath appears in the Qur’an, the biblical story (jaltut in Arabic) has not marked traditional Arabo-Islamic narratives and has yet to enjoy the multiple brilliant variations and interpretations that the story of Joseph has for instance, both in Arabic and Persian classical literature. Arabs have nonetheless experienced another version of that myth in their “contemporary”a quo, because it is one of the founding myths and enduring propagandist representations of the state of Israel. Since its emergence as an independent state, Israel has represented itself as the defenseless David facing the demographically overwhelming and militarily overpowering Arab Goliath—an everlasting threat to the very existence of Israel.

The contemporary refashioning of the myth hardly matches reality. According to a CIA report from July 1948, the forces of the Israeli-David totaled more than double the numbers of troops of the eight Arab-Goliath armies combined (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia in addition to the Arab irregulars of the Salvation Army). In numbers, some 110,600 Jewish Zionist men were pitted against 46,800 Arab men. It should be added that the Zionist leadership, as well as its American overlords, had no doubt about the outcome of the war and the victory of the Zionist armies.7

Sometimes, however, myths play strange tricks on their progenitors; in the case of the modern-day Middle Eastern restaging of David and Goliath, a vexing role reversal has taken place over time, undermining the very code of identification. With the First Intifada, it became increasingly difficult to convince the world of an Israeli David fighting a legitimate war against the formidable Palestinian Goliath in the West Bank and Gaza. Most recently, another illustration of the role reversal was glaring with the Israeli David bravely slaying the Freedom Flotilla/Goliath that attempted to shore in Gaza.

The role reversal was best embodied during the Palestinian Intifadas where the sling of David passed to the grips of stone-throwing Palestinian boys. It caused serious concern in Israel, for instance, when during a meeting in Sydney, Australia, Michelle Rojas-Tai from the Israel education organization StandWithUS asked: “How do you challenge the image of a small (Palestinian) boy throwing a stone at an (Israeli) tank?”

The reference to David and Goliath is intended to emphasize the question, how do we turn the Israeli Merkava tank around into a David and the sling-carrying Palestinian boy into a Goliath? Education is about turning things around, it would seem. Not a simple task, and which became even more difficult when Israel-David was incapable of defeating Goliath in the July 2006 war against Lebanon.

Nevertheless, with additional effort and shots of western guilt culture, the educational “turning around” operation might work. It is working.

When Picasso meets Caravaggio

In Caravaggio’s paintings of David and Goliath, the relationship between the paintings and the painter’s life is not given from the beginning. In the 1599 version, the young David was modeled after the young painter himself. In the 1607 version, there were no changes, even though the painting was done after the painter had committed homicide. In the third and final version in 1610, David was still modeled after young Caravaggio, but he lifts the severed head of a Goliath who bears a striking resemblance to the older Caravaggio.

The 1610 version can be regarded to contain an admission of guilt and a plea for redemption, but the guilty is visibly punished with by a death sentence. The irony is that the younger Caravaggio has beheaded the older Caravaggio. Here, the reversal of roles and responsibilities proposes a totally different interpretation than the mere use of the biblical story as a pretext for a painting: the painter represents himself interchangeably perpetrator and victim. This perpetrator/victim ‘double’, as René Giraud coined it, lead me to Pablo Picasso and the Lebanese civil war.

In 1987 I published a book titled Guernica–Beirut, A Picasso Mural / An Arab City in War in Arabic. Three themes were interlaced throughout the book. For my Lebanese readers I recounted the story of another civil war between a republican camp and a fascist camp backed by a foreign military intervention. That scheme was not dissimilar from the war Lebanon had been enduring since 1975. It had started as a duel between a camp seeking social and political reforms and the other defending the status quo, but both protagonists drew the Palestine Liberation Organization, Syria and Israel into the conflict. The bulk of Guernica–Beirut, however, is a multi-disciplinary and multi-layered analysis of Picasso’s masterpiece, read in the context of the Spanish master’s artistic production from the declaration of the Spanish Republic to the end of the Second World War. The third theme, a variation on how life imitates art, juxtaposes details from Picasso’s Guernica with scenes from the Lebanese wars, with a focus on the Israeli invasion and siege of Beirut in 1982.

I looked at Picasso’s masterpiece with eyes that have experienced a civil war. The fact that the different stages in the conceptualization and execution of the painting have been preserved allows viewers to track how the painter started from representing the tragic destruction of a Basque town by German warplanes, moved on to glorifying the resistance against fascism and ended with a vivid denunciation of the horrors of war. The mural stages a tragedy and depicts carnage, but the enemy/perpetrator is not formally represented. In Picasso’s familiar use of condensation, it is found “condensed” in the bodies of its victims: the wounded collapsed horse, the mother carrying her dead child, the broken and dispersed gait of the fighter’s body. On the right side of the painting, consider the falling woman whose body fuses with a burning beam: their figure suggests the sketch of an airplane, the very weapon


8 Elly Shalev, “David and Goliath—Israel and the Media”, J-Wire (20 August 2010).
that has caused the tragedy. On the far left end of the painting, consider the wounded bird that seems to have been slain by an instrument that resembles its wing. The main hero of this tragedy is the bull. Usually symbolizing the enemy to be fought and killed in the bullfight, it figures here as the symbol of everlasting Spain, to which all the characters of the tragedy appeal in search of help, strength and salvation.

What Use Is Guilt in Civil Wars?

In post-war Lebanon, a number of direct confessions by militia men who killed during the different wars—meaning not only fought—have been collected. One striking question repeated in those interviews was whether they would do it again, given the same circumstances? Most of the militia men’s testimonies repeatedly answered in the affirmative.

Most interesting were confessions of Asaad Shaftary, who was chief of security in the strongest Lebanese militia, the (Christian) Lebanese Forces (LF). Before the war ended in 1989, Shaftary fled to Switzerland. Shortly thereafter, he dispatched a short mea culpa to the media, where he asked his compatriots who suffered from his acts to pardon him. An openly repentant Catholic, Shaftary eventually returned to Lebanon, created his own NGO dedicated to justice and reconciliation. Most of what he has to say about his experience is published in an interview in the pan-Arab daily al-Hayat. Among the many acts of torture, kidnapping, assassinations and car bombs he confessed to having committed, was a plot he considered with the complicity of Bashir Gemayel, the leader of the LF at the time. It primarily included poisoning the water conduits that ran from the predominantly Christian eastern flank of Beirut to its predominantly Muslim western flank with the objective of “reducing the number of Muslims in the country.”

Astoundingly, Shaftary’s confessions hardly provoked reaction or comment. I propose two possible interpretations for the absence of reaction; the first is prevailing amnesia and the second is the chilling horror of the confession itself, which in Lebanon can only be interpreted in sectarian terms.

In this post-trauma situation, guilt is integral to the larger issue of memory. There are three mental processes related to trauma: amnesia as a failure of memory and/or a form of repression of memory that follows the same logic of substitution and displacement as in the individual psyche: less important events and narrative replaces the more important ones; secondary causes take the place of primary ones; memory forgetting. A simplistic juxtaposition between memory and forgetting pits one against the other. In his stimulating essay, L’oubli, Marc Augé argues the opposite: oblivion is but “a component of memory itself.” One does not remember everything and one does not forget everything. That means that one is always forgetting. More importantly, Augé maintains that repression of memory—i.e., amnesia—does not apply to the event, to the remembrance, or to the isolated trace in our brain, per se; amnesia severs the connections between memories or traces. Here is where the question of amnesia and causality meet.

Why remember a civil war? The “simple” answer is: To avoid another one. For the answer not to be as simplistic, one has to define what to remember and what to forget: events or causes, fragments and traces or links and relations.

In the case of Lebanon, two elements are at play: officially-coerced amnesia and amnesty. Officially-coerced amnesia is a process that exploits a general tendency among survivors of wars to repress memory to the benefit of vested interests in power and money. The alliance of businessmen and warlords that took power after the war was especially keen to block any discussion of the question of whether war could have been averted. Presenting the war as an obvious fatal predicament, with all the allusions to “conspiracies”, was how they chose to repress the question.

There is another reason for orchestrated amnesia. The need to rebuild the country’s economic, social, and political system on the same bases as before the war—namely a sectarian sharing of power and unbridled free trade economy based on finance and trade. The mechanisms commonly operated either by imposing taboos or severing links between events and time periods. The civil war was represented as the “war of others” or “war for others” on the Lebanese territory, in order to break any causal link between the pre-war period and the war itself. Both formulations absolve the Lebanese at large from any guilt, responsibility or accountability for the war. “Others” bear the blame; “others” can be any protagonist as the scapegoat. This is where the motif of “shame” creeps in. War tarnishes the reputation of Lebanon and the Lebanese in the world. By absolving themselves of any responsibility in their civil wars, a new “virginity” can be concocted for their business reputation.

The 1989 amnesty law took care of accountability and punishment concerning warlords. They in fact became the country’s new rulers, and signed the judicial stamp on the innocence of the Lebanese in their wars. All criminal acts perpetrated between April 1975 and December 1989 were granted amnesty. Moreover, the law included an additional aberration, as if to further humiliate the hundred thousand victims of the war—to not speak of the wounded, handicapped and thousands of disappeared. It namely considered exceptional the death of a dozen politicians and religious dignitaries killed during that period. Identified as “crimes against the security of the State”, they were still liable to prosecution. In other words, a few hundred innocent civilians killed in a massacre did not warrant prosecution, but the killing, or attempted killing, of a politician or a religious dignitary did.

The above situation can only result in the obligation of memory and the need for forgetfulness.

Presently, the process of remembrance is focused mainly on war as violence, guilt included. That has been the main activity of most of the NGOs concerned with memory and violence. What is suggested, in contrast, is the reconstitution of the memory of causes, or a memory that remembers causes and seeks to recreate those links and relations between events, causes and effects and periods of time that amnesia had shattered. Once there is enough distance from the trauma, the civil war can be narrated as a past, rather than perpetually re-enacted in the present, and on an individual and collective scale.

Here is precisely the role of forgetting, for which we owe Ernest Renan an interesting proposal: a nation is built on shared memories as well as on
shared oblivions. In the case of Lebanon the horrors of the civil war, the killings, the vendettas, massacres, the various forms of violence (physical, ritual or symbolic), “had better be forgotten,” to use Renan’s words concerning the massacre of Saint-Barthélemy of Protestants, in the French Midi, in the thirteenth century.

We can only forget what we can remember. Mahmoud Darwish’s memoir of the Israeli siege of Beirut in the summer of 1982 is titled Memory of Forgetfulness, in which he argues that of all that concerns us, one can willfully forget only what one remembers; namely, the parts recuperated from oblivion and amnesia. One can also choose to forgive, if people are to continue living together. An Arab adage claims that man is called “insan” because he is “nasin”, or oblivious. Forgetting can be constructive; even human.

10 Ernest Renan, Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? (Paris: IEP, 1992) 41–42.


Nineteen-sixty was the year Nigeria gained its independence from its British colonial master. It was on October 1, 1960, to be precise. The Ambivalence of 1960 is a collage of excerpts from some prominent speeches made during the 1960 independence celebrations. It particularly includes speeches made by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (the first president of Nigeria), Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (the prime minister of Nigeria), and Princess Alexandra of Kent (the representative of the Queen of England).

These speeches were highly fuelled with hopes of utopia and aspirations of Nigeria becoming the giant of Africa as it steps out of the shackles of colonialism. The speeches also emphasized relevant issues that were to be considered for national development, for example: unity in diversity, defense of human rights, security, religious tolerance, et cetera.

The Ambivalence of 1960 uses these archived sound recordings to highlight how Nigeria’s modern past, symbolized by the promises of independence, contrasts with the contemporary present, characterized by failed hope and long forgotten dreams. In doing so, the work uncovers the ways in which nostalgia and memory play into the national imaginary.
“A witch is, actually, a successful (in the sense of surviving) deviant. You have a cultural, ideological, social, what-not pattern which is, for that society in question, normal (and, importantly, this is understood as a synonym for natural). Most people survive because they conform to these patterns, because they behave normally. [...] But then suddenly you get a deviant which survives, and since it does not draw its support from the normal pattern, [...] that deviant is understood as drawing its support from “unknown”, “supernatural” sources. [...] If we cannot survive without our order, how can she [the witch] survive in solitude? Hers must be indeed a very powerful order to exist so independently, without all the inter cooperation and individual compromise which we have to go through to survive. And if it is so powerful, then it could destroy us. We must try to destroy it first.”


The list of artists, writers, activists, researchers, journals, conventions and camps that have sought to conjure the figure of the witch since the 1950s is not only longer than the above chart suggests, but also growing. Symbol of the enemy, the outsider, the maladjusted and the subversive, the witch is also, as historian Jules Michelet put it in his 1862 book La Sorcière, “the sole doctor of the people to have existed throughout centuries”. If her close knowledge of nature and her involvement with all aspects of life and death—from midwifery, to burials—have been points of inspiration for various generations of feminists in their struggle to reclaim sovereignty over their bodies, the regime of terror of which she was the target between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries in both Europe and the so-called New World is an equally, if not more, useful reference to make their voices heard. In an interview with Xavière Gauthier, published in Les Parleuses (1974), Marguerite Duras remarked that: “We have burnt them. To stop and to contain madness; to contain the feminine voice.” This shall not happen again.

Independent, rebellious, nonconformist and marginal, the so-called witch thus symbolises the one who speaks out; the one who has left the domestic sphere in favour of the political arena; the one who has control over her own body and actions; finally, the one who defies the sexual division of labor, as well as gender binarism. To this day, her alterity continues to serve as a reference to several counter-cultural movements and gatherings invested in unifying spirituality and politics, and questioning gender and identities: from the Reclaiming community,¹ to the Radical Faeries network,² through the annual pagan convention PantheaCon,³ all of which find their roots in California.

¹ http://www.reclaiming.org
² http://www.radfae.org
³ http://pantheacon.com/wordpress

Cover reproduction of Sorcières (issue nr. 6, 1976), featuring an artwork by Evelyne Ortlieb. Courtesy Xavière Gauthier (Sorcières)
During his two-month residency in Istanbul in 2010, Hrair Sarkissian sought access to the history sections of various public and semi-public archives in the city. He didn’t speak a word of Turkish, but had a clear sense of what the gatekeepers of the archives meant when, having identified him by his name, they muttered among themselves about the “Ermeni.” Many refused access.

Tales of inaccessible archives have been told aplenty. Often found in the introductory chapters of history books of the unofficial variety, and depicting a particular breed of the uncanny, the absurd, and the Kafkaesque, this literature on the vagaries of archival access begs to be considered a genre of its own. In viewing Sarkissian’s Istory (2011) series, one can only imagine the performance piece that must have been his audience with the gatekeepers. And yet the human encounters that condition these photographs as their immediate history are missing from Istory. Instead, there is another history at work here.

In 1915, Sarkissian’s grandfather was forced to flee his village in eastern Turkey, a space reconstructed from imagination by the artist in a highly stylized, formal register in his earlier series Construction (2010). At work in Istory is the wider context of that personal past: the systemic elimination, expulsion and erasure of Armenians and their history from Turkey and its archives. It is well known that following the 1915 genocide, certain incriminating documents literally disappeared into the fog of war and regime change. Later, in the first few decades of the republic, a mix of nefarious operations and ridiculous recycling efforts have resulted in further archival losses. After Turkey’s 1980 coup d’état, the historical archives were targeted even more systematically as befits the military regime, with a cohort of experts and translators deployed to eliminate “harmful” documents.1

Then again, someone like historian Taner Akçam, who has done extensive archival research on the Armenian genocide, suggests that a “systemic cleansing” of the archives can never be fully achieved as such. For any document that is destroyed, there could be, and often is, another one which speaks of its having existed, whether by casual or anxious reference. Then there are records and testimonies attesting to the destruction of the documents themselves, various individual deeds and institutional campaigns, such as the injunctions to “burn after reading”.

It is perhaps the possibilities opened up by such archival traces that establish the viscerally felt dramatic tensions in Istory. Access is granted and we are past the first doorkeeper. The photographs depict a spatial diversity of sorts, but there is a common underlying principle with which we are familiar from other state-engineered public spaces in Turkey—the classroom, the courthouse, the public park. It is a style that redefines the meaning of “public”, as if in saying “This space is for your
use", what is meant is "This space is where you will be utilized." Past the first doorkeeper, we find ourselves in the sinister light of official history archives, oppressive, impenetrable; distant. Is there any hope of finding what it is that we seek here? Is there any history here? Istory responds:

Oh, there is plenty of history, an infinite amount of history—but not for Hrair or Haig, Heranuş or Hrant.

Rephrasing Kafka’s famous quip as relayed by Max Brod in his Franz Kafka: A Biography (New York: Schocken, 1960), 75.

The only reason I know this song, "Fog il Nakhal", which literally means "I am as happy as the highest date palm tree" is because it played continuously against the backdrop of my youth in Los Angeles of 1978–1988, mingled in there with The Police, Blondie, Siouxsie and The Banshees, and Bananarama, for instance. I wasn’t surprised later in college to learn of theories correlating New Wave music and Middle Eastern or oriental sounds, probably deriving from New Wave’s having embraced dissonant or quarter tones. Though I hated the Arabic music my father played, it was "Fog il Nakhal" that stuck in my mind throughout those years and despite that I could sing it perfectly and whistle the tune, I had no idea what the lyrics were, nor did my parents bother to tell me. Arabic was spoken between them and their Iraqi friends—on the phone, at parties, at the Synagogue; Hebrew was spoken to my older brothers and English to me. In fact from around eight to ten years of age, I believed that Arabic was a language that only belonged to adults. I was completely floored when I first heard a child speak Arabic—ironically this happened when we visited Israel and I met Palestinian children for the first time. Somehow it got absorbed, as languages and music do, in that department of "forbidden sounds" in my brain.

Listen to ‘Fog il Nakhal’, a song produced by Naim Rejwan and Sammy Shamoun, sung by Suzanne Sharabani (a.k.a IMAN) on www.manifestajournal.org

"Fog il Nakhal" was particularly loved at the time because it was, as my mother called it ‘a happy tune’ not a ‘sad’, "wailing" tune in Arabic. Listen to a recently synthesized remix by Naim Rejwan and Suzanne Sharabani on www.manifestajournal.org

The men seemed to love the sad wailing tunes and sat around on the floor at house parties waving their hands and wagging their fingers at the musicians (my dad was sometimes one of them on the oud), while the women sat in another room and gossiped or prepared food. The food was ongoing. Sometimes breakfast was even served at 8 a.m. because the parties lasted so long. In lieu of hiring babysitters, my parents often took me with them, and in my younger years, before I could drive (and escape to meet my own friends in LA parking lots somewhere) I had to sleep over in the guest bedrooms amidst the coats and handbags. If I was lucky I would get to play with the other kids my age (who were often wealthier and had better toys or even VHS tapes).

Listen to ‘Fog il Nakhal’ produced by Naim Rejwan and Sammy Shamoun, sung by Suzanne Sharabani (a.k.a IMAN) on www.manifestajournal.org

Images: Hrair Sarkissian, Istory, 2011, Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries

2 Rephrasing Kafka’s famous quip as relayed by Max Brod in his Franz Kafka: A Biography (New York: Schocken, 1960), 75.
I don’t know whether or not Abraham Salman’s music is still known to or appreciated by Iraqis back in the homeland. I have heard of a younger generation of Iraqi musicians who are seeking out this modern chapter in history, as apparently, Saddam Hussein actively erased it from the history books and radio waves. How ironic it is that in the hills of Encino or the suburbs of Tel Aviv, we are likely to hear the sounds of one of the last bastions of cosmopolitanism in Iraq if there could be a sound for that condition, it would definitely ring atonally. Watch the clip on my father and his mixed tape cassette collection on www.manifestajournal.org

A virtuoso qanun player, blind since birth, he now lives modestly in an Iraqi Jewish suburb of Tel Aviv, performing only for the friends who come over and egg him on. Salman was a beloved child prodigy in Iraq and continued to perform shortly after arriving in Israel in the early 1950s as part of the program “Kol Israel” (a televised “Oriental” orchestral broadcast à la Lawrence Welk). In his living room over cookies and tea, his wife told me of his continued following in the Middle East—especially in Saudi Arabia, where efforts to bring him for a concert have proved futile. Earnestly, I asked Salman if he could talk about the maqam to me, and explain it in layman terms perhaps. He reluctantly responded in Arabic by asking where I lived. When I stated, “New York,” he simply said, “Oh... that’s too far.”

Laura was the quintessential hostess for Iraqi parties.

She made everyone from every class within the community feel at home. She also arranged for all the music, sometimes bringing in Palestinian or Syrian musicians who could play the tunes loved by the Iraqi Jews. No one ever spoke openly of this interreligious musical arrangement, though.

Loads of live recordings of these house parties on cassette and VHS tapes fill my parents’s bathroom cabinets. My own meager teenage cassette collection from this time has nothing on theirs. It wasn’t only about capturing the music but just as much the heckling, teasing, and jokes from the live audience, typical Middle Eastern behavior that you’d never have encountered outside that intimate setting. The cassettes are traded and presented as gifts to friends and family abroad in a network that, ultimately, contains the social code that holds people together. It may not be nostalgia, but it is reenactment, a kind of resistance that feels more like a form of resistance than active nostalgia does. It was as if our secret musical citizenship had suspended outside time and place. Repeated again and again in different homes—the same songs, the same food, the same guests—this was the ever-present internal life of the party, where the music of 1940s and 1950s Iraq played on in pockets of Beverly Hills, Encino, and even San Diego.

I had always wondered if Iraqis back in Iraq were still listening to this repertoire. Or was it just within the diasporic community?

As my curiosity about our identification with this music grew over time, I decided to research the history of “Chagli” (the Arabic word used for Jewish musical house parties) in Baghdad. In 1932, a Jewish band called Chagli, a folk ensemble with nay, dumbek, violin, and oud, was invited to represent Iraq at the Cairo International Music Convention, the first music industry event of its kind in the Middle East. At that time, Jews and their music were not separated from Iraqi culture; the Chagli was never considered Jewish music. “But for reasons that had to do with social mores in that era, Iraqi Jews tended to be the musicians of Iraq—so much so that music ceased on the radio and in the streets on the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. Throughout the late 1930s and 1940s, the Iraqi National Radio station was a productive place for new compositions and collaborations, headed by the Jewish brothers Salah and Daoud Al-Kuwaiti. Though the Iraqi maqam (a musical scale) was often sung by a Muslim singer, Jews always provided the musical accompaniment. This led to the writing of new modern compositions modeled after the popular Egyptian compositions at the time—which led the way for Modern Arabic music throughout the whole Middle East. The eventual displacement of this culture (a force majeure after Israel was established) affected the music scene of Iraq for decades, as most of the music teachers were also Jews.

In my latest research on the Iraqi Jewish musicians of this generation who are still alive and playing, no one stands out more than the octogenarian Abraham Salman.

She made everyone from every class within the community feel at home. She also arranged for all the music, sometimes bringing in Palestinian or Syrian musicians who could play the tunes loved by the Iraqi Jews. No one ever spoke openly of this interreligious musical arrangement, though.

Growing interest in experimental sounds at the time. People like David Sylvian and Brian Ferry, our own “crooners”, became my own source of “happy/sad” sounds.

Laura was the quintessential hostess for Iraqi parties.

Watch Daisy Kassab (a.k.a. Laura) featured in the text on www.manifestajournal.org

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THE ABSENT SPECTATOR

This text is part of an ongoing project of reviewing exhibitions that its author was temporally or physically unable to see.

The absent spectator aims at testing the dynamics of neglectfulness, resurgence, nostalgia and canonization in cultural practices. Many questions have arisen over the course of this procedure. If a review is a form of mastery and knowledge but to provide access to the present moment of advantage might an absent spectator have? Can she or he go beyond the condition of a mediator: one who sees through the eyes, who thinks with the thoughts, and who feels the impressions of another? What sort of advantage might an absent spectator have? Can she or he go beyond description and elaborate critical judgments? Can he or she make use of the historical present tense; opening a direct relation with the past?

The absent spectator will attempt to answer to these questions and challenges through the exercise of writing. The Present Was Now is the first part of the series.

THE PRESENT WAS NOW

Inverting the sedimentary urban logic in Rome (in which recent layers lay on top of the older ones), the contemporary finds its place beneath the classical: underground, when the recently-finished Villa Borghese parking garage (located below the homonymous museum) hosted the ambitious multidisciplinary project Contemporanea (arte 1973–1955).1

It is the end of November 1973.2 It takes willingness to face Rome’s damp cold and spend a considerable amount of time inside an unheated parcheggio. As if the new needs to be exhibited in a rough, hostile atmosphere—magnificent but distant from the omnipresent memories of the past of the Eternal City.

This seems to be the appropriate moment to pay tribute to the iridescent present, as it is happening elsewhere. In fact, not long ago, in 1969, two major European venues hosted major exhibitions aimed at capturing and presenting the spirit of the time: Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum, with Op Losse Schroeven, curated by Wim Beeren, and Harald Szeemann’s When Attitudes Become Form at the Kunsthalle Bern.3

In Italy, during these years, probably the strongest wavelength with the international cultural scene was attested to not by means of exhibits but through the echoes of the turmoil of 1968, which triggered the boycott and occupation of those art institutions that were considered symbols of the bourgeois culture, such as the Venice Biennale and the Milan Triennale.4

It is in this context that a group of cultural organizers from Incontri Internazionali d’Arte, an organization founded in Rome in 1970 by Grazziella Lonardi Bontempsi that promotes a lively dialogue with contemporary culture, decided to have their say on the contemporary, which represented such a symbolic value that it named the whole project.5

Rome is full of museums but none of them seemed appropriate for this adventure. This ambitious project required a more radical (and culturally wider) environment, one that created the possibility of relating to art in a new context. So it was that the Villa parking garage became the set for Contemporanea. Its charismatic architect, Luigi Moretti, was close to the artistic scene. He had also planned the Watergate complex, which was named “the” political scandal of 1972, the year just previous to the show. But if President Richard Nixon was yet to resign, Moretti would not assist in the transformation of the 10 000 square meters of his car park into a major cultural venue, as he died during the summer of 1973.

The intention to use such a location was closely connected to the nature of the project, which aimed to promote a cross-disciplinary approach in which the boundaries between subjects were to be abolished in order to sketch a wide panorama of the contemporary creative scene.

Contemporanea is presented as a manifesto-like program that strongly reinforces the ethical and scientific vocation of the critic, conceived as a person who is able to unite contemporary culture with time, and to deal with both in a holistic way—not to exhibit, but to think on the relation of the critic with time, and his or her responsibility to the past, present and future.6

1 Translated as Contemporary arts 1973–1955 and hereafter referred to as Contemporanea.
2 Contemporanea took place from 30 November 1973 until 28 February 1974.
4 The 34th Biennale (1968) opened in a tense climate that culminated in its occupation and the refusal of most artists to open the pavilions. This pushed the organization to rethink itself and to adopt a new status, due to be perceived in the 1974 edition (dedicated to Chile after the 1973 coup d’État). But more than dealing with the political context in a lively way, it gave way to illustrating the politicized and to its gradual transformation into the promotion of contemporary art and its spectacle. For a general introduction to the theme cf. Francesca Franco “The Curatorial Canon of the Venice Biennale 1975–1974”, Manifesta Journal 11 (2011): 66–74. For more information cf. Enzo Di Martino, The History of the Venice Biennale 1895–2005 (Venice: Papiro Arte, 2005).

PROJECTION

The 34th Biennale (1968) opened in a tense climate that culminated in its occupation and the refusal of most artists to open the pavilions. This pushed the organization to rethink itself and to adopt a new status, due to be perceived in the 1974 edition (dedicated to Chile after the 1973 coup d’État). But more than dealing with the political context in a lively way, it gave way to illustrating the politicized and to its gradual transformation into the promotion of contemporary art and its spectacle. For a general introduction to the theme cf. Francesca Franco “The Curatorial Canon of the Venice Biennale 1975–1974”, Manifesta Journal 11 (2011): 66–74. For more information cf. Enzo Di Martino, The History of the Venice Biennale 1895–2005 (Venice: Papiro Arte, 2005).


1 Translated as Contemporary arts 1973–1955 and hereafter referred to as Contemporanea.
2 Contemporanea took place from 30 November 1973 until 28 February 1974.
According to Oliva, the critic should transform historical, diachronic time into critical time, using it as an instrument of research and not as a tool to predict the future of culture. Such an act would be a mere exhibitionism of erudition. The future, in order to take place, must be assured of its unpredictability and instability. The critic should relate to it in a constructive, open way, and a cultural project should generate the uncertainty of a non-lived experience, based upon the event as an eruption in daily life.1

This being the aim of Contemporanea, its success largely relies on the presentation and display of continuously changing live events in a new, dynamic way.

The latter is immediately perceived upon entering the exhibition space, which is left wide open thanks to the permeable device designed by the architect Piero Sartogo. No pavilions or walls divide the different areas. Instead, the articulation of the visitor’s walk across the sections of the exhibition is structured through the introduction of rows of transversal planes of wire mesh, inserted perpendicular to the main axis of the parking space. The quantity of metal diagrams increases along the way, generating a rhythm of acceleration and deceleration in the opposite directions of the viewing experience. The result is a structure that gives the impression of being ethereal: visible, but that is also traversed by the gaze.

The angle of observation changes it, making it transparent (when observed frontally), solid (when observed diagonally), or a pure line (when observed laterally). The overlapping of the nets produces an effect of “solid air,” whose resistance the viewer must overcome.8

It is within the volumes delimited by the nets that the ten sections that define the different trends and artists are evidenced. These are: Art, Cinema, Theatre, Architecture and Design, Photography, Music; Dance; Artistic Books and Records; Visual and Concrete Poetry, and Counterinformation. In all of them, contemporaneously, live actions of different scale and nature take place, some sporadically while others occur throughout the duration of the project. Such is the case of the Architecture and Design section (curated by Alessandro Mendini, chief editor of Casabella, deeply involved with the radical design movement), which hosts a non-stop projection of a thousand slides by the chief editor of Casabella, deeply involved with the radical design movement, showing images of architects, urban planners, designers and artists (such as Ant Farm, Norman Foster, Vittorio Gregotti, Le Corbusier, Mario Merz, Superstudio and Robert Venturi).

The Cinema (curated by Paolo Bertetto, due-to-become director of the Museo Nazionale del Cinema), Theatre (by Giuseppe Bartolucci), Music and Dance sections (coordinated by Fabio Sargenti, director of the Magazzino L’Attico, the most experimental Roman commercial platform of the gallery) rely on the continuous creation of new events that crossed disciplines and practices.7 If the Theatre section showcases mainly national companies, the Music section presents live acts by Phillip Glass, Terry Riley and Cornelius Cardew, but also by La Monte Young, Giuseppe Chiari and Charlesmagne Palestine. Trisha Brown, Simon Forte, Yvonne Rainer, Jodi Fortun, Steve Paxton and others intertwine dance and performance in the Dance section. Sound, music and movement, the articulation between bodies and kinetic experiments with objects and images, are constant presences, echoing and reverberating throughout the space.

Ironically, the least interdisciplinary and most hermetic sector is the Art one. Curated by Bonito Oliva, it is divided into four themes: Analytic; Process; Synthematic; and Open. Most of the works are represented on the large floor areas or suspended from the metal grids of the display. Together with the artists’ books and records section (curated by Michel Clauba and Yvon Lambert), it presents over one hundred individuals (from Ad Reinhard, Alighiero Boetti and Allan Kaprow to Andy Warhol and Lawrence Weiner), creating a biennial-scale event that aims to offer a panorama of the major international cultural scene, which is understood to be European and North American. Most of the artists are Western and male. Namely, in the arts sector, of the ninety participants no more than fifteen percent are female; forty-five are European and forty-five are North American. How closely Italy is related to the American context is thus quite clear.

In light of this statistical sample, would it be fair to interpret contemporary as being conformist? Perhaps, although Contemporanea does not differ much from current curatorial practice. New times, new economies, new geopolitical strategies and new notions of the politically correct will still introduce visible changes in such a panorama.

Little of the space is devoted to lesser-known practitioners, and most of the represented individuals and groups (once more, especially in the Visual Arts section) are well-established. Even so, novelties have been introduced, and artists such as Luigi Ontani and Marina Abramovic are enjoying their first large public appearances, representing a new generation’s approach to the performative body. An external attraction to the exhibition is Christo’s monumental wrapping of Porta Pinciana and Mura Aureliane, probably inspired by the success of the 1969 unfolding of the Kunsthalle Bern, which celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the institution.

Despite an overall conventionality of the selection criteria, Contemporanea features some relevant innovative aspects. It goes beyond the traditional use of time, leaving its doors open until late hours, and presenting live events and films in the evenings. Pier Paolo Pasolini is said to be a faithful attendant of the screenings, which present more than eighty films that are intended to defy—if not deny—entertainment. It includes experimental, documentary and feature films by Stan Brakhage, Philippe Garrel, Jean-Luc Godard, Alexander Kluge, Stanley Kramer, Jacques Rivette, Glauber Rocha, Jean Rouch, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Hulillet and many others.


Photo Archivio Sartogo

Installation view of Contemporanea with work by Christo, Rome, 1973–1974

courtesy Roma Sportiva, 2012

2. The attention given to the invention of this display support by Piero Sartogo, an architect who previously worked with the organizers of the exhibition in projects such as Amore Mio (Montepulciano, 1973) and Vitalità del Negativo (Rome, 1970), and who will continue to do so throughout the following two decades, can also be perceived on the eight pages of the catalogue (15–22), dedicated to illustrating the device through text, photographs and diagrams.
5. Photo Archivio Sartogo
8. The angle of observation changes, making it transparent (when observed frontally), solid (when observed diagonally), or a pure line (when observed laterally). The overlapping of the nets produces an effect of “solid air,” whose resistance the viewer must overcome.
This questioning of entertainment assumes another face in the Counterinformation section (curated by Bruno Corà, director of the “alternative information” office of the Incontri), which displays a variegated selection of press cuts, images, pamphlets and other important documents that reveal contradictory and irresolute aspects of political and social nature.

Beyond aesthetic judgements and cultural valuation systems, the Counterinformation section—and its intertwining of culture and politics, appropriating one to communicate the other and vice versa, but still working within two distinct realms—will surely be one of the major legacies of the whole project, as it proposes an approach to the present in which the social role of the artist is reinforced, by taking part in an event that exhibits a clear interest in society as a whole.

It is difficult to say if it has been a wise combination of mainstream names and attitudes, presented in an unprotected environment, and mingled with alternative cultural and political tendencies that will determine the success of the project, which has already been viewed by more than 100,000 visitors, and considerably reviewed both by national and international press. Or if, instead, it is the blockbuster agenda that will bring many people closer to the engaged subjects. What seems certain at least, is that the auspicious and passionate motto of the project, Wolf Vostell’s declaration that “It’s things that you’re unfamiliar with that will change your life”, has become fully meaningful in relation to this exhibition and its inclusion of concrete, real life facts. Contemporanea has the potential to become a life-changing event. It is making headway in the activation of the necessary openness that subsequent projects will be required to have.


things never go as planned,
a day at the museum,
a coincidence,

“things appear in their extended and manifold sense,
only contradicting yesterday’s experiences.”

exhausted on the dance floor,

flashing smiles,
mouths open,

awaiting voodoo drops,
trance,

disappearance,

a taxi ride back home,
frozen pizza awaits.

language fails vision,
one is successive,
the other simultaneous.

we can never say what we see,
or see what we say,

this incompatibility is our starting point,
and our goal is the infinite task
of incongruent translation.

one text, a blind spot, a transmission:

“on the concept of history” (walter benjamin, 1940)

the angel of history,
a description too well-known, not worth repeating.
an angel, re-imagined,
a point of focus provided:
a storm caught in its wings, blows it away, back to the future.
it is stuck, it wants to stay, it wants to make whole what has been smashed,
but it moves without will, carried away,
witness to the totality of history as

one
big
stinky
pile
of
junk.

a question:
where do angels want to go?

two images:

angel novus (paul klee, 1920)

reproduction meets reproduction,
a blind date,

L.H.O.O.Q. (marcel duchamp, 1921–1922)

reproduction meets reproduction,
a blind date,

sitting across from one another,

adjacent pages in the museum catalogue.

“she was an open image,
a party image,
a narcissa, a pile of lines…
she opened into a series of characters,
a series of bodies,
a range of desires.”

a cross-eyed angel and a mustachioed mona lisa
meet on an impossible geometry;
their travels have brought them to palestine,
a line goes out for a walk, meets another line,
they dance.

someone whispers: “she has a hot ass!”

a cross-eyed angel and a mustachioed mona lisa
meet on an impossible geometry;
their travels have brought them to palestine,
a line goes out for a walk, meets another line,
they dance.

“culture is expressed as a distance traveled,
a desire mobilized,
and sometimes a path of obsession.”

follow the pathway,
where does it lead?

the drum and bass can be heard,
the colored lights flash,
the drugs secretly passed from bag to finger,
the head gets fuzzy.

try and describe it…

getting lost in the bathroom,

exhausted on the dance floor,
certainly, they do not wish "to tarry in the rooms of cunning sorcerer-jews", or decorate hot air balloons going up and down, up and down, above the tropical islands.

what are angels?
"angels are devices for acquainting the mind with the paradox of the material torsions of immateriality."

non-movement not to say, lack of movement,
as long as we breathe, we are moving.

a social non-movement, or, how to be resilient:
"large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations."

consider a party: the aftermath, a landscape of waste, a pile of debris,
what the party has produced:
bottles, cups, track marks, spilt drinks, bodily fluids, cigarette butts, ash, dirt... a social sculpture.

the creative output of movement upon movement, the material expression of a totality of experience.

historical images, flash up, the then and the now, a constellation, a crystal of time. light enters reflection refraction no view stays the same each crystalline view is only one side, one possibility, one configuration under variation, producing difference, change as a constant.

a third image, squinting the eyes, in-between the brows, a mental image: melencolia I (albrecht dürer, 1514) a truncated rhomboid, dürer’s solid, an arcane polyhedron, art history’s first test subject, an iconological study, erwin panofsky’s first book in 1919, an examination of historical sources and typologies, he is stumped. everything has an explanation, the entire image is a text, encoded with symbols, each with a meaning.

the crystal? nope. awkward. panofsky’s blind spot. an appendix in the text, certainly not an afterthought, rather, a thorn in the argument, alluding a reading.

the crystal is just there. it can be described: degree of angles, proportion of composition, perspectival positioning, who cares?

why would benjamin recommend this book so enthusiastically in a letter from 1924?
naming is magic, he would say.

the things around us embody history in their materiality, he would say.

universal history the need to reduce all occurrence in time down to one guiding principle, is an abomination, a silencing of voices, a jamming of signals, a disgruntled neighbor making a noise complaint, shutting down the party with all its colors, flavors, fuck-ups, floozies, cool kids and lost souls, he would say.

the crystal would linger on in benjamin’s mind, appear in his texts, notes, scribbles, index cards, a theory of knowledge.
a critique of progress, 
a hallucination of time.

let’s imagine dürer’s crystal
as an unconscious inspiration;
an association towards impossibility.
no way can such a form occur in reality;
it would collapse underneath its own weight
its proportion all wrong.
let’s imagine we are angels,
that we seek a ground for movement.
we are back in jerusalem,
all that remains is an image,
the (un)holy city.

there is ritual in all of this:
making place, taking place, putting in place
pay attention, make intent clear, transform ground into place,
something happens,
translation occurs:
maps are not territory,
deviation from place, transportation to another.
geometry extends into social space, a broken mirror
or, it unfolds into a way of thinking.
our mode of attention seeks difference,
ritual distinguishes between
‘the now of everyday life and the now of ritual place;
the simultaneity, but not the coexistence, of ‘here’ and ‘there.’
we are on our way to the party,
drag queens, divine,
angelic young faces,
trendy mustaches,
sexy melancholics.

a party is a work of translation:
how do i reach out of myself to touch the other?
how can forms multiply in space through negotiation with the other,
a party is a space,
its principle emanation and refraction,
an enclosure of energies bouncing around,
boomerang, frisbee, dodgeball;
bodies emanating energies,
adding up,
gaining weight,
falling apart.
certain moments crystallize into a monad:
syncopation,
rhythm,
atonality,
echo,
multiple directions,
sporadic movements,
the mediation of external substances
a voice in your ear: “enjoy it!”
all of a sudden: a still-stand, a pattern, a gesture
—the angel of history!—
only to dissolve and become fluid once more, moving along.

“we need to speak to the pattern of capital
that keeps the image moving.
keeps it alive
and asks it to be human.”
call and response,
the telephone game,
the music doesn’t stop.
alchemical transformation,
how to determine the balance of a substance’s attributes?
the soft philosopher’s stone, stable in occurrence, malleable to touch,
metaphor for the soul as it migrates, moves, lives life in its vital unfolding,
diaspora, scattering,
translating my experiences,
producing a space for you to make a variation; make it different, take it for a spin.
my singular personal becomes a plural political.

“the aim is to reveal the fundamental idea
behind the coincidental.”
As early as 1984 art historian Carol Duncan pinpointed a fundamental, though typically overlooked feature of high culture: that the majority of professionally trained artists make up a vast surplus whose redundancy is the normal condition of the art market.

More than twenty years later, a policy study by the California-based Rand Corporation reinforced and updated these observations describing an even more unsettling picture of the 2005 art world. Its key finding was that although the number of artists had greatly increased over the previous decades, the always-evident hierarchy among artists “appears to have become increasingly stratified, as has their earnings prospects.”

One of the key questions addressed in my book Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise is that the gravity generated by this “dark matter” is not only what this glut of creativity consists of, but what function does it have in relation to the art world’s symbolic and financial economy by actively reproducing its exclusionary hierarchies. After all, this shadowy surplus plays a key role in the art world by purchasing art supplies, trade magazines, and museum memberships, while also serving the system in the role of studio assistants, interns (often unpaid), adjunct teachers (always underpaid), art fabricators and installers and so on. At the same time this dark matter “surplus” also forms the topographical boundary and backdrop upon which that smaller zone of successful artists and art institutions are brought into visibility.

All this may seem obvious, or it may come off as extremely cynical, however what I attempt to do in the book is take this metaphor of cultural dark matter a step further by asking if this missing mass is not also extremely cynical, however what I attempt to do in the book is take this metaphor of cultural dark matter a potential seedbed of resistance to the system that secretly stabilizes the art world’s dead capital. It is the dawn of the dead.” What is Dark Matter about you ask? It is an intervention and call to arms for the ninety-nine percent.

Either by coincidence, or simply as a result of the same historical urgency that compelled me to write Dark Matter in the first place, it was only a few months after the book appeared in print that events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and then the occupations on Wall Street and elsewhere emerged, dramatically redefining the theoretical parameters of my thesis.

Once face-to-face within the confines of Zuccotti Park, this surplus army of “creatives” drew upon previously unused capacities. A mini-commonwealth emerged, complete with food and trash services; a generator-powered digital media station; and an expanding collection of books and publications dubbed “The People’s Library”. At the same time, the occupation breathed life into dozens of smaller subdivisions and working groups, from the practical, such as Jail Support, and Medics, to the more imaginary such as Direct Action Painters, and Arts and Culture—one of the largest groups, which in turn spawned its own sub-subdivisions including Arts and Labor, Alternative Economies, and Occupy Museums.

Over the past few months these subgroups have generated a series of teach-ins, email exchanges, website postings, and .pdf readings attempting to restore to themselves local knowledge about such groups as Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC), Artists Meeting or Cultural Change (AMCC), Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D), Group Material, Gran Fury, and Guerrilla Girls, thus refocusing attention on their own little-known genealogy. Rejecting sleep, embracing redundancy, acknowledging the archive: not only has Occupy Wall Street (OWS) attempted to re-write its relationship with capitalism; but its fair to say OWS artists demand to know where their history is, why it has been exiled, and by whom?

The final lines of my book insist somewhat enigmatically that the “archive has split open. We are its dead capital. It is the dawn of the dead.” What is Dark Matter about you ask? It is an intervention and call to arms for the ninety-nine percent.
IMAGES OF THE PAD/D ARCHIVE at MoMA (showing examples folders, many of unknown content. All images courtesy of Gregory Sholette/MoMA):

Selections from the PAD/D Archive: 51.2 linear feet of material including posters, street flyers, notes, documents, letters, periodicals and images, much of it located in uncategorized manila folders collected by the group throughout the 1980s. PAD/D aka Political Art Documentation/Distribution was founded in 1980 by Lucy R. Lippard, among others. The group, which included the author, produced a newsletter, street art, public events, and organized the PAD/D Archive which was dedicated to social and political art roughly between the mid 1960s and early 1990s. It contains a range of materials including folders on anarchism, graffiti, gentrification, and feminism, but it also houses documents about dozens of individual artists who submitted their work to the group and whose stories were ultimately included in the collection. Many (if not most) of these artist’s names are now unknown, effectively transforming the PAD/D Archive into a site of artistic surplus whose actual content is chaotic and messy and very much at odds with the codes and laws that order the institution within which it is housed. The PAD/D Archive is today located in the Museum of Modern Art in New York and is accessible to scholars and interested researchers by appointment.

A large inflatable Uncle Sam Pac-Man, one of several protest artworks created specifically for use in anti-war demonstrations by PAD/D in the mid 1980s. (Image: Herb Perr)

Every second Sunday of each month in the early 1980s PAD/D organized public lectures and performances on topics related to art and politics. (Image: G. Sholette)


The REPOHistory collective consisted of NYC-based artists and activists whose primary conceit was to act as the self-appointed amateur historians for those who lacked visibility within public spaces where official commemorative statues and bronze plaques held sway. The group was active from 1989 to 2000 and organized eleven projects including three on the streets of New York, one of which the “law and order” mayor Rudolph Giuliani tried (unsuccessfully) to stop in 1989/1990. The group sought to temporarily “repossess” the unknown, overlooked, or repressed histories of poor immigrants, slaves, abolitionists, radicals, feminists, trade unionists, indentured servants, child-laborers, and the forgotten narratives of transients, native people, and gay, lesbian, and transgender activists. In reality, these disenfranchised minorities shared nothing so much in common as a mutual superfluousness to the mainstream public sphere: its electoral process, its history, but also its museums, cultural institutions, and official educational curricula. REPOhistory made the past uncomfortable for the present, directly on the streets of the city. The group’s final project CIRCULATION was an attempt to map the history, economy, and symbolic dimensions of human blood as a natural / social / metaphorical substance. Because the City would no longer let the group put up public signs, the project consisted of a fluxus-like series of circulating postcards, and a website still archived online at http://repohistory.org


News coverage of The Lower Manhattan Sign Project, REPOhistory’s first street-sign project, 1992 showing REPOhistorian Tom Klem installing one of the group’s signs with a NYC Department of Transportation permit. The street signs, which “repossessed” unknown or repressed histories at specific sites, were permitted to remain in place for one year. In later projects the group encountered strong resistance from the City regarding its controversial re-mapping of New York’s past.

Marsha P. Johnson was a famed transgender activist who was most likely murdered in a bias-related crime in 1992. In 1994 REPOhistory working in conjunction with the Storefront for Art & Architecture created its second New York City sign project Queer Spaces in which nine sites of significance to the gay, lesbian, and transgendered communities of the city were temporarily marked with pink triangles. Among the sites was the location of ACT UP’s first demonstration, a famous gay bathhouse, and the approximate location of Marsha P. Johnson’s death in the Hudson River near the Meat Packing District.

REPOartist Mona Jimenez participated in an important federal lawsuit proving that welfare was a human right and not a state gift. He created this sign design for Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice in New York City (1998–1999), REPOhistory, NYC, 1992.

Visualization of an unrealized REPOhistory project for the Whitney Independent Studies Program’s (ISP) exhibition City of Power. In 1992, REPOhistory was invited to participate in City of Power, an exhibition organized by student curators at the ISP. This was at a time when the program’s exhibition space was still on Maiden Lane near the Federal Reserve Bank in lower Manhattan. REPOhistory proposed an installation that looked like a bank break-in by creating the illusion of a huge tunnel dug down into the nearby subterranean gold vaults beneath the Reserve. Scattered about the work site would be information about the financial history of the United States. For reasons still unknown, REPOhistory’s proposal was rejected. Instead the ISP curators installed one of the group’s metal street signs in their exhibition. Pictured is Jim Costanzo’s street sign “Advantages of an Unregulated Free-Market Economy,” first installed outside the New York Stock Exchange building, 1992–1993.
After REPOhistory forced the City to install its 1998–1999 project, Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice in New York City, the group discovered several of the signs missing including this piece by Marina Gutierrez protesting illegal discriminatory housing quotas at a City-owned building in Brooklyn. Here the New York City Police Department allegedly investigates the sign as having been reported on in the pages of the tabloid paper New York Post.


Just about the time REPOhistory became entangled with the administration of Rudolph Giuliani in 1998, the Mayor had lost an important case brought against him and the City for confiscating the work of artists who were selling art on city sidewalks. The lawsuit stated that such sales fell under the Constitutional Protection of Freedom of Speech, and the judges agreed. REPOartist George Spencer illustrates the case using a famous image of artist David Hammons selling snow balls outside Cooper Union in the 1970s.

The final REPOhistory project in 2000 entitled CIRCULATION was not a street sign installation because of new restrictions put in place by the City about public art that came about as fallout from our previous project Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice in New York City. CIRCULATION was a mapping of human blood as a political, economic, metaphorical, and natural substance and the project consisted of circulating postcards designed by individual artists on the subject of blood, a website (http://repohistory.org designed by a team led by Jim Costanzo) with digital projects and documentation of all of REPOhistory’s work, a series of educational projects in public high schools, and this project map designed by Janet Roening and Gregory Sholette, which was widely distributed.

“Do You Know Where Your DNA Is?” An adhesive postcard designed by Gregory Sholette for the final REPOhistory project, CIRCULATION in 2000 with this text printed on the reverse side:

On December 31, 1998, NYC Police Commissioner Howard Safir announced plans to collect DNA samples from the blood or saliva of any suspects. Safir assured New Yorkers, “The innocents have nothing to fear.” Two months later an innocent African man named Amadou Diallo was shot nineteen times by NYPD.
On December 20, 2011, members of Occupy Wall Street's Arts & Labor Working Group staged a "photo-op" intervention on the High Line Park in Chelsea, New York, to comment on the artist John Baldessari's enormous billboard piece, *The First $100 000 I Ever Made*. Passersby were encouraged to stop and paint their own cardboard message "dots," and then pose with them before the billboard. Responses ranged from "I will never have this much money," to "End For-Profit Education," to "Trickle Down". Arts & Labor is a working group of Arts & Culture, OWS. Pictured is video artist Ernie Larson. (Image: G. Sholette)

Not An Alternative and allies dressed as street workers in collaboration with Picture The Homeless during a building occupation on March 19, 2009, in East Harlem, El Barrio, NYC. The temporary, guerilla street installation was part of a campaign to bring attention to the contradiction and failure in Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s five-year plan to end homelessness by making visible the thousands of City- and bank-owned properties sitting vacant. Not An Alternative is a non-profit organization based in Brooklyn, NY, whose mission integrates art, activism, theory, and digital technology around core themes of spatial conflict, gentrification, and a critique of the "creative class." (Image: A. Stern)

Survey visualization graphics designed by Worksight.com from Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture (London: Pluto Press, 2011), and also available online along with the raw survey data about artists's collectives at http://darkmatterarchives.net
Edgar Arceneaux’s *Untitled*  

I.

One might be tempted to read this image rhythmically:

*(Crashing waves)*

Musically: in staccato and with limited attention span.

Engaging intensely and letting go immediately: Jazz.

*(Detroit… 1967)*

Concretely:

*(FINAL HOPE FREENESS ZES FREE TIME)*

One then might be tempted to think about circulation:

*(Newspaper, poster, Situationist sloganeering)*

The layering of signifying mechanisms is fractal depending on the combinations the eye seeks to make between composition and color, imagery and word, mark-making and type, type and date, headline and slogan, color and language, color and slogan, color and date, color and Jazz. These combinations exponentially amplified depending on the historical baggage that the individual associates to each of the elements.

II.

July 23, 1967. Detroit. Police raid The Blind Pig, a so-called after-hours drinking club. The squad is taken aback by the number of people present in the club at the time of the raid: far more than the few patrons they were anticipating. The eighty men in the club were celebrating the return of two of their friends from Vietnam. Eighty-two black men were arrested on 12th Street.

*(Twelve more dead)*

The extent of police harassment and brutality is too much to bear. Frustrations would culminate that night: as the police await backup to apprehend those in handcuffs, riots break out.

By July 25, Federal troops are deployed: the National Guard occupies the city of Detroit.

*(Color and Detroit)*

On July 26, Mayor Jerome Cavanagh says: “Today we stand amidst the ashes of our hopes. We hoped against hope that what we had been doing was enough to prevent a riot. It was not enough.”

*(Time Freezes but History Echoes)*

III.

Since 1999 and until recently, Los Angeles-based artist Edgar Arceneaux had been managing the Watts House Project: a collaboration between the residents of Watts, artists and architects to redevelop the neighborhood, and in particular, the strip adjacent to...
Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers.

August 11, 1965. Watts. Police attempt to arrest Marquette Frye, accusing him of driving intoxicated. Frye’s brother, and later his mother are witnesses of the incident. They intervene in order to prevent excessive use of force by the officer trying to subdue the twenty-one-year-old driver.

The extent of police harassment and brutality is too much to bear. Frustrations would culminate that night: a crowd gathers and begins to throw projectiles at the police. Twenty-nine people are arrested.

By August 13, Federal troops are deployed: the National Guard occupies South Central Los Angeles.

On August 14, Sergeant Ben Dunn likens Watts to “an all-out war zone in some far-off foreign country”.

IV.

One might be tempted to read this image physically, wondering what the aged newspaper feels like between one’s fingers, what it sounded like when the push pins pierced through it to lay another sheet of paper over it. Does the red oil stick used for the writing stain the back of the paper with oily residue? Are the two sheets closely in contact or is there some give; some shadow; a dark crevice between them?

Arceneaux is not only interested in non-linear forms of interpretation—since after all, all sense-making (if indeed things are making sense) is inherently non-linear. But he is also interested in the act of making work and the relationship of that act to larger disciplines such as physics and psychology.

One might be tempted to read this image as a freeze frame from a lifelong accumulation of affect; a confusion of time and memorial images; an unsorted fragment from a database of experiences and intensities.

V.

1. Edgar Arceneaux has produced a book of the same title, in collaboration with Detroit-based techno collective Underground Resistance, and scholar Julian Meyers. The book draws from Detroit’s rich history of dissent and explores the thriving nature of the city’s contemporary art landscape.

March 1971—A poster calling to “stop poverty” appears for the first time in Israel. Different from previous cries to stop poverty during the two decades prior, this time the Israeli flag is absent and in its place appears the daring image of—no less—a Black Panther accompanied by the name of the movement: ‘The Black Panther Party’. For people familiar with the associations and connotations made by the poster, it was perceived as a threat; a danger to ‘Jewish unity’. What follows is a conversation between the then-prime minister Golda Meir, and the leaders of the Panthers—which is to say, four young, twenty-something men with an average of fourth grade schooling. After asking them on three different occasions where they got the name for their movement, Meir was still unsatisfied by their answers, and went on:

G. Meir: How did you come to this name?
R. Abarjel: There is an organization called Gattamon for Gattamon and some other organizations have been formed until this day [with other names], and they have all disappeared, or fallen into comas. This name is striking and arousing.

G. Meir: Where did you get this particular name?
R. Abarjel: It’s a striking name.
April 1971, Jerusalem, demonstration.

New generation of Mizrahim, with new language; the banners read:

"We Are Security Too"
"Wake Up, Mizrahi Communities"
"We Want Equality"
"Hunger is Crying Out"
"We Asked for Freedom of Speech; We Got Detention"
"Until When?"

At the other side of the picture, police forces waited on horseback and on foot, with clubs, tear gas and water cannons. The Panthers were encouraged by the "attention" they received from the "socialist government" of Meir. They realized that they were doing something right—exposing the truth: oppression of Black Jews by White Jews.

Editors's Note:
Mizrahi Jews or Mizrahim are Jews descended from the Jewish communities of the Middle East, North Africa and the Caucasus. The term Mizrahi is used in Israel in the language of politics, media and some social scientists for Jews from mostly Arab-ruled geographies and adjacent, primarily Muslim-majority countries.

Demonstration, Zion Square, Jerusalem 1971.

Thousands of young people like the ones pictured here made the Black Panthers in Israel into a mass movement. They had nothing to lose aside from their chains of poverty, their low-quality education and their unemployment. As the second generation of immigrants from the Middle East, they watched as their parents hit rock bottom and they felt they had no choice but to take it to the streets.

The leader—Saadia Marciano, twenty-one at the time. The brain and the charisma of the Panthers. He chose the name for the movement, brilliantly connecting the struggle of Mizrahim in Israel to that of the Blacks in America, with the Marxist and First-World—Third-World theories, even without having read one of the books. He heard and listened very closely to MAZPEN young friends (Israeli anti-Zionist movement established after 1967) and socialist students who had come to Israel from South America. When he had heard enough, he took his Musrara neighborhood to the streets, attracting all the neighborhoods in Jerusalem, and soon after, every Mizrahi town and neighborhood in Israel. "We wanted to scare Golda and her government" he said many years later, "and we succeeded, because she said many times that our movement’s name kept her up all night, every night." Saadia Marciano passed away in December 2007 at the age of fifty-seven. He was poor, sick and lonely, but never lost the spark in his eyes.

Demonstration—July 1971, Jerusalem. After one year of the first and only Jewish intifada, including clashes with the police and the government, Golda Meir formed a committee to investigate "youth poverty in Israel", a comfortable euphemism for "oppressive ethnic relationships". A year later when the new budget passed in the Knesset, all welfare sections of the budget were either doubled or tripled. That year’s budget was coined the "Panthers Budget". The Panthers also attacked Rabbi Kahana’s racist movement, which used Israeli secret service money to divert the anger of the Mizrahi masses away from the government to a new target—the Palestinians. He offered them racism to replace social justice. Today we know that that strategy of the Israeli government did indeed work to a large extent. The only Mizrahi "Panthers" that can be found today are patriot soldiers in the occupation forces. Sad.
1971: Charlie Bitton—twenty years old. Education—fourth grade. A bright, smart, analytical mind that Israeli social movements haven’t seen since. No fear. Nothing to lose. Unlike the cute, red-haired leaders of the summer 2011 “social uprising” in Tel-Aviv. This young man was sent to prison multiple times but never gave in or gave up. He later became the first “slams Mizrahi boy” to make it to the Knesset with the Communist Party and later the first Knesset member and Mizrahi leader to meet with PLO leader Yasser Arafat in Europe, when it was against the law. He continued his social protest in the Knesset with provocations that made it to the evening news, such as handcuffing himself to the microphone whilst addressing the Israeli parliament, saying “These social issues deserve more than five minutes!” The Knesset security guards had to cut the handcuffs off to remove Bitton from the podium.

July 1971—Mass demonstration in Jerusalem. The feast! The coffin reads: “Discrimination.” Unfortunately discrimination is still alive and kicking in Israel and the occupied territories. The only visible and tragic change is that many Mizrahim “made” it into the oppressor’s side, becoming small politicians in Zionist political parties and middle class sub-contractors enslaving upwards of five hundred thousand foreign workers from the “real” Third-World. The Panthers threw themselves on the barbed wire fence to pave the way for social change. They gave us the language, the universal discourse and the example of courage. No other movement has followed in their footsteps to the same degree.

To read further on the Black Panthers in Israel and the Mizrahi struggle, see Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel, White Jews, Black Jews, by professor Sami Shalom Chetrit, published by Routledge London, 2010 (Hebrew and Arabic versions are available under: The Mizrahi Struggle in Israel).
found in it a refuge from the tyranny of history and the absolutism of various ideologies. It was neither a manifest nor a set of guidelines for a violent act, but more of an artistic / performative text signaling a desire for the liberation of sacred archetypes that could easily be—were—abused so as to serve conflicting purposes and propagandas. Makris and his team seemed to be against the void-like admiration and the emotionally sterile confrontation of an historic monument—while the political, social and aesthetic destruction of Athens could take place uninterrupted at its feet, yet not seem to touch the Parthenon itself. This proclamation was more of an urgent call for genuine action by the living, or even an accusation of society, it did not, in any sense, urge the actual destruction of the Parthenon.

“The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work among them”, argues Arthur Danto in his famous work, After the End of Art.1 One way or another, a declaration that was as such articulated and distributed in that particular period of time, was a really “new idea” (at least in Greece, since the concept of shattering was already discussed extensively in Europe) and was setting up a challenging perspective for issues of “Hellenic identity”. Destroy Athens, which many years later in 2007 became a title for the first Athens Biennial, perhaps emerged of the same urge, but was since used as a successful marketing magnet for a contemporary art exhibition. It was intended to shake the conditions of the art scene at the time. The exhibition undoubtedly encompassed the energy of Athens as a city in a constant flux of unsystematized, metamorphosis, however, it did not involve a debate that foresaw or even implied Greece’s current state.

Originally initiated as a bluff by the up-and-coming curator Xenia Kalpaktsoglou, the young critic Augustine Zenakos, and artist Poka-Yio, Destroy Athens ended up being a well-orchestrated and strong international biennial that not only attracted international funding support, but 40 000 people in addition to art world attention on the city of Athens. While up to then there had been a yearly (and fruitless) debate over a state biennial in Greece—by the circles of the Ministry of Culture and the official state museums—this particular Biennial was announced, rather courageously, by its founders as an official institution at a time where they had neither secured even a small percentage of funding nor an organizational infrastructure to back them up. There was a big chance that there would not be any future to the announcement, even if it sounded very “proper”. But they took it. Ultimately, the exhibition managed to “hijack” the Greek cultural policy. This was actually its most successful instant, and also, as its title expresses in a way, destroyed the ‘old regime’. It has been running strong for four years since.

Funding for the exhibition was mainly provided by Deutsche Bank, and the audience numbers were beyond any kind of expectation. Under a very specific narrative (which was quite apparent in the curatorial stance but perhaps less so in the selected works) based on the notion of conflict, dead ends, violence, and cruelty, a spectrum of interesting works and artists—quite trendy for the period—were gathered. A long and sober corridor-like route permitted only one entry to the spectacle. Following the biblical reference of the Genesis creation, the seven days that God needed to create the universe, the biennial was separated into seven ‘episodes’. In that sense the interplay between the ‘creation’ of a show on taboos or the hidden scope of life which bares the barbarous rawness of humanity and the symbolic destruction of Athens seemed to have been a given. Some works were very justified in that context, others less so. Notable was a large mural by the artist Sterios Faitakis that depicted an illusionary magma of philosopher Socrates’s days and current Greek protest and riots, in his own style (a combination of Byzantine iconography and manga cartoon influences). On top of the mural hung a small painting by Pablo Picasso that depicted the Parthenon. The painting is a historical one for Greece, since Picasso made it to raise money for the liberation of Manolis Glezos, who together with Apostolos Santas on May 30, 1941, climbed on the Acropolis and tore down the swastika which had been there since April 27, 1941, when the Nazi forces had entered Athens.

‘Every practice brings a territory into existence— one that superimposes its own geography over the state cartography, scrambling and blurring it: it produces its own secession,” argues the Invisible Committee in the book The Coming Insurrection. They continue, ‘Current history might be about false communities and calculated absences; however, art as a kind of magic operation always offers an exodus from the rigid reality to a more ‘invented’ one. Often it not only captures an actual time and place, but also predicts and even influences the future. The Greek crisis confronts us as a harsh reality that is here to stay; a difficult episode of an unknown duration, during which we all have to learn to survive as best as possible. We must learn to find our balance in this new environment.’

The mass media has been quick to make a brand out of something called the ‘Greek crisis’, with the paradoxical goal of triggering consumerism. Only a few advertisements in Greece do not refer to the economic crisis or do things such as ask people to buy more products for cheaper prices. And then, of course, the crisis appears all the time as a subject in contemporary theater, music, and visual production. “Crisis” is an easy tag for everything as long as there is no need for serious thinking.

This is immoral.

In a country where people oscillate between despair, lack of resources, uncertainty, turbulence, anomie, disbelieve, corruption, and chaos, adopting an imaginative distance from daily events can sometimes, perhaps, be more effective than any other gestural form of destruction. This stance brooks change and all kinds act as constructive agents of historical change. History, after all, evolves in loops, and artistic expression always reacts to fundamental philosophical and scientific changes or alterations in political and social structures, by offering an apparatus of departure from everyday reality toward the ‘imaginary’.


For everyone in Greece, or elsewhere, one of the first issues should be preventing the current crisis from being branded in the wrong way. Our biggest responsibility during these times is to think with deepest precision, to think of causes and possibilities, to analyze facts, to open up a constructive environment for knowledge, even amidst the difficult context produced by the real restrictions imposed upon us by the crisis. Greeks are confused by the extent of the looting, arson and general pillaging that happen in front of the camera, while at the same time they realize that capitalism as a system is based on the violence of exclusion and the obedience obtained by violence. “Who are really behind the balaclavas?” asks the young student demonstrator Maria Virgioti. “They may be angry unemployed or redundant people, destitute immigrants, or desperate students who are destroying the source of their oppression.”

Art has not the right to decide for all. It is maybe wiser to question. With my co-curators Paolo Colombo and Mahita El Bacha Ureeta at the Thessaloniki Biennial [2011], for example, we wanted to avoid pseudo-political gestures, false or incomplete documentation, and pseudo-activism—trends we tend to see a lot in the art world (and have been seeing for some years now, actually). We focused more on works that spoke of current conditions, but through the properties of art itself in a quite elusive manner of storytelling. Art is connected to illusion, after all. This may be where its main political power lies. The works we included reflect the human condition and its fragile nature, in many different senses and through many different pathways and stories. Our aim was to open up ways to think not just about the crisis, but beyond the crisis. Our idea was to try and sculpt a mindscape that would encompass some of the past and the present, politics and sentiment by looking for an organic rapport between the works and the historical buildings of the city—be it philosophical, cultural, or architectural in nature. We came up with various episodes belonging to an overarching narrative which was inspired by either the past, or the present contributions of these buildings to the social life of the city and to its political underbelly.

With this in mind, we made use of some of the city’s remaining monuments from different eras for the exhibition site. Old Ottoman mosques, a Turkish bath, an old Ottoman prison in Thessaloniki that was active up until the 1980s, the bourgeois villa of an Italian inhabitant during the Second World War—all became part of the Biennial, though neither for a historical nor a nostalgic staging. The intention was to let the audience stroll around the city, grasping an essence of both the past and the present, which encompass the socio-economical conflicts, chasms and questions that have brought the world to its so-called universally modern state. The risk that viewers may not experience all the venues, which were quite spread out, was taken into account. Yet an important aspect of the Biennial was the audience’s potential to get lost along the way. Navigation of the space and time between the venues, which were quite spread out, was taken into account. Yet an important aspect of the Biennial was the audience’s potential to get lost along the way. Navigation of the space and time between

In hindsight, a dynamic transition could have taken place. This was the condition we wanted to explore precisely in the context of truculence and uprisings. Creating an alternative reality, which nevertheless does not feel out of time and place, but on the contrary, is part of the geographical context and its present, was the main task. And this was possible only through the appreciation of art as a “radical illusion” from this world.

Each episode was triggered from the present or past use of each monument but did not consist merely of re-staging of any sort. An example the old hammam became a space for gathering information, a foyers for exchange and discussion as old public baths used to be, and hosted archival material by artists and collectives such as Arab Image Foundation, Cinémathèque de Tanger, Prism TV, 99 Weeks Archive, Zeina Maasri, and The Archive, among others. In the same sense, and still haunted by the voices of political prisoners of the latest junta in Greece and the fact that many important works were installed there, they somehow turned attention away from the prevailing mood of various coexistences. It is strange to think that in a country like Greece, personalities such as Vassilis Kaisar, dedicated to youth culture and which chronicles rock ’n roll in Greece from 1945 to 1990. Yet what ultimately weakens the record of Greek “revolutionary” gestures is that it neglects the role of culture and imagination within society.
No one wants to destroy anything, yet in the same respect, one wants to have the choice of what to remember, what to forget, what to preserve or what to destroy.

Territorially speaking, the common is different than both public and private spaces. Both private and public lands and the relations between people and things that they implicate are regulated by the state. The state guarantees private property and maintains public property. Both private and public lands are territorial mechanisms for the governance of men and women. Sometimes this form of government operates by maintaining these distinctions and sometimes it operates by blurring them. The endless privatization of public space, mirrored by the incessant intrusion of public agents (state bodies, police, et cetera) into the private domain is a technique of governmental control.

In Palestine, the idea of the public is particularly toxic. Although prior to Zionist colonization a wide multiplicity of collective lands existed, as well as collective uses of land—agricultural, religious, and nomadic, to name a few—upon occupying the land and excluding its people, the state has since flattened them all into one category, “state land”, and seized control over it as sovereign. This state land was still declared public space but only inasmuch as it was reserved for the only public acknowledged to be legitimate—the Jewish Israeli one. The contours of public land became the blueprint of colonization. This regime of sovereignty was strictly willing to acknowledge individual Palestinian titles, thus private land. The state’s mechanism of humanitarian balance tolerates Palestinian presence only as individuals. And yet, in many cases ownership of this land was seized as well.

The main legal resource for colonization was the Ottoman Land Law of 1858. This law was the result of an agrarian reform across the Ottoman Empire, of which Palestine was part until 1917. It recognized a plot of land as "miri" (privately owned) if it had been continuously cultivated for at least ten consecutive years. If a landowner failed to farm the land for three consecutive years, the status of the land was changed to “makhlul” and repossessed by the sovereign. Therefore, farmers who did not want to pay the tax for land not used for cultivation gave up ownership, even if these plots were only small patches of rocky ground that existed within their fields.

The topographical folds, summits, slopes, irrigation basins, valleys, rifts, cracks and streams of Palestine, were no longer seen simply as naïve topographical features, but as signifiers to a series of legal manipulations, generating patterns of “islands” of small privately owned fields within an area of uncultivated “state land”. So in what way did the collective differ? The idea of the common land in this context is a set of relations between people and things—organized by the principle of equality—and is not mediated by the state. But the common here exist only in an immaterial territorial form, or in extraterritorial forms, scattered amongst a diasporic archipelago of camps. The demolished cities and villages of Palestine are now one example of a common space, and their mirror image—the camps—is another. After sixty years, the memory of a single house is now equally shared by hundreds of families.

In the camp, the common is the shared history of displacement and the absence of private property. In this respect, thinking up the revolution of that return also means thinking up a revolution in relation to property. The common is an action rather than a

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Notes from the editors: In a conscious effort to distance themselves from more Anglo-Saxon declination of “commons”, the authors have chosen to employ the less-familiar “common”, thus making recourse to the word’s Latin origin, “commune”, meaning municipality; self-government; what we have in common.
designation. It is not a definition of a type of property or a type of land but of the practices that attempt to reclaim this land to common use. This return to common use is the main condition for the general political tendency that in the last sixty-odd years was collected under the terms of the return. Two inverse and interdependent utopias: the Palestinians’s rights of return, and the Jewish law of return. Not only is return dependent on the common, but there can be no common without return. The common that constitutes a shared Palestine in suspension, common in as much as it is in suspension.
The destroyed village of Miska is located north of Tel Aviv–Jaffa, five kilometers from the Palestinian city of Tira and fifteen kilometers from Qalqilya, today part of the West Bank. In April 1948, the village’s residents were forcibly expelled and the village was subsequently destroyed. Only one family was able to stay nearby. At present, close to 400 descendants of this family live as internally displaced refugees in the Israeli Palestinian town of Tira. The exiled population has spread throughout refugee camps and cities in the West Bank and Jordan. The municipal land of Miska has since been managed by the Israeli Land Administration (ILA) that rents it for the cultivation of fruit trees to the settlements of Sde Warburg, Mishment and the kibbutz of Ramat Ha-Kovesh. The only significant visible remains of the village are the ruins of a mosque. Until 2007 there was also a school, but Israeli authorities demolished the building after it was discovered that Miska refugees living in Tira had been appropriating it for social activities.

We approached Miska as a material archive for the spatial possibilities of return, investigating the socio-political dimensions of the nation. Imagining forms of return of Palestinian refugees implied exploring ways in which being a refugee and its associated spatial dislocation could reshape the political space. Refugee-ness, the most contemporary of predicaments, is a rapid and indeterminate process of dislocation that fuels the transformation of states and the concept of sovereignty. That condition of being refugee, living an exiled and transnational life, is unthinkable within present political categories. We must imagine new political spaces.

Vegetable fields, now cultivated by Kibbutz Sde-Warburg and other Israeli settlements, are bound by routes that marked the layout of the village on Miska, whose ruins lay at the surface of the land. The circular building of the Phenix (al-Feneiq) Cultural Centre is like a memory probe. It traces the footprints of the village. Within the circular form the fabric of Miska was invented. Whatever was filled by houses is now void, and the open spaces between the houses in Miske are now solids, extruded over the surface of the earth, inhabited by multiple common programs. Both formally and conceptually, the building is thus the complementary structure to the Phenix Cultural Centre in the refugee camp of Deheisheh.

Within a void in the refugee camp of Deheisheh, a structure whose shadow on the open plaza reflects the footprint of houses in the village of Miska was inserted. It is a fleeting, immaterial presence of the village within the camp.

[...] We need to think about a model for the return. Al Feneiq is a novel that we have created; it represents a collective cultural process able to innovate, change and reverse itself. Indeed, the first Feneiq was created in Deheishe, but we have also succeeded in creating another center in the Arobab camp. A Feneiq could also be created in Deir Aban, my village of origin… I know that finally a Feneiq in my village would be even stronger than the Feneiq in the Deheisheh camp. I will leave Deheisheh Camp to the city of Bethlehem. I know I will miss Deheisheh; I will return back to walk in its alleys on summer nights. Bethlehem will remain the place where I will gather my forces and my people to prepare new bases and a new life for the Return. I am sure that we will be able to reproduce a model through the collective work that will not only prepare the environment for the return, but that will influence the whole Arab world.”

Naji Odeh, Director of Al Feneiq Center

1. The “Classroom of Difficult Questions” was used by Jasmina Huseinovic to describe her workshop as part of Exposures, the second chapter of the WEIYTH project.
2. Where Everything is Yet To Happen (WEIYTH) started in Banja Luka, in collaboration with a curatorial team consisting of Anselm Franke, Ana Janeski, Vit Havranek and Zbynek Baladrán, Enid Kosova, Nina Mointmann and Jelena Vesić. The outcome of this joint work was the exhibition of the first part of the project, Can You Speak of This?—Yes, I Can, held in October 2009.

Can You Speak of This? The Exhibition As a Classroom of Difficult Questions

Upon having been invited to curate a new edition of Spaport in Banja Luka, Bosnia-Herzegovina, we decided to replace the one-time spectacular “biennial” event with a temporal subversion of the format, turning it into a slow, two-year project, gradually constructing and restructuring an unstable community gathered in various phases of its realization.

The first part, Can You Speak of This?—Yes, I Can, developed in several stages, throughout 2009. Involving artists and co-curators from various contexts, it inverted the topics usually identified with the “Balkans” into different geopolitical constellations. This first exhibition set up the topics that had materialized gradually—questions of complicity, collaboration, solidarity, the articulation of trauma, the politics of language, the politics of memory and the politicization of art in opposition to the culturalization of politics. The second part, Exposures, evolved throughout 2010 and focused exclusively on the post-Yugoslav context, gathering a community of artists, thinkers, writers and activists around a set of difficult, post-traumatic and “transitional” (i.e. unresolved) questions.

The title, Where Everything is Yet to Happen (WEIYTH), contains references to duration, location and variables of the expected event, all of which are united by a conscious assumption of a position of radical
uncertainty, of being caught in a breach between a past that does not provide support and a future that does not arrive; a past that does not offer (or in the best of cases, obscures the view of) an event to which we would, in Alain Badiou’s terms, bind ourselves to fidelity; and a future from which one expects precisely that—the ‘miracle’ of an event.

Called upon to speak, we, representatives of the closer and more distant “international community” found ourselves caught at the same time in a forest of speech as well as in front of a wall of silence, which resounded with the question: What, in the first place, can one speak about and what must one speak about today in ex-Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Republika Srpska, in Banja Luka—and with what means?

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One day someone from out of the crowd recognized me. Behind me, a young woman, her lips blue from the cold—who had of course never before known me by name—interrupted the silence created from the exhaustion to which we were all subject, asking me with a whisper (there everybody whispered): “Can you describe this?” I said I could, after which something like a smile passed over what had once been her face. Anna Akhmatova, Requiem

As Giorgio Agamben pointed out in his essay On Potentiality, Akhmatova’s “I can”—her positive answer to the question of whether she could describe the horrors that were being committed during the time of Stalin’s purges—does not mean a conviction of the possession of certain capacities that guarantee success in describing the indescribable. Instead, it represents a radical acceptance of responsibility: an obligation to define one’s own position in the existing state of things. “Beyond all faculties, this ‘I can’ does not mean anything—yet it marks what is, for each of us, perhaps the hardest and bitterest experience possible: the experience of potentiality.”

Accepting the invitation to take on the responsibility for speech, in spite of all the paradoxes and difficulties; articulating our own positions with respect to them; and inviting others to join this forum represented the foundations of the attempt to answer the question what we can (and must) do, or better still, what art is capable of doing.

In his elaboration of the modes in which ethnic identity is produced, Sarajevo-based philosopher Ugo Vlaisavljević argues that ethnic politics rests upon narrative pragmatics—ethnic identity is always created through the telling of the ‘most important stories’ and these are always, in the post-Yugoslav space at least, war stories. How then to radically do away with the past, destabilizing those war subjects who rest on the telling of the ‘most important tales’? Can speech occupy the place of the tale—tale as a myth; tale of the past; tale as delusion?

It seems necessary, however, to first expose oneself to the truth; to confess; to lay bare; to reveal oneself in speech as action; to put an end to the past via direct statement.

In what manner can one address war crimes and trauma when going beyond the “unambiguous” roles of perpetrator, victim, accomplice and observer? Who is it that should speak, and with what means, if he or she is to avoid the simplistic telling of the “true” stories, the establishment of the “fundamental interpretations”? Must it be that speech continually happens elsewhere; negotiations and judgements happen in that same “international community”; or outside the spaces in which the past is the future; spaces where speech and the political wait patiently, and for long periods of time, to once again step into the sphere of the public?

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The prospective framing of the project with the title Where Everything Is Yet to Happen, was also formulated through positing an “impossible” equation: If the recent past is what creates the perversion and continuous paralysis of the political, social and economic present of Bosnia-Herzegovina, then this past should be done away with. This recent past, marked by war between the three dominant ethnic “communities” seems to be the only thing that still makes the country the object of interest and patronage of the international community; of the EU supports for the development of democracy, civil society, tolerance and multiculturalism. This same traumatic past is at the same time a key element in the external naming and in the mechanisms of branding the cultural and art production of Bosnia-Herzegovina by the “stable” and “well-ordered” Western democracies, apt to humanitarian exoticism and fetishization of the “suffering of others”.

Doing away with the past, not in the sense of a blind, escapist denial of its “reality”, but through an attempt to delegitimize it, assumes cancelling out the entire referential field in which the past and its violence continue to impose themselves as the only, “natural”, source of the narrative of the past that does not provide support and a future that does not arrive; a past that does not offer (or in the best of cases, obscures the view of) an event to which we would, in Alain Badiou’s terms, bind ourselves to fidelity; and a future from which one expects precisely that—the ‘miracle’ of an event.

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Called upon in 1993 to write a “eulogy of the mélange” (mixed), Jean-Luc Nancy started his text with the words: “Sarajevo has become the expression of a complete system for the reduction to identity.” Mixing and “bastardry” are impermissible and threaten the very heart of the idea of the immanence of community. In the foreword to Being Singular Plural, we again find a reference to Sarajevo, along with a lengthy list of scenes of armed conflicts in the world at the time, together with their protagonists; their “identities”. Precisely at that moment, Nancy recognises the necessity of thinking the community again, of beginning to address the problem of “we”.

In the context of the entire post-Yugoslav region, the question of how to think and how to utter “we” resounds with a particular gravity. This is especially so in the context of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the “normalisation” of which lags behind the states of the former Yugoslavia primarily because it was not possible to conduct it through the “one nation-one state” formula. Perhaps perversely, such a situation implies resistance to normalisation and opens up the possibility that it is precisely Bosnia-Herzegovina that could spur us on to imagining alternatives to the supposedly obvious and natural model of the nation state; the ultimate object of which is the unobstructed establishment of a free market and dissolution of all antagonisms.

In his lecture, Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art, Alain Badiou defines art as the “production” and “process” of truth: “Art cannot merely be the expression of a particularity (be it ethnic or personal). Art is the impersonal production of a truth that is addressed to everyone [...]. Art is the process of a truth, and this truth is always the truth of the sensible or sensual, the sensible qua sensible. This means: the transformation of the sensible into a happening of the Idea.”

By accepting the invitation to do the project in Bosnia-Herzegovina, we decided to believe that we could find methodological and tactical ways of surmounting the particularities of various interested parties, and the individual and collective traumas that crossed paths therein. Attempting to engage in a process of searching for truth in solidarity with others, we accepted the possibility of finding ourselves and the “results” of our work instrumentalized for the purposes of a culturalization of politics and of representing its location as a normal, decent “Republic”. Yet it was precisely these possible traps that had led us to accept the process. For it is in exactly such complex conditions that our own postulates may be put to the test; namely, that critical practice should always take risks, depart from uncertainty about its own positions, continuous self-examination, a sense of responsibility, and finally—radical exposure to both external circumstances and to all of the people who (in one way or another) may become involved in a project.

Accepting and extending the invitation to participate in these uneasy conditions of multiple confrontations and exposures meant emancipating the search (or truth) itself, while accepting the unpredictability of the outcome. In the final instance, the continued commitments from everyone involved helped create a terrain for strengthening the existing alliances between dis-identified individuals and groups in the post-Yugoslav space, and assisted in the forgoing of new ones. Most importantly, the multidirectional processes taking part within WEYMP project enabled a different kind of community of learning and un-learning in the “classrooms of difficult questions”. Entering these classrooms meant embracing the contradiction between the often uncomfortable and unattractive slowness of reflection and the insistence on the prospective impetus of the overall endeavour. Finally, it all took place in the framework of an exhibition without results that could be easily measured or understood at a glance.

All stages of the project thus remained relatively invisible and were almost unequivocally ignored by the media and the local and regional art and intellectual communities. Particularly disappointing, the chapter of the project, was received with an active and frightening silence, and even boycotted in the local context. However, for the small number of people that joined these classrooms, including us, this process turned out to be extremely transformative. It was neither achieved easily nor without antagonism and confrontation, however. Summarizing the outcomes of these processes is not simple since they appear as a set of “consequences”: after-effects and echoes that can no longer be directly identified with the project or with our own agency. We believe however, that it is precisely such outcomes that need to be incited—often delayed, they become impossible to count or measure or bring into relation with their origination point. In that sense, the project itself might be thought of as merely a preparation for something that is itself always “yet to happen”—a soft incipiency of lines of resonances in the future; going beyond the more or less rhetorical task of prospectively oriented thinking, so often present in the curatorial discourse today.
Curators:
Ivana Bago & Antonia Majčić
DeLVe | Institute for Duration, Location and Variables

Participating artists and projects:


Public Classroom and Political Workshop by Jasmina Husanović (Grupa Spomenik/Monument Group), Against the Death of the Political Subject, On Cultural Production and Emancipatory Politics, 2010, Spaport 2010

Working Group “Four Faces of Omarska”, Wall notes of public working meeting, Exposures, Spaport 2010

Public Reading of Jelena Petrović (Grupa Spomenik/Monument Group) & Stanislav Tomic, History of the Present, Spaport 2010

Public Reading of Jelena Petrović (Grupa Spomenik/Monument Group) & Stanislav Tomic, History of the Present, Spaport 2010
Working Group “Four Faces of Omarska”, field research on Omarska concentration camp, Spaport 2010

Installation view of Can You Speak of This?—Yes, I Can with work by Libia Castro & Ólafur Ólafsson, Your Country Does Not Exist, 2009, Spaport 2009

All images: Archives of Protok, Banja Luka and DeLVe, Zagreb.
All images courtesy of the artists if not stated otherwise.

The whole act of making a landscape of Palestine, or what can be called “The Open”—that which is ‘outside’ the urban space; of making it a timeless continuation of the imagined biblical landscape, has been part of the Zionist process for colonizing the land and replacing its native inhabitants. This process knows two phases: Firstly, by making the native inhabitants part of the scenery; part of the landscape, the image is lent an ‘authentic’ aesthetic. Secondly, by inverting that very process, and by looking at those very people as undeveloped characters who fail to understand the value of the landscape. It is reasoned that the land should be taken away from them and the desert turned into a blooming country of “milk and honey”. Subjects produce the scenery and then disappear.

This reduction of Palestine into the “status” of a simple landscape alienates Palestinians from the land, but interestingly, not from the image that represents the landscape. Access to the land is limited and restricted by different encounters: temporary and structural, procedural and bureaucratic. The Wall, checkpoints, by-pass and settler-only roads, settlements, military zones, and of course, all the necessary permissions which have become harder than ever to obtain, prevent a sense of familiarity with the landscape. They castrate the possibility of constructing a collective relation in and through the land and its geography. Exile occurs without the indigenous having been expelled; we become passers-by on the road-networks that penetrate the landscape when travelling from one ghetto to another (the ghetto known as Area A as per writ of the Oslo Accords), and we become temporal inhabitants of the roads overlapping that timeless landscape.

Strangely, we, “Palestinians”, cannot see that very biblical landscape; we don’t belong to it because we are it. Our vital space is its continuation through the history, and when we begin depicting that space as a landscape we begin to give ourselves over to that sense of alienation from what used to be a place.

From the Nakba (Arabic for ‘catastrophe”—or the loss of Palestine in 1948) throughout the years of occupation, the landscape has been represented as an image of vanishing space, from a possible site to a distant sight that represents all these policies and structures of separation and oppression. These images are produced to represent feelings of loss and trauma from the conflict; images of olive groves, of ancient roots of villages, of the terraces, and more. Images that document the actions of the occupation, showing the gray concrete wall penetrating the land, settlements in the horizon, the misery of the queues of people waiting at checkpoints; whether mass mediated or in art, whether by foreign or local photographers. All these images are familiar to us. This is how we see the land: a landscape practiced through occupation and alienation. We become fixated on the visual representation of our political status; we become familiar to this landscape because we become used to seeing it as an alien place.

Clearly I am not implying that we “Palestinians” never did have a landscape before the British Mandate or the Israeli occupation—far from that. Every nation has a landscape that it relates to, constructing part of its collective narrative through both traversal and imagination. The problem is not in the landscape as a scene, but in the act of transforming the space to become a scene. Violence is not only what is practiced through space, but also in making a landscape out of that violence. The Wall is not only there to separate us from the land, it has also become our landscape.
I can’t remember seeing anything more beautiful than this landscape.

she told me that day...

we went to explore other universes

nine astronauts and I
we were going to die of thirst

we waited for the rain

Instead... alien ships appeared

they looked like toys from our childhood

they attacked us using electromagnetic weapons
we thought it was funny

we laughed out loud

until one day they came with real spaceships

we never expected to see such catastrophe

what the fuck do we do now?
The future is the past in search of the present. The past is the future in search of the present.
- David Thringham

1. I first watched Chilean film-maker Patricio Guzmán’s remarkable meditation on cosmic time and political violence on a flawed promotional DVD with friends in Highgate, London. In the final third, it was only possible to view it in cycles of about forty-five seconds. Afterward, eyes smeared in tears, we looked at each other in silence. We were started into silence. Later, around 2 a.m., I walked back to where I was living, in Hackney, perhaps two and a half hours away. I walked beneath a sky of stars that were impossible to see.

2. We are both storytellers. Lying on our backs, we look up at the night sky. This is where stories begin, under the aegis of that multitude of stars, which at night fill with certitudes and sometimes return them as faith. Those who first invented and then named the constellations did not of course change the stars, but the stars connected by the lines of the constellations did not of course change the stars, but the lines of the constellations gave them an image of their place. The stars threaded on that line were part of the fabric of our lives, providing us with a sense of our own place in the world. The stars were our way of being, reminding one of Andrei Tarkovsky’s childhood home—in the layered intensity of its being, reminding one of Andrei Tarkovsky’s Mirror—establishes all of this with the simplest of means. The camera studies the quiet harmony of a genuine dwelling place while the film maker himself narrates the opening stations in the journey towards the coming Fall. As he does so, the constellated dust motes in the bright and slanting air inform us of the stars. They are galaxies.

So it begins. Time is embodied in space, and thus becomes place; the place of stories that matter.

3. Cinema is, foundationally, the story of time’s relationship with space; and also of time’s relationships with versions of itself within that space. In Nostalgia for the Light, Guzmán occupies these premises (proposal as architecture) so profoundly that what might, in other hand’s, have felt thematically distancing—actions committed by the Augusto Pinochet regime, stellar birth and death—becomes as intimate as the heat of the sun in a summer arm, as the gaze of a loved one on what she loves.

4. The problem of time is like the darkness of the sky. Every event is inscribed in its own time. Events may cluster and their time overlap, but the time in common between events does not extend as a law beyond the clustering. A famine is a tragic cluster of events. To which the Great Plough is indifferent, existing as it does in another time.
- John Berger, from And Our Faces...

5. The success of any creative process lies in the strength and conviction of the dynamic established between form, content and intention. The work made occupies this triangulation. Guzmán’s life project has, by his living within the circumstances of the Chilean twentieth century, become a memory map: a topographic inquiry into the place of Chile and its deliberately destroyed peoples; from Salvador Allende and his government to the thousands of violated and vanished citizens, removed into the void of “disappearance” by the military dictatorship. Memory becomes the place where, for better or for worse, those lives continue to be lived.

6. In Nostalgia for the Light the place of this “living memory” is the Atacama Desert. Here, all the chronologies of Guzmán’s investigation co-exist: the astronomers studying universal origins in the clearest skies of the planet, perfectly preserved pre-Columbian mummies; the graveyards of nineteenth-century miners; the ruins of the Pinochet prison; and the women of the disappeared, who, for decades, have scoured the desert debris for the traces of their lost husbands, brothers and sons... for what remains.

7. The film’s opening sequence in Guzmán’s childhood home—in the layered intensity of its being, reminding one of Andrei Tarkovsky’s Mirror—establishes all of this with the simplest of means. The camera studies the quiet harmony of a genuine dwelling place while the film maker himself narrates the opening stations in the journey towards the coming Fall. As he does so, the constellated dust motes in the bright and slanting air inform us of the stars. They are galaxies.

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8. The old order of the sublime focused its attention on scale and awe, normally natural or artistic, and in generally equal measure on the darkness and the light. As we move further into the era of upheaval we have made for ourselves, much of this remains “true” to our perception, albeit that the creative expression has largely changed, registering the globalized and the post-industrial, even the post-natural.

However, given the constellation of crises we face, it could be argued that an entirely different, almost reversed conception of the sublime is needed; one that finds its meaning in our experience of these phenomena. If this is correct, such a definition would need to be founded on empathy, as the bedrock of the means by which we can encounter others in the time and space of our troubles, and so begin, tentatively, collectively, to change them, and ourselves in the process.

9. You have been looking for your son for forty years, bent over the earth, the sun on your back for how many seasons. You have found his foot in a sock. You have found part of his forehead. Is this enough for you to mourn with, to leave him finally to the arms of the world? Is anything ever enough?

10. What reconciles me to my own death more than anything else is the image of a place: a place where your bones and mine are buried, thrown, uncovered, together. They are strewn there pell-mell. One of your ribs leans against my skull. A metacarpal of my left hand lies inside your pelvis. (Against my broken ribs your breast like a flower.) The hundred bones of our feet are scattered like gravel. It is strange that this image of our proximity, concerning as it does mere phosphate of calcium, should bestow a sense of peace. Yet it does. With you I can imagine a place where to be phosphate of calcium is enough.
- John Berger, from And Our Faces...

Nostalgia for the Light is available on DVD (www.nostalgiaforlight.com).

See here for info: http://www.newwavefilms.co.uk/new-cinema-releases.html

Watch the trailer on http://www.manifestajournal.org/issues/l-forgot-to-remember-to-forget

ENDS: 16 April 2012
Let us consider that this is a museum of past intergalactic revolutionary events, which began on December 15, 2013. At that point, Earth was collapsing—economically as much as ecologically. Hu Jintao took over the presidency of the European Union for undetermined time. The elites of the Earth, understandably worried about their security, decided to move to the perfectly neoliberal and well-organized gated communities on the moon. For entertainment purposes, and to resist the spell of nostalgia, they decided to invite a number of artists. However, since even on the Moon, the inhabitable space had become scarce, the artists had to be put into a cocoon—an artificial satellite called Zero Dream Factory. Inside, the gravity was zero; the time was subjective, and thus, the working time was unlimited.

"WE ALL REMEMBER THAT DAY. THE DAY WE LOOKED INTO THE SKY THAT HAD BECOME RED FROM THE POLLUTION AND HAD NO STARS, AND AT LAST WE SAW A REMINDER OF HOPE IN THE FORM OF AN EMBLEM OF INTERGALACTIC UNION PROJECTED INTO THE CLOUDS. THE DAY WHEN, FOR A COUPLE OF HOURS, EVERYTHING STOPPED ON PLANET EARTH, BECAUSE ALL THE NATIONS WERE GLUED TO THEIR MEDIA SCREENS, WATCHING THE LATEST NEWS REPORT. THAT WAS THE DAY THE INTERPLANETARY AGREEMENT WAS FINALLY SIGNED AFTER A YEAR OF HESITATION, AND THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE STRONGEST GALACTIC COALITIONS (AT THAT POINT EARTH, MOON AND VENUS) FOR THE FIRST TIME GREETED EACH OTHER WITH TWO FLAPS ON THE SHOULDER. THAT'S WHERE OUR NEW HISTORY BEGAN. NO ONE COULD PREDICT WHAT LIFE WOULD BE LIKE THEREAFTER. OF COURSE, NO ONE WOULD EVER HAVE IMAGINED THAT IT COULD SPREAD INTO A REVOLUTION."

(Recorded by Anastasia Starikova at the collective writing session)
In early Soviet science fiction, revolutions happened all over the Solar system—on Mars, on the Moon, and of course on Earth. Full of vivid social imagination, its authors described cosmic class struggles and social upheavals booming in space, both forceful and impetuous. The labor of revolution was, however, supposed to be the building block for the future conditions of labor. And here the revolutionary dynamics often got stuck on a single question: How will future humanity work? Should it work at all? Many writers of the 1920s–1930s hesitated between the abolition of labor, its extreme technologization and either its hyper-acceleration or a total creativisation. Some opted for a creative form of non-labor and described the inhabitants of the future as dancing, singing, painting creatures, who also regularly engage in unassisted flight. Like art, levitation and flight are considered to be creative pastimes that keep the new humanity busy. But neither painting, nor dance, nor levitation entail any “work”. This opinion was disputed by some. In Vladimir Mayakovsky’s muscular utopia, The Flying Proletarian, written in 1925 and set in the year 2025, levitation and work become an admirable unity. Assisted and unassisted flights are part of everyday life. The proletariat dominates the sky. Streets are no longer necessary; only airports are scattered throughout the city. Every worker goes on a private jet to her/his fully mechanized working place. And after work, there are cosmic dances...
FACTORY.
FORTY-FLOORED BUILDING.
GOT OFF.
THE FORTY—IN FIERCE ZEAL.
ULTRA-CLEAN. NO SOOT,
NO SMOKE.
LIFT
DELIVERS
ONE TO EACH FLOOR.
NO BUZZING,
NO CROWDS!
ONE KEYBOARD— LIKE AN ‘UNDERWOOD’.
NICE WORK!
EASY ALREADY,
BUT FURTHER
THE RADIO—
MUSIC BEATING TIME.
HIT LETTERS,
RIGHT ONES,
ALL
THE REST
ENGINES MANAGED.

EVENING.
CALL—
—HALLO!
CAN’T CATCH THE NAME...
OH!
IT’S YOU!
HI, DARLING!
AM COMING!
IMMEDIATELY?
IN FIVE MINUTES
TAKE IN STRIDE
THE FULL-LENGTH SKY.
IN SUCH WEATHER
IT’S NICE TO TRAVEL.
WAIT—
NEAR THE CLOUD—
UNDER THE GREAT BEAR.
GOOD BYE—
GOT IN.
MOVED BACKWARDS
SQUARES,
BUILDINGS...
CHEEK—TO CHEEK,
WAIST—TO WAIST—
MAYBE THREE TIMES CIRCUMNAVIGATED
THE SKY.
ALONG MILKY WAYS
ALONG COMET CURVES,
BEHIND—
AS A FOAL—
A TETHERED AEROPLANE.

Levitation as a hard scientific labor was most prominently theorized
by Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1858–1935), the legendary space scientist
but also a sci-fi writer. In his novels, people must work hard in order to
overcome the force of gravity. At the end of his life, he was invited as a
script writer for the film The Space Voyage, released in 1936. Reportedly,
it was the first-ever movie that depicted conditions of zero gravity
with help of advanced special effects. After the spaceship leaves the
Earth’s orbit, the crew’s professor
announces with scientific
authority: “Be careful! Remember
that you have lost gravity!”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WoAiYmeDvxc
The Space Voyage, 1936
Unlike Mayakovsky’s flying proletariat or Tsiolkovsky’s levitating professors, the precariat of the Zero Dream Factory levitates in different conditions, and in entirely different moods. Levitation is work, work is levitation, and there is no ground at all. Impossible to feel where one is flying or falling.

“We were just the usual nomads of art. Mostly—jobless youths, afflicted with a couple of addictions and neuroses, trying to make our living somehow. Of course, when someone comes up to you and asks politely if you would like to have a proper creative job that won’t disturb your borders of creation or your concepts, and on the contrary, will even be the embodiment of the ultimate, absolute creative production, you think that it is not such a big deal to move to the Moon. What would we get here? A dying planet that reminds us of an over-populated oven, where soon we will all be sitting on each other’s heads, and a notion that somewhere, somewhere, there is a bigger piece of a tart…” “What do you mean, if I were asked where I would like to go, China or the Moon? I’ve heard that on the Moon you can fly, or at least try to hang yourself in space. That’s pretty awesome…”

Recorded by Anastasia Starikova during the collective writing session

If the classical ideal of art is a kind of elevation, lifting up or spiritualization, one way of characterizing contemporary art is as an “art of the fall.” Rather than the miraculous flight of the Saint, its iconic figure is the well-timed tumble of the slapstick artist. In short: Buster Keaton in place of St. Joseph.

Paradoxically, while you are falling, you will probably feel as if you are floating—or not even moving at all. Falling is relational—if there is nothing to fall toward, you may not even be aware that you’re falling. If there is no ground, gravity might be low and you’ll feel weightless. Objects will stay suspended if you let go of them. Whole societies around you may be falling just as you are. And it may actually feel like perfect stasis—as if history and time have ended and you can’t even remember that time had ever moved forward.

“WE WERE JUST THE USUAL NOMADS OF ART. MOSTLY—JOBLESS YOUTHS, AFFLICTED WITH A COUPLE OF ADDICTIONS AND NEUROSES, TRYING TO MAKE OUR LIVING SOMEHOW. OF COURSE, WHEN SOMEONE COMES UP TO YOU AND ASKS POLITELY IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO HAVE A PROPER CREATIVE JOB THAT WON’T DISTURB YOUR BORDERS OF CREATION OR YOUR CONCEPTS. AND ON THE CONTRARY, WILL EVEN BE THE EMBODIMENT OF THE ULTIMATE, ABSOLUTE CREATIVE PRODUCTION, YOU THINK THAT IT IS NOT SUCH A BIG DEAL TO MOVE TO THE MOON. WHAT WOULD WE GET HERE? A DYING PLANET THAT REMINDS US OF AN OVER-POPULATED OVEN, WHERE SOON WE WILL ALL BE SITTING ON EACH OTHER’S HEADS, AND A NOTION THAT SOMEWHERE, SOMEWHERE, THERE IS A BIGGER PIECE OF A TART…” “WHAT DO YOU MEAN, IF I WERE ASKED WHERE I WOULD LIKE TO GO, CHINA OR THE MOON? I’VE HEARD THAT ON THE MOON YOU CAN FLY, OR AT LEAST TRY TO HANG YOURSELF IN SPACE. THAT’S PRETTY AWESOME…”

Recorded by Anastasia Starikova during the collective writing session

1. Translation taken from the site http://www.unrealstockholm.org/2010/?page_id=181

This exhibition is based on ZERO GRAVITY REVOLT
Nikolay Oleynikov (Chto Delat and more)
A learning mural in collaboration with:
Bringing Home America’s Army

This game concept is the result of an ongoing series of conversations between two friends, curator Joseph del Pesco and game designer Al McElrath. McElrath was involved in the production of the single-player PC game America’s Army (AA), the most successful tool ever deployed by the US Army’s recruiting department. “The game had more impact on recruits than all other forms of Army advertising combined.” But AA is more than an advertisement. Like a flight simulator used for the education of pilots, AA purports to “provide players with the most authentic military experience available.” In other words, it occupies a slippery ground between a simulator designed for soldiers-in-training and a commercial game intended for the entertainment market. In fact, its proximity to “authenticity” may be the very thing that makes it such popular entertainment.

Following a brief overview of America’s Army (AA), we’ll outline our concept for a propositional or “paper” game, based loosely on the symbolic resistance strategy employed by The Weather Underground: “Bring the War Home.” This new game is intended not to counteract America’s Army, but rather to enact a thought-experiment that might reveal its enrollment strategy, and make visible, through comparison, some of the facets and limits of the representation of war.

The PC version of America’s Army was released via the Internet as a free download in 2002 and quickly became popular in the game community. The Army had identified an overlapping demographic between gamers and potential and future recruits (sixteen to twenty-year-olds) and spent sufficient funds on its production value (and continues to spend about six million per year) to secure the game lasting traction. AA simulates training exercises and combat scenarios in dozens of different locations that range from the generic to the suggestive. Each level offers abstracted obstacles with other urban or rural terrain such as mountain passes, river basins, oil fields, collapsed tunnels, insurgent camps, and bridge crossings. Tasks in these locations include extraction, precious cargo recovery, and recon. AA is a single player (training) and multi-player (combat) game that compiles groups to form two teams in combat scenarios. In the game space every player and their teammates appear to each other as US Army soldiers. Through a trick of the game the other team appears as ambiguous others—foreign soldiers/terrorists. While the early versions of the game withheld the problematic politics of the enemy’s identity or location, current versions identify The Taliban as an enemy and specific locations in the Middle East such as Afghanistan, marking the game as an explicit propaganda tool in the “War on Terror.” Finally the most alarming feature: “To log onto the game, you have to connect via the Army’s recruitment Website and give them your information. The gamers can also check out profiles to counteract why they joined up.” America’s Army’s is tantamount to a sophisticated advertisement, but with potential consequences.

Bring the War Home

The game space of Bring the War Home is the gamer’s current geographic location. For us, typing here in San Francisco, the game would model the streets of the Mission, the neighboring hill of Potrero, and the towers of the financial district. The game takes the familiar single-player role of eye-to-screen equivalence, an immersive experience where the camera angle is the same as the tilt of one’s head. The player’s task is to deliver food, water and medical supplies to shelters that house friends across the city. Using Internet connections and access to social media accounts, the game automatically finds friends in the player’s city and includes their names in the game. So rather than running to Point X on a fictional map, the gamer is attempting to transport emergency supplies to close friends in their home city. The player doesn’t have a gun (and at first can’t pick one up) and the landscape is overrun with foreign and domestic armies in near-constant conflict.

When a player is killed in the game, his or her body remains in the game space. The game never forgets. One can imagine a landscape strewn with bodies—not props, but symbolic markers of previous players. When a player finds a body, they can risk their life and resources to attend to it, which then yields information about the dangers ahead. This is important, because in this game a player can only die once, and when they die they’re given the option to record information for the use of future players. In Bring the War Home, when a new player creates a profile

2 http://hrn.us/articles/93754.html
3 According to the America’s Army website. AA is one of the ten most popular PC-action games played online.
5 If friends in the player’s social network join the game and form a collaboration, the player is recognized as a member of the budding resistance. They are then less likely to get killed (safety in numbers) because the game provides access to additional information about conflict zones and how to avoid them. One might imagine knowledge of underground tunnels, large caches of supplies, or surveillance video. However, once in a group, it also becomes possible to find, pick up, and use a gun in the game, but this dramatically increases the player’s chance of getting killed. We have also considered additional features such as: higher levels of the game establish pirate communications networks that allow players live audio communications during game play. Prior to this level, audio communication is only possible when in relative proximity to other players.
login, they also sign an anti-war statement emailed to local city and state representatives. This is repeated, with variations in the text and destination, each time the player signs in.6

The original strategy of symbolic resistance conceived of by The Weather Underground was intended to inflict significant and visible damage in the U.S. as a way to represent the atrocities of war happening elsewhere. To make the war felt (or in some way experienced, even if only virtually) at home by those in the U.S. is a problem that arises, in part, because of the sense of distance and the flatness of the already limited stream of images presented to the American public about the ongoing war. This is especially true for those who aren’t directly connected to the war by a friend or relative enrolled in the armed forces. So, can another representational strategy, that of video games, conjure this sense of an embodied experience and inscribe a lasting—albeit fragmentary and limited—memory of war? What we do know is that America’s Army has presented a compelling and active simulation, and successfully incubated potential recruits. Might we not use the power of the same tool for different ends?

The ultimate challenge (for us) here is to make a game that is entertaining and engaging in such a way as to encourage its popularity and therefore its distribution, but not so much that the gamer cannot access the meta-critical dimension that underscores the extreme conditions and costs of war.

What do we imagine might be the life of our game, and who might play it? According to the AA website, forty percent of the players of America’s Army are outside of the U.S.8 Can we not predict (with dread) the eventuality of someone in Iraq or Afghanistan playing Bring the War Home? Or more optimistically, might we allow ourselves to imagine a community forming around the game, who establish correspondence (and an anti-war network) connecting players around the world? Might the anti-war emails sent to officials be administered by local activist groups in the places where the game is most popular, linking the incidental gestures of thousands to specific and timely anti-war struggles in their own region? In what way might our game risk escalating to an ideological struggle? Unlike America’s Army, Bring the War Home doesn’t claim explicit national affiliations, but how might it be understood in the international community? As an act of amelioration? Is the desire to end war not universal?

6 The email sent includes small print at the bottom that acknowledges the connection to the game. In their personal preferences, players are given the ability to opt-out of these automatic emails.

7 According to research compiled by game advocate Jane McGonigal, there are hundred eighty-three million active computer and video gamers in the U.S., who average thirteen hours a week playing games. Five million of those gamers play forty-five hours a week, which amounts to a full-time job. McGonigal identifies games as a powerful social tool, and gamers as an under-utilized cognitive surplus.

8 This fact seems to nullify the purported authenticity of America’s Army. Are we so naive as to believe that the Army would give away training and combat secrets to anyone with an internet connection?
Colophon

PUBLISHED BY
Manifesta Foundation
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

CHIEF EDITOR
Natala Petelin-Bachelez

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
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GRAPHIC DESIGN
g.u.i., Paris:
Nicolas Couturier
Bachir Soussi-Chladmi
with Chloé Vézolé

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Manifesta Journal is made possible with the generous support of