

Forty-Six Thoughts
on Radio

The beauty of radio is its off-switch. No matter what comes across the airwaves—no matter how annoying, absurd, or incongruous—you can always turn it off. The off-switch is a tool of empowerment for both broadcaster and listener. It allows the broadcaster to take chances; and it allows the listener to opt-out.

Sitting alone in a studio broadcasting to 10,000 people, one must maintain the illusion that no one is listening.

You can never know exactly to whom you're broadcasting, so it is useless trying to pander to an audience. At the same moment, one listener may be manacled at work while another may be manacled to a bed-post.

There are certain ruts and habits a DJ gets into. Automatic segues. One tends to repeat these again and again. The secret: the audience never notices.

Radio is background, not foreground. You are always doing something while listening—with one ear—to the radio. Nobody sits by the radio and just listens—with the exception of people driving. Along with artists, drivers are the best listeners. Artists' hands and eyes are busy, but their

ears are wide open. As a result, visual artists know more about music than anyone else on the planet.

When I first began broadcasting, I tried to make perfect segues from other people's music. When I became good at that, presenting other people's music became tedious. So I began to sing on the radio. I have a lousy voice. I would sing in front of generic karaoke tracks, enhancing my voice with the studio tools. Soon, I began putting on long instrumental tracks like John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" and singing Roland Barthes' texts on top of them. I would do this sometimes for three hours at a time. Of course, it drove the listeners crazy.

Bertolt Brecht said, "I wish that they would graft an additional device onto the radio—one that would make it possible to record and archive for all time, everything that can be communicated by radio. Later generations would then have the chance of seeing with amazement how an entire population—by making it possible to say what they had to say to the whole world—simultaneously made it possible for the whole world to see that they had absolutely nothing to say."

When I first got on the air at WFMU, the hippest radio station in

the world, I took the on-air name, Kenny G, which is, in fact, my real name. It drove the listeners crazy at first, but over time, I became their Kenny G as opposed to the sax player.

When I first arrived at the station in 1995, I set up a primitive homepage that said "Welcome to Kenny G's homepage" with a link to email me. It being the early days of the web, many people thought that they had found the "real" Kenny G's secret homepage, made even more convincing by the fact that it was hosted by a radio station. I soon began getting fan mail intended for the sax-playing Kenny G, lots of it. I never wrote the fans back, fearing that word would get out that I was not him, and then the emails would stop. Each week, I would take the strangest, most obsessive letters and read them aloud on my show as if they were addressed to me. My bed music was always the Kenny G Christmas record.

One evening in an Italian restaurant in Chelsea, I got up to go to the bathroom. On the way, I overheard two traditionally dressed gentlemen mention the name "Kenny G." Tispy as I was, I marched right up to the table and said, "Did I hear you say the name Kenny G? Well, I'm Kenny G!" They looked at me askance. I repeated my statement: "I'm Kenny G." One

of the gentlemen said, “Nice to meet you, but I’m Kenny G’s agent.” And it was true. This guy was the other Kenny G’s agent. I told him about my radio show and asked if it was possible for Kenny G to be on the Kenny G show. He smiled, said “Of course!” and I gave him my business card. We shook hands and he said he’d call me. I never heard from him again.

In 2003, I was on the radio Thursday evenings from 8-11pm. It just so happened that just as I went on the air on Thursday, March 20, 2003, the deadline for Saddam Hussein to leave Iraq had passed. For the next two hours, the country—and the world—was on edge, knowing that we were on the brink of war. It was just a matter of time until the invasion was to begin. I knew I couldn’t do a normal show, so instead, from 8pm on, I only played eerie recordings of shortwave numbers stations, mostly created during the cold war, which were numbers repeated amidst bursts of feedback, static, and odd electronic sounds. At 10pm, we invaded Iraq. I continued to play these numbers stations, but had my computer read out, in computer voice, short announcements like “The invasion has begun” and “We will destroy the enemy.” I never spoke—and so it went on for three hours, a creepy hazy ambience, which I thought was the only way to mark such an event.

The World Trade Center attacks happened right across the river from the WFMU studio. They occurred on a Tuesday, I went on the air that Thursday. During my shift, I played Allen Ginsberg’s “Kaddish” in its entirety and Gorecki’s “Symphony No. 3: Sorrowful Songs.” I didn’t speak on the show.

I was on the air on the morning after Obama was elected, from 9am to noon. I played Parliament’s 1976 five-minute long “Chocolate City” over and over again for an entire three hours without interruption.

Each week, I had three hours to kill. That’s the way I saw it. How to fill up three hours?

In 2007, J.K. Rowling released the seventh and final **Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows**. Prior to the book’s release the day I went on the air, someone had leaked a copy to the internet, enraging Scholastic Books, who threatened anybody distributing it with a heavy lawsuit. I printed out and sang in my horrible voice the very last chapter of the book on the air, thereby spoiling the finale of the series for anyone listening. During my show, the station received an angry

call from Scholastic Books. It appears that their whole office was listening to WFMU that afternoon. Nothing ever came of it.

In the mid-90s, it was made illegal to distribute the DECSS code that was used to crack DVDs for replication. With this in mind, I read the entire code over the air and played songs that used the code as lyrics. I faked my arrest on air, leaving my shift a half-hour early, the air dead, the studio empty.

When I began doing radio, I was told by the station manager that my on-air voice was too smooth, too professional sounding. He suggested that I add some “ums” and “uhs” during my mic breaks to sound more like an average person.

On the air, not having anything to say, I began reading blogs that had nothing to do with me. For one show I’d read from blogs written by obese people trying desperately to lose weight. For another, I’d read from anorexic blogs written by skeletal people trying to gain weight. The following week, I’d read from depressive people trying to get happy. Because radio is not a visual medium, people had no idea what I really looked like. And because I read so convincingly so as to sound like I was talking naturally, listeners thought I was, one week, wildly overweight or terribly emaciated. They had no idea that I was an average man, of average size and average weight.

Radio is best heard, not seen. Whenever you see an image of your favorite radio personality, you are inevitably disappointed.

One week, Gregory Whitehead came on my show and we had people call in and scream as loudly as they could for three hours.

My show was technologically determined. There was a time when, in the finder window, you could play several MP3s simultaneously, each with their own volume control and each able to be fast-forwarded and reversed. In essence, the computer’s finder became a mixer. But then Apple changed their OS and deleted that feature. When that happened, I was no longer able to do my show the way I used to. It led to the end of my involvement in radio.

With Vicki Bennett, we did a show for three hours where we were bound and gagged to each other. We kept the mics on the entire time. Each half hour, one rope was cut. The show

started out silent. By the end, it was full on noise.

For three hours, I whispered the entirety of Karl Marx’s **Communist Manifesto** whilst dressed in an expensive suit.

For three hours, I played a tape of two men sleeping. The silence was punctured by snores.

For three hours I played the sounds of farts.

It is said that a baby’s cry is the most attention-getting sound in the human catalog of sounds. I once looped a piercing baby’s cry for an hour.

At first, listeners would call and complain. But after a decade or so, the complaints stopped. Those who didn’t wish to listen, left. The rest learned to either listen or else tolerate my weekly intrusion.

My show started off being called “Unpopular Music,” so you knew what you were getting into beforehand. If there were complaints, I would say, you were warned.

My idea was to get the listener to turn the radio off.

When you challenge someone not to listen, they listen harder.

My initial inspiration: the Mothers of Invention’s **Absolutely Free**, a collage which fused pop, noise, sound poetry, and classical music.

For a short time, the FCC allowed us to say swear words on air. I seem to recall that you could say them ten minutes apart and that you were allowed to use them in a political way (“The government is fucked”) but not in a sexual way (“I want to fuck Laura Bush”). This lasted for a month or two and was then predictably rescinded.

My own work was informed by my years in radio. I learned how to speak publicly and consciously. I learned how to lie convincingly. I learned how the pitch and timbre of the voice can juice a situation.

For weeks, I would play the sources for my books on the air. For instance, for three weeks straight, I broadcast nothing but 1010 WINS traffic reports, which came to be my book **Traffic**. Then for the three weeks following that, I would read my transcripts of those traffic reports live on the air. That killed six weeks, 18 hours.



I did the same for weather reports and baseball games.

I had the idea to bring a radio into the studio and simply rebroadcast another station for three hours. I would just pull the mic down to the radio and walk away. I was told that this was highly illegal.

As long as you didn't violate FCC codes, you could do anything you like for three hours. I always wondered why DJs would bother to play it safe when they were given all the freedom in the world. Why would they bother to pander to an audience, to be loved? (We weren't paid, so it couldn't have been about money or ratings.)

"Every once in a while," said station manager Ken Freedman when fending off listener complaints about my show, "you're just going to have to turn your radio off."

Oftentimes I would backannounce song titles for songs I didn't play. Other times, I would backannounce song titles from another DJ's sets and shows for the entire three hours. Nobody seemed to notice.

I would transcribe my fellow DJ's mic breaks and then read them as my own during my show. Nobody seemed to notice.

During a fundraiser once, I played musical sets from a popular rock 'n' roll DJ's show and faithfully backannounced them as my own. I didn't raise any more money than I normally did.

In the end, each week on the air was three hours of performance art. I couldn't keep that up forever.

I organized sets by keyword. Pick a topic, say, "dog," and search an MP3 library containing hundreds of thousands of files for ID3 tags that had "dog" in it (which, naturally, had "god" in it). I'd come up with a beautiful freeform set, not based on how songs sound, but by what they're about. The more MP3s on one's hard drive, the more possibilities there are. Oftentimes, I never heard the song I was to play in the set, but because it had a keyword I was looking for, it conceptually worked.

iTunes allows you to sort songs according to their length. One week, I programmed three hours of audio that was all under thirty seconds long. The next week, I repeated

the concept, this time with songs lasting exactly one minute.

When I ran out of ideas for a new show, I would just play one of my old shows in the public MP3 archive. Nobody ever knew the difference.

It was a delight to do back-to-back shows with Irwin Chusid—for years people have said that we are the same person because our voices are almost identical. Many weeks, we switched and pretended we were the other DJ. The listenership couldn't tell the difference.

Why, in this age when everybody can download all the MP3s they want from the web, do we still listen to radio? Because we need someone to make sense of it all, someone with a sensibility to put it together for us, someone to narrate this mass of information.



ALBERT HERTER







A History of Reason

Pierre Guyotat's autobiographical fiction **In the Deep** is a backwards look, from the author's 69th year, at the beginning of a creative vocation. Indeed, the term vocation is not excessive to describe Guyotat's devotion of more than fifty years to inventing the language for a dark horror: the writing of a prostitutional scene where prostitute slaves are bred for the sole purpose of their labor of lust and where all human life has a price.

Over its long development, Guyotat has given this brothel scene many names. He has shifted its setting from the former French colonies in North Africa (**Tomb for 500,000 Soldiers** or **Eden, Eden, Eden**) to invented contemporary metropolises (in the recent and as-yet-untranslated **Joyeux Animaux de la Misère**). Its slave figures have names borrowed from combatants in the struggles against colonialism and post-colonialism (for example, one hero is named Samora Machel after the revolutionary and eventual president of Mozambique who successfully fought Portuguese colonial rule), and are inflected by Guyotat's observations and personal experiences (sexual encounters, men and women seen during his travels, or on the streets). Pictures from the camps of World War II seen in books by the young Guyotat had imprinted their slaughterhouse images of naked and tortured bodies on his mind. But beyond this historical anchoring, the scene breaks with historical boundedness to reach farther and farther through time, coursing man's endless alienation, driving for the "divine slaving infinite," the endless and utmost abandon to need, or control, or power. It concerns the never-satisfied drive to profit (or cum) on the backs of whatever can be exchanged—the human, the animal, the natural. The scene is populated with prostitutes, pimps, procurers and procuresses, slaves and workers; it has its own locale, its twists and turns of (bodily) events and exchanges of fluids and money, its reason, and its own specific language: a Word, an invert of divine speech. It is not predominantly a place of sexuality, but of exchange: its abjection results from the truth that being cannot be sold. "In prostitution or slavery," writes Guyotat, "I am obsessed not as much by domination or obedience, but by gold on the organ (*l'or sur l'organe*), the commercialization of circuits, of the anatomical and physiological circulations" (**Vivre**, 63).

Guyotat's vocation is absolutely excessive, in its singularity and strangeness, in its ambitions, its contradictions, and its dangers. In 2007, Guyotat began writing a series of autobiographical fictions, part historical fact, part theoretical, in which he returned to the salient moments of his life inasmuch as they are interwoven with the writing. **Coma** (2006) narrated the degree of exhaustion and despair to which he was driven by the difficulty of his work and its intractable contradiction, a physical coma that coincided with a spiritual crisis, his writing bottoming out as did the exhilaration of the project of collective emancipation that had fueled much of its imaginary through the 1960s and '70s. **Formation** (2007), set during childhood, recounted his family's involvement in the resistance and the reasoned inhumanity of the camps. **In the Deep** returns to the origin of his prostitutional scene, and the seminal practice out of which it sprung.

The specifics here are Guyotat's "beat-sheet" practice: masturbatory writing that he developed at the onset of puberty. Publicly announced to the Parisian TelQuelian intelligentsia assembled at the Artaud-Bataille conference of 1972 as something he had already given up, the beat-sheet has remained surrounded with a slight aura of underground infamy and anti-conventional cool, although very little was known of it. **In the Deep** explains and maps out its complex implications—physical, imaginary, social, philosophical, and sacred. Guyotat had started masturbating early to ward off announcing to his class that he had to go to the bathroom, to hide the base functions of the body, too shameful for the young, ten-year-old Catholic child. Instead of signaling that need with his hand raised, the child would slip the hand into his short pants, and tug at the little member there, discovering that the spreading warmth released during that knead-

ing was enough to delay the urge until recess or lunch. From the beginning, masturbation was related to a symbolic space, the body clearly tied to a social ordering of needs, with its related system of concealment and delay. This incipient fondling developed an entire logic whose emergence is rigorously charted in the book, from the original stratum of sense data through the child's still inchoate ideas about sexuality and reproduction, under the sign of Catholic notions of God, the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, truth, and beauty, as well as class-based French cultural frames around gender, politics, purpose, work, desire, and love. Later, masturbation developed in the spaces of intimacy available for a more in-depth exploration of the act, where the boy might deal with its unsavory production: a sulfurous, maybe even poisonous white substance, the fear of its corrosive power forgotten in the pleasure of its discharge. In Guyotat's boarding school, the outside latrines provided the only opportunity for solitude. Still linked with defecation, often occurring at the same time, masturbation in the latrines began to be accompanied with an imaginary space, and the physical sensations connected into a mingled sensorium with adjoining intellectual and emotional facets.

Slowly, the beat off practice grew, developed, came to fruition, and dug its imaginary space, internally, into a low, inner depths of desire and language called the *deep* ("arrière-fond"). Guyotat invented an apparatus for writing where masturbation and language joined in a technique—replete with costume to be strapped on—an experimentation of desire at the borderline of cuming with an economics of ejaculation and restraint aiming to produce the thickest, lewdest clots of Word to scribble with a trembling hand on the paper beside and under the hot substance. Its jizz cloth shared its name with the trappings of the clergy. For the adolescent Guyotat, this deep was shameful, raw, against morality: it was the underbelly of the social, an inverted double of the self. But its implications, even if seen here through the eyes of an adolescent, had a larger portent. "Beating off jerks the head 'til brain empties of all sapiens thought" wrote Guyotat in **Prostitution** (1975). He wanted to write free of the law of lack, and for that, he had to make matter itself write.

The first castration that had to go was the partition between wrong and right knowledge. Everything was fodder for material production. Knowledge (of all kinds, clear or obscure, true or false) met physical fondling to produce feelings, perceptions, and rationalizations. The young Guyotat called facts what some who are more rigorously empirical would relegate to religious doctrine, social convention, received ideas about genders, sexes, physical organs. Here is the list of facts that he develops in the book, a blend of physical sensations, imaginings, and rationalizations: "a Creator God, a Redemptive God, Virgins, paternal conflict, maternal friendship before my mother would disappear three years after this narrative, the Cosmos, History, girls, women, boys, girls again, Nature, animals, the ruins of war, the circus, and especially, through Poetry, the sex organs of women" (**In the Deep**). The book is written from Guyotat's contemporary perspective, but its voice is that of the fifteen-year-old child who leaves for England, at his first rupture from the law of the father, for a month-long trip that will delay his night practice of the beat-sheet and its entire apparatus of strapping, constraining, and churning of the member to produce a Word that would be on the level of the sacrilege that (for the child at least) the practice demanded.

This physical production instilled a way to think about truth, and its history, in a perhaps lewder version of Foucault's episteme: a shifting, twisting core of reason nonetheless territorialized. "Even in what is the most sacred of the Sacred, truth moves as the Earth turns on itself: this might be where the artist works, in the perpetually disjointed gap which is also maybe the demon's part, at least in the history of humanity" (**In the Deep**).

That rotating core is the place of fiction: where imagination and body create a thick, joyous, deep Word that is the language of

life's incessant drive and of the enslavement to feed it, the language of bodies partaking of the physical labor of production. But theirs is a labor of sexuality without reproduction, without regard for anything other than itself, rigorous beyond violence, an exploded reason.

There is a political logic to the *deep*: no women, because they have been too used and abused in history for this, and none of the classical subjects of exploitation, indigenous peoples, the global colonized. Instead, the children of the powerful are led to the brothel, the prostitutes are almost all masculine, bred for the purpose, their entire lives given over to the destiny of laying beneath the human—what we reserve for animals: absolute *abandon*.

From a material base, using the means available—organs, hands, but also the entire arsenal of the symbolic with its share of misapprehensions—Guyotat writes a material origin of humanity, and of human production and thought. It is a writing of immanence, the textual, sonic, and ritual productivity of the physical body showing how the *nonsignificant*, and then, via the usual (Western) slip-page, the *insignificant* or base (the base organs) can balloon into the mysterious and the grandiose. Its long, swelling sentences patiently describe the development of reason from a physical base, building up rhythm. But because Guyotat's reason is an extremist and essentialist organ, it is always tottering on the brink of its self-doubt, and its exhaustion through that doubt. What does it mean that art is constructed altogether from wanderings and error? From the Latin *errare* comes erring and error, which so easily tilt into sin.

For the child Guyotat, this masturbatory origin blended pleasure with the forbidden, the unknown, the hidden, and the shameful in an illicit act of writing that represented an attempt at absolute transgression, with its correlative moral outrage and the despair that followed once the deed was done. From this early wrenching apart came a vocation for writing that would embody the contradictions of aesthetics through the 20th century: quickly stated, the coexistence of Richard Wagner with the death camps of World War II, the dark side of modernity and humanism, slavery conjoined with the universal rights of man. Born the year of France's surrender to Germany, Guyotat's life is intimately paired to this history, and his art (he refuses to call it work) struggles with its dark horror, with what beauty or reason lies in a beyond of good and evil where it seems the sacred lurks.

What does the vocational aspect of the work imply? First, the project clearly engages with the history of art as sacred practice. At seminary school, young Guyotat had first conceived of a priestly vocation in the "exhilaration of the continuous celebration of God": light, calm, revelation, joy, a blinding light behind which the child sensed incomprehensible excess. "As a child, the sacred—what isn't sacred for me then?—dazzles me so much that my small reason sees and suspects that there is excess there, and that behind the amazement—object, figure, notion—lies its opposite: behind the absolute of virtue, the absolute of its opposite" (**In the Deep**). When the calling shifted to art (first painting, then writing) this only made the transgression at its base more pronounced, and gave it grounds in what the child knew from religious instruction, where he sensed that the partition between good and evil was not so clear and started probing their intimate concatenation. If the *deep* is composed of figures, they must be *known*. Guyotat names "art" the process of that knowing, a becoming other, a refusal to partition self and other, a training in a shared sensorium. Who is the other here? The oppressed, the weak (Catholicism again). It is the other of reason as well: the idiot, the body. And the political other: of patriarchy, of colonial invasion, of class. Writing would respond to the *physical need* to rid one's self into the other. "*Jouir* [to come] is then, and is still now, a word that doesn't resonate in my heart, my mind or in my senses. I want more: pleasure without flesh, happiness. In *jouir* there is the I that encloses the word around the personal orgasm that is nothing" (**In the Deep**). The vocation of the beat-sheet promises a paradoxical release, emphatically joining with the idiot, the child, the criminal, the violent, the proletariat, the animal, the female, the social outcast, and all the others through contact with blood, shit, garbage, sperm-encrusted rags. The meaning of art as vocation is also the hope of the invention of a life, a singularity: its arc, its meaning, low lows, almost un-

bearable intensities. The implications are absolute surrender to what one must become and, in that sense, the darkness of the lowermost depths looms as the inevitable that must be imagined, experienced, lived through, and even welcomed.

The body of text that results is a life written through (and maybe also despite) a negative process of excavation, as if Guyotat were trying to extract all cruelty, all sexuality from himself, and to lay it bare, outside, in its own beautiful and pulsating Word. From the Judeo-Catholic tradition the implications are clear. "Immediately his word became accomplished fact." But here, rather than the divine word of God parsing reality and creating fact, Guyotat's brothel word operates according to a form of inversion and reversal. The evil and horror that are in the world, and history as the long space-time of oppression, are seemingly extracted from the self, via imagination and through physical means. But the self also comes to itself and to its own singularity through this inversion, becoming progressively emptied of its violence, as if emptied of what separates it as an *indivuated* self.

Why banish sexuality? Why is sexuality entwined in such a profound contract with violence and exploitation? "Everything I do," Guyotat says in an interview, "I do it to rid myself of sexuality; I don't want it, I want to evacuate it; that will take the time it will take, it might even take all my time [...] The more you evacuate, the more there is; but the more text there is, the more Word there is to modulate" (**Explications**, 28). The reasons for the purge of sexuality are multiple. Certainly, the Catholic injunction against sin played an early role, although one that Guyotat understood was erroneous, and productive. **In the Deep** reveals just how productive this inherited notion was for a young Catholic boy writing under the throes of the prohibited. More importantly, sexuality is a root, a seminal impulse, sealing our pact with life, with procreation and the imperative of survival. There are also political reasons to this choice, which are that sexuality opens the floodgates for the injustices of history on the oppressed, churning out fodder for exploitation. Also, that capitalism has latched onto desire as one of its latest, and most intimate, frontiers. Aesthetic reasons turn to sexuality as a pro-creative source, the impulse and possibility of material creation. And then there is the physical and emotional reality of sex as a place of surrender and bliss, where the self can be forgotten in undifferentiated becoming, belonging, where one is delivered to what is stronger than oneself. The excreta of sex, writes Guyotat, incite "to the unreason of the self in the great reason of the Universe" (**In the Deep**). And add to this a base productivist reason: wouldn't you write if you'd hooked the protocol to masturbation?

So it is all about sex. And it is not about sex at all. And honestly, it's true, as a species we produce ejaculate scum (power, violence, control). Guyotat is nothing if not a realist. But his comes with optimism. "The more you evacuate, the more there is; but the more text there is, the more Word there is to modulate." Language is our collective process; it is the sign system of our relations. If divinity is there, and if Guyotat invents a Word, properly or improperly creative, it's because God, as a movement toward excess, is for him "the instance or the culmination of the Word. Everyone addresses everyone else [...] everyone invokes, but the supreme invoked is God" (**Explications** 28). When we are speaking to each other, might we have this extremist form of address, supreme as if we were indeed addressing ourselves to another, unimaginable reason? Does Guyotat invert it into prostitutional form because its light would blind us if he didn't, its reason shatter ours? Or is it because worlds are produced materially by stroking, wandering, and erring?

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Gunnar
Tchida

my brain is still lazy
and I write a poem with a wandering eye
until it's too much
and I have to go into the next room, grab a plump
strawberry to put in my mouth
as I step into the bathroom and take a hot little piss

when you wear a phrase like a pair of panties
still wet from being prematurely pulled from the dryer
it's best to sit for a long time
and think about what you've done

What is perverse
is liquid

I'm squatting over a rusty-hued lump. You can imagine, like squeezing out an entire tube of toothpaste. I am right there, on the second tier of your turd-like impression. Barely noon, it registers 112 degrees. The view is so vast that the only thing I can comprehend is that my sense of self is entirely out of scale. There is nothing behind me or beyond. It's a type of nothingness that only excess can produce. It is the deprivation of familiar whims and I am reminded that there is no convenience like the bounty of a corner bodega. But I packed my gut before I arrived. The yogurt, banana, and green tea are culminating at my anus, so I make use of what lines my pockets, crumpled notes and a used tissue. With the impossible intention to leave no trace, I burn and bury the waste.

Few things can be here. The snakes, scorpions, and kangaroo rats are infrequent at best. Have you ever seen a kangaroo rat? I doubt it. They're nocturnal, and if caught in a flash of light, they move like meth addicts. They're exactly what they sound like, a tangelo—with the hind legs of a jackrabbit, a Cat Dancer for a tail, and the body-face of a stout mouse.

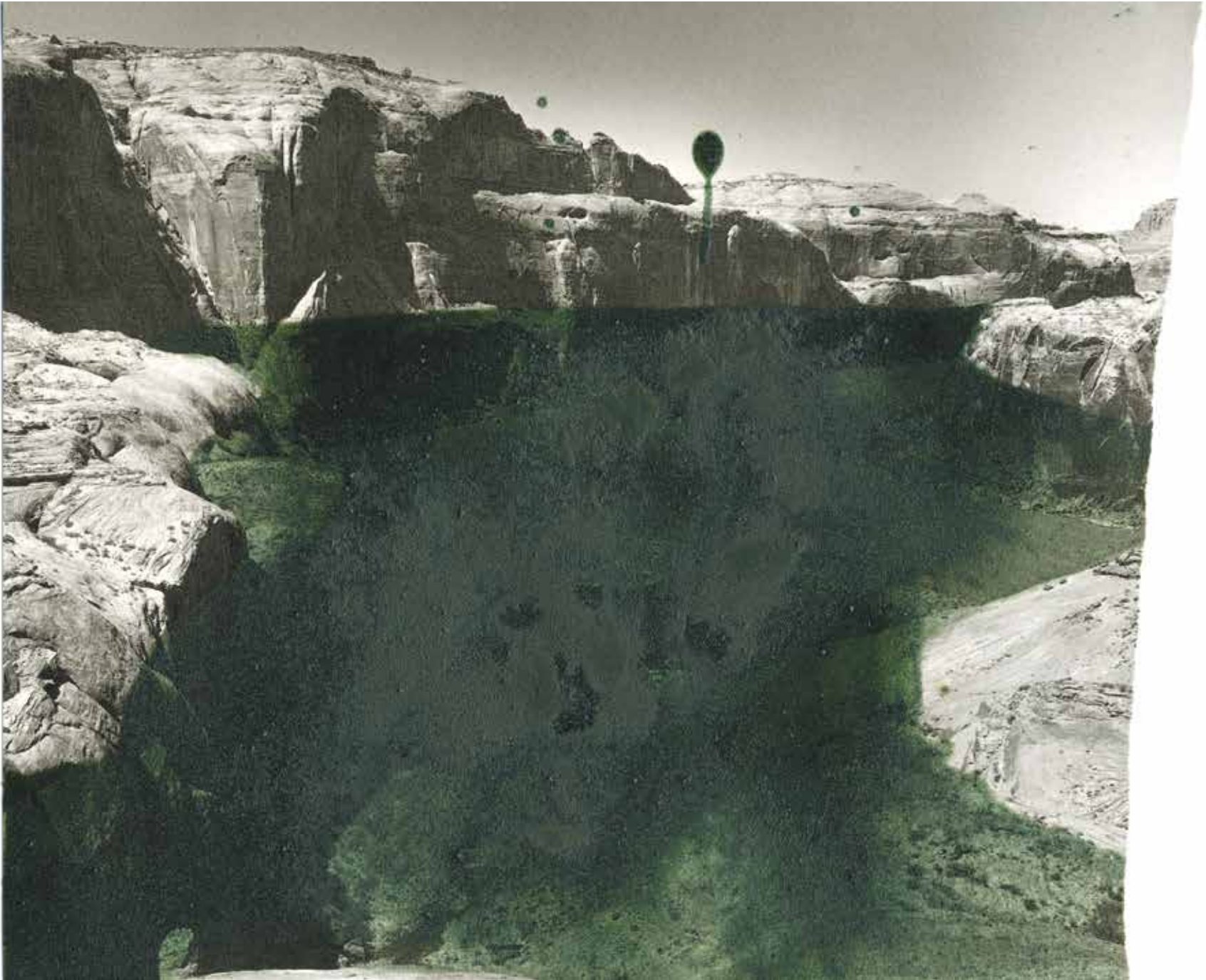
Every body offers up like a banquet. Thwack! The flies, landing subtly on exposed skin, quickly tease out a tiny piece of meat from the surface, leaving you bloody, bruised, or both. Thwack! Moving is what you do here. You can come and go, but you cannot stay. It is a now place because it is a non-possessed place.

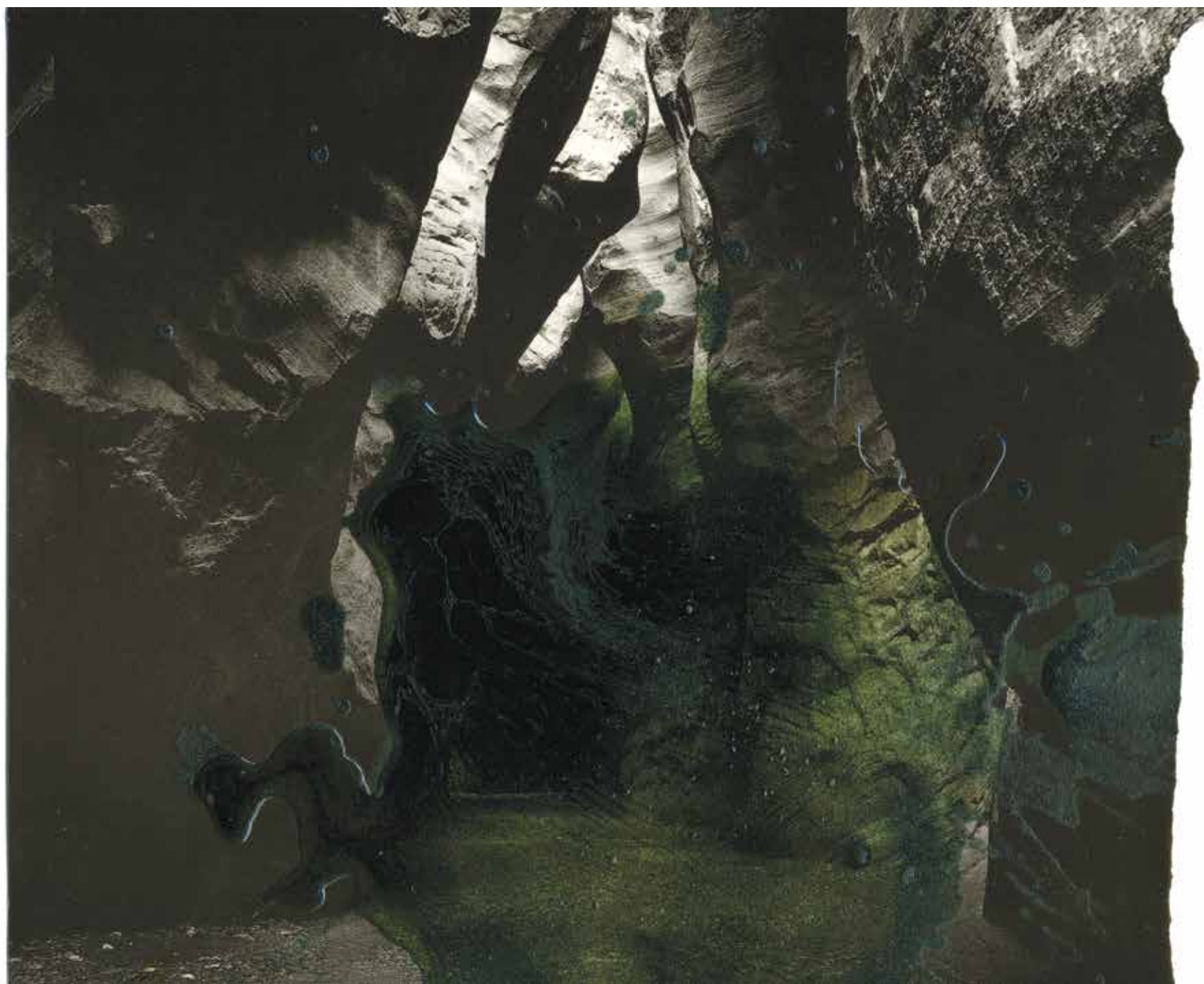
I'm here with another. She is Donald Duck-ing about the landscape in an oversized t-shirt, ass to the wind. She gathers hardened sap from the few spindly pine trees. Later we set fire to small bits. Under flame it liquefies and bubbles as it boils. The fumes are a thick sweet pleasure. The sun is impossible and omnipresent. A glaring hot-



A.K. Burns, **Untitled**, 2014

Spiralina, polyurethane, and images ripped from a catalog of photographs by Tad Nichols of Glen Canyon, Utah before it was dammed in 1956. Currently the canyon brims with water over 500 feet deep.





white blowout. Wetness pools as fast as it evaporates around the edge of my shades and anything else that touches anything else. At this hour, the exposure is violent and our bodies become terracotta-like. I'm over it. This kind of beauty is exhausting. The only thing we desire is to put water in, or on, our bodies.

Into our sports utility rental we go. The breeze of conditioned air engulfs us. After an hour or probably more of all-terrain travel, the engine begins to smolder. Exhaust barreling along a dusty path, we emerge over yet another expanse. The mouth widens, the line spreads, and an ocean-like river divides the horizon. We land in an entirely artificial town or constellation of properties, demarcated by slabs of cement and awkwardly placed trees. Such greenery appears like a mirage of grotesque luxury. Everything is ironic, even the way the water meets the land. There is no edge, no bank, no beach, just a liquid-filled void. Stripped bare, we submerge.

Dripping dry. Over a parched surface, she draws Death—the thirteenth Major Arcana attributed to Scorpio—neither an end nor a beginning, but both, a sign of transformation. Scorpio, assigned the element of water, may have perceptions that border on psychic, but Scorpio's insights are often clouded by the intensity of feelings or deluded by an elaborate imagination. This vital solvent is formless on its own, and that's why those with this sign are quickly shaped by their relationships to others.



Fatemeh's
Baghali Ghatogh



Or *baghala ghatogh*, as it is called in Gilaki, a dialect spoken in the northern Iranian province of Gilan. I have never heard anyone say the name of this dish without emphasis. One offers *baghali ghatogh* with a proud tone, or an air of expectation that tests the recipient's palate. Even when it is served as one part of a collection of dishes, its name is never prattled off from a list. *Baghali ghatogh* is a robust stew of the bean *pacha baghala*, butter, garlic, and dill. The bean is difficult to find in North America—I have a freezer full of unpeeled *pacha baghala* that traveled with me from my last trip to Iran—but in the past I have had success using fresh fava beans or (frozen) lima beans.

Baghali ghatogh demands that one rethink how time ought to be spent. This dish distracts from the very notion of time: it forces focus on peeling the skin of each bean. Every memory I have of eating this dish or making it conjures an image of three very large bowls: one with the unpeeled beans, one with discarded peels, and one with the prepared, exposed beans. The bowls are always in the middle of a busy room, and many hands tend to them. Anyone who eats *baghali ghatogh* knows this and thus does not expect to find it on generic Tehran menus with run of the mill *kabob* or *ghormeh sabzi*. The poached egg with a slightly runny yolk that crowns each serving of the dish is a reminder of the duration of care it demands, right until the moment of serving.

Each time I make this, I aim for a more fully set stew. A watery rendition is to be avoided at all costs.

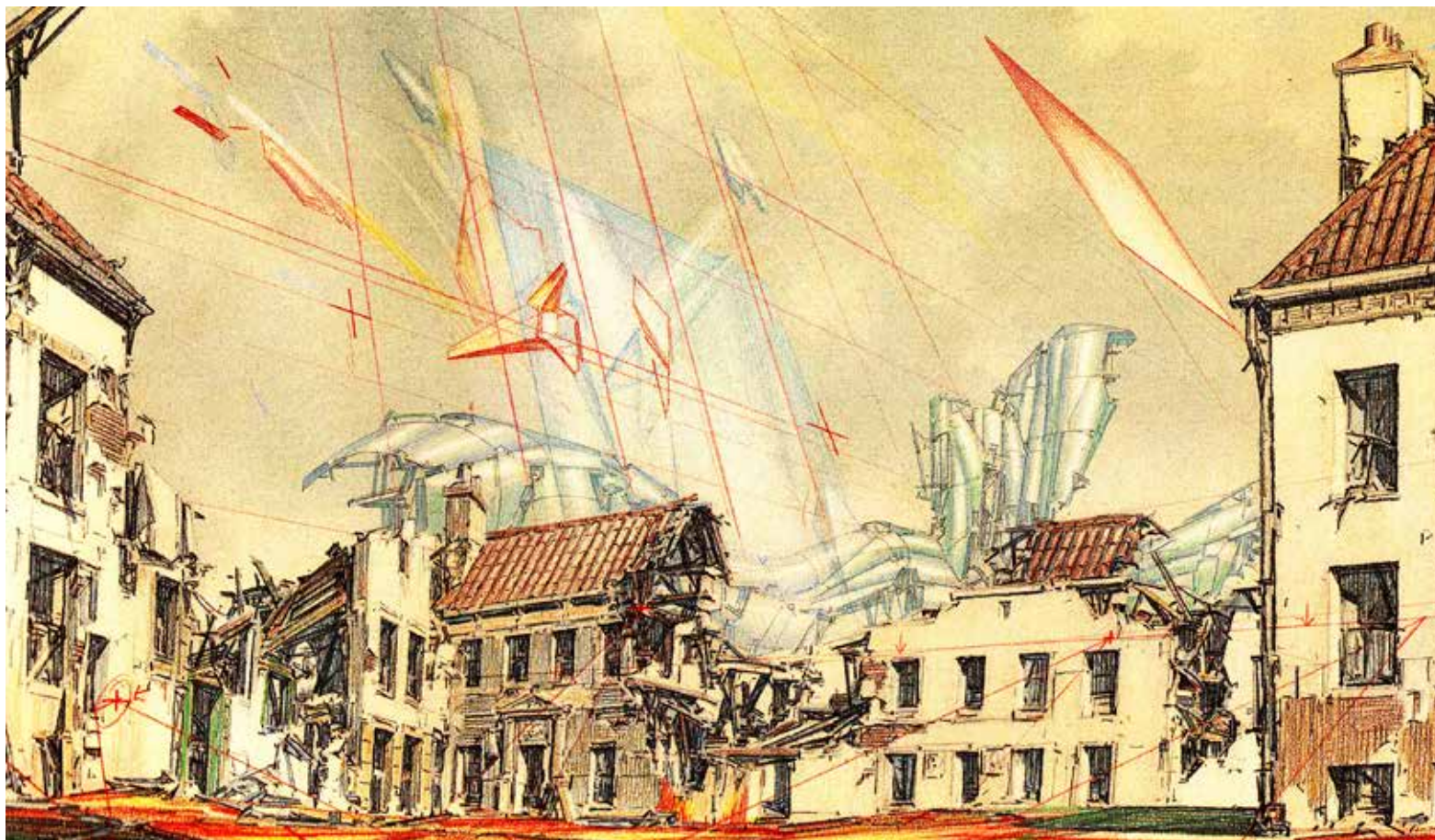
Serves 4-6

- 1 pound fresh or frozen *pacha baghali*, shelled and peeled or fava beans (fresh or frozen), or lima beans (fresh or frozen)
- 5-6 Tablespoons butter
- 6-8 cloves garlic, minced or 4 stalks green garlic, including scapes
- 1-2 bunches (or 3 cups) fresh dill, finely chopped
- 2 teaspoons turmeric
- salt and pepper to taste
- ¼ teaspoon ground saffron (prepared by grinding threads with a pinch of sugar in a mortar and pestle) steeped in 2 Tablespoons of hot water
- 1 egg per person

Heat butter in a heavy pot or deep skillet, making sure that it does not brown. Add garlic and sauté for 1 minute. Stir in the beans and dill. Cook for 3 minutes. Be careful not to break the beans as you stir. Add the turmeric and salt. Cook for another 2 minutes. Add saffron water. Add 2-3 cups of water to the pot until the beans are covered. Bring the stew to a boil and then reduce the heat so that the beans are simmering very gently. Partially cover the pot with a lid and cook until the beans are tender. After 20 minutes, taste the stew and add salt if necessary. At this point, if your stew is not thick enough, you may need to reduce the heat, add a bit more butter, adjust the seasoning, and cook longer. If you do this, treat the beans ever so gingerly. Once you are ready to serve, crack one egg per person into the stew, making sure to leave space between the eggs. It will take about 3-4 minutes for the egg white to set. Season the egg with salt and pepper and serve immediately. This dish is best eaten with basmati rice, a side of smoked fish, and pickled vegetables, preferably garlic. *Noush-e jan!*



Lebbeus Woods at The Drawing Center



*Architecture and war are not incompatible.
Architecture is war. War is architecture.
I am at war with my time, with history, with all authority
that resides in fixed and frightened forms.*
—Lebbeus Woods ¹

When Lebbeus Woods speaks of war, he also speaks of time. If history is trauma, then the future is catastrophe. Caught between the positivism of modernist progress and a reactionary postmodern uncertainty, Woods attempted to build a new future atop the lacerated and pulsing topography of the battleground. He embraced, on the one hand, the epistemic skepticism of postmodernism, while, on the other, never abandoning the Promethean impulse of modernism towards the future.

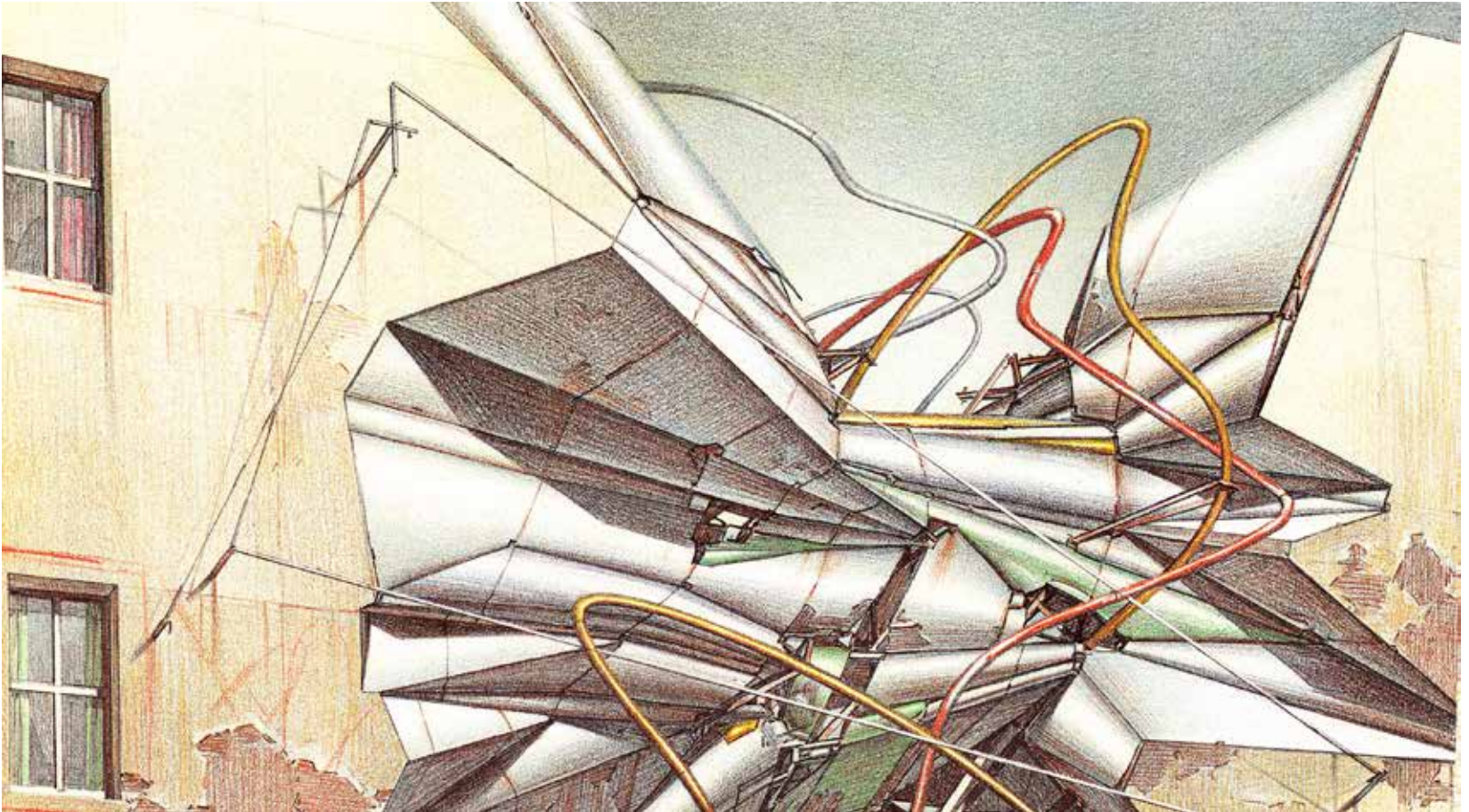
The Drawing Center is the current host to “Lebbeus Woods, Architect,” a traveling retrospective (curated by Joseph Becker, Jennifer Dunlop Fletcher, Helen Hilton, and organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) which is loosely organized according to a chronological trajectory and covers about 30 years of Woods’s work. Various drawings—configured around a grid of vitrines containing maquettes, sketchbooks, and other materials—are hung sequentially with interspersing quotes taken from Woods’s writing printed on the walls. The exhibition offers a fairly staid and dryly academic presentation, following a conventionally Cartesian plan that

does not quite capture the truly radical format of his work or its import for the present day. Nonetheless, the panoramic overview of his practice, process, and thought provides plenty of fuel for those who look beyond the rote survey presentation. Woods, who passed away in 2012, left an enduring legacy that continues to hold sway over our collective vision of the future. For Woods, the future was something to be constructed. He distanced himself from the label “Deconstructivism” (the postmodern architectural movement aligned with the literary and philosophical theory of “deconstruction”) and its manipulation and dislocation of the surface effects of architecture. His work was often associated with Deconstructivism, but Woods was more properly a constructivist.

The earliest work in the exhibition, **The Einstein Tomb** (1980), displays Woods’s interest in a scientifically led architecture, as well as his speculative vision. A tribute to Albert Einstein—who requested that no monuments be erected after his death that could become the site of pilgrimage—**The Einstein Tomb** is a hulking Brutalist cross. The tomb is adorned on two opposing ends of the cross with city-like spires and pierced in its hollow center by a beam of light, along which it travels out from Earth to the edges of the universe.

The desolate cities of this monolith were to inspire an extended interest in Einstein’s concept of relativity and its disruption of the stable universe of Newtonian mechanics. The development of scientific knowledge became a principle in **Centricity** (1986–88)





Lebbus Woods, Projects for the reconstruction of Sarajevo, 1993–1996

and its companion works, **Aeon** (1981) and **A-City** (1986), Woods's ambitious project to conceive entire utopian cities. Presented with Woods's usual expert draughtsmanship, **Centricity** revels in monumental forms and seemingly impossible architectures, appearing like mechanical medieval termite mounds. Contrary to much of the architectural thought of his day, Woods conceptualized this city, not upon theories of history or culture, but around the geometries of mathematics and scientific development: "Science changes the very idea of what is natural and human, of what human capacity and strength really are."²

Scientific and technological progresses are another form of the paradoxical and shifting territory that Woods thought architecture must embrace to become fully human. The Copernican revolution, for instance, displaced and diminished man's historic role in the cosmic story which he had assigned himself. Woods used the word "paradoxical" often to point to the complexities of a future in which comfortable human certainties are challenged beyond their historical conception. He labeled this an "existential" challenge, for which the figure of war was to stand for the catastrophic changes and crises that could not be named with existing forms of knowledge. However, he did not see the destruction of the past as a call to retreat and buttress old conceptions. Rather, it was as an opportunity to remake the image of man, precisely upon the site where the wound was inflicted. This theme is explored continuously throughout the War and Archi-

tecture Series, which includes **Underground Berlin** (1988), **Aerial Paris** (1989), **Berlin Free-Zone** (1991), **Zagreb Free-Zone** (1991), and the projects for the reconstruction of Sarajevo (1993–96).

In **Underground Berlin** (1988), he envisions an architecture that might heal the ideological divides of East and West Berlin through a literal ungrounding of the city. While in **Berlin Free-Zone** (1991), Woods proposes a hidden architecture tunneling through the city's monuments of authority to create "freespaces" connected by modern communications technology. Freespaces are Woods's conception of an autonomous space meant to foster a new adaptation to everyday living. Injected into the existing architecture, the use of freespaces was radically underdetermined by design and without any pre-set plan for habitation. Though not pre-planned in purpose, freespaces were formally experimental—eschewing the linear and grid-like composition of the surrounding architecture—to catalyze a way of living that was disconnected from the forms of the old world. In **Berlin Free-Zone** freespaces act as arteries in a vast cybernetic system transposed upon the existing order, collecting pockets of resistance and transforming them into a multi-cellular cybernetic organism united to a new purpose.

Woods explicitly characterized his approach to architecture as that of a second-order cybernetic system. Cybernetics is a purposive science, concerned with the goal-oriented behavior of systems. Second-order cybernetics attempts to grapple with the complex feedback



loops that occur between a model and the system which envelops it. For instance, while an engineer may have a detailed view of the specific materials and functions that inform the construction of a bridge, her *model* of that bridge is constrained and only minimally considers the broader *system* within which it is enveloped, such as the surrounding landscape, further infrastructure, traffic, etc., and limits those feedback loops according to fixed tolerances. While the engineer may mistake the model for the system, second-order cybernetics emphasizes the distinction and recognizes it as a representation, attempting to understand how observation of the system and the complex epistemological issues that this raises feed back into the system.

Woods never loses sight of the complex feedback loops between the sociocultural and infrastructural issues erupting in the space of war. With **High Houses and Sarajevo** (1993) he offers the hopeful reconstruction of a city tragically torn asunder by war. Rather than raze and rebuild, he suggests the organic solution of intervening in the scarred architecture, inserting “ideology-free spaces” amidst the broken fragments of the former Yugoslavia. While these spaces, envisioned by a scabrous, piecemeal architecture, are seemingly purposeless, they were meant to be engaged as new modes of living; distinctly configured from the habitual structures of everyday life, they form concrete pockets of revolutionary experience within the shattered remnants of the old order.

In his book **Radical Reconstruction**, Woods mentions two principles of drawing: “Draw architecture as though it were already built” and “Build architecture as though it had never been drawn.”³ With these two statements, he indexes the distinction between the abstract model and the concrete realities of the system, and brings them into dialogue with one another. “Drawing it as if it had been built” enables the abstract conception of a new way of living that may be concretely realized, while “building as if it had never been drawn” allows for the spontaneous practice of freedom in response to concrete problems. In Kant’s transcendental framework, freedom derives from the ability to conceive the self-conscious unity of what “ought” to be rather than what “is” in the concrete empirical sense. Freespaces not only exemplify the practice of freedom in the concept of their construction, but, moreover, offer a new communal space from within which to develop that concept. For Woods, it was the spontaneous construction of the community’s vision of what “ought” to be, in dialogue with the radical autonomy of space, which would open architecture into new ways of living.

With architecture, Woods saw a way to represent the building of a new reality that was not dependent upon the historical, cultural, and ethnic divisions that plagued Yugoslavia’s formation after World War II. While particular and complex architectural problems derive from historical situations, we are free to develop the function of our architecture in a manner that is not in keeping with the causes of that historical trauma. From a cybernetic perspective, Woods saw architecture as offering the possibility of rehabilitating the functions of a system that had lost equilibrium, but it was only through an understanding of the complexities of that system that we could hope to achieve this. His works are not meant to erase the conflict in which they intervene, but to propose an emancipatory practice beyond the limits of that conflict.

In **San Francisco: Inhabiting the Quake** (1995), rather than buttressing the failed principles of an architecture which props up the city amidst the fault lines of ever-shifting tectonic plates, Woods proposes a form of architecture that slides and reconfigures along with the tremors. From economic crisis, ecological disaster, growing inequality, and any number of other pressures, we now live in a state constantly threatened by collapse. Perhaps we need new approaches, like those suggested by Woods: We need a practice that does not shy away from the catastrophe which postmodernism found amongst the torn bedrock of modernism’s foundations, but embraces its best impulses; a practice that builds not against the ruin, but with it; a practice that rekindles the embers of enlightenment and freedom in the ashes. From the war-torn streets of Sarajevo to a fantastic monument cast to the edges of the universe on a beam of light, Woods shone a beacon upon these foundations of the future.

1

Lebbeus Woods, **War and Architecture** (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993).

2

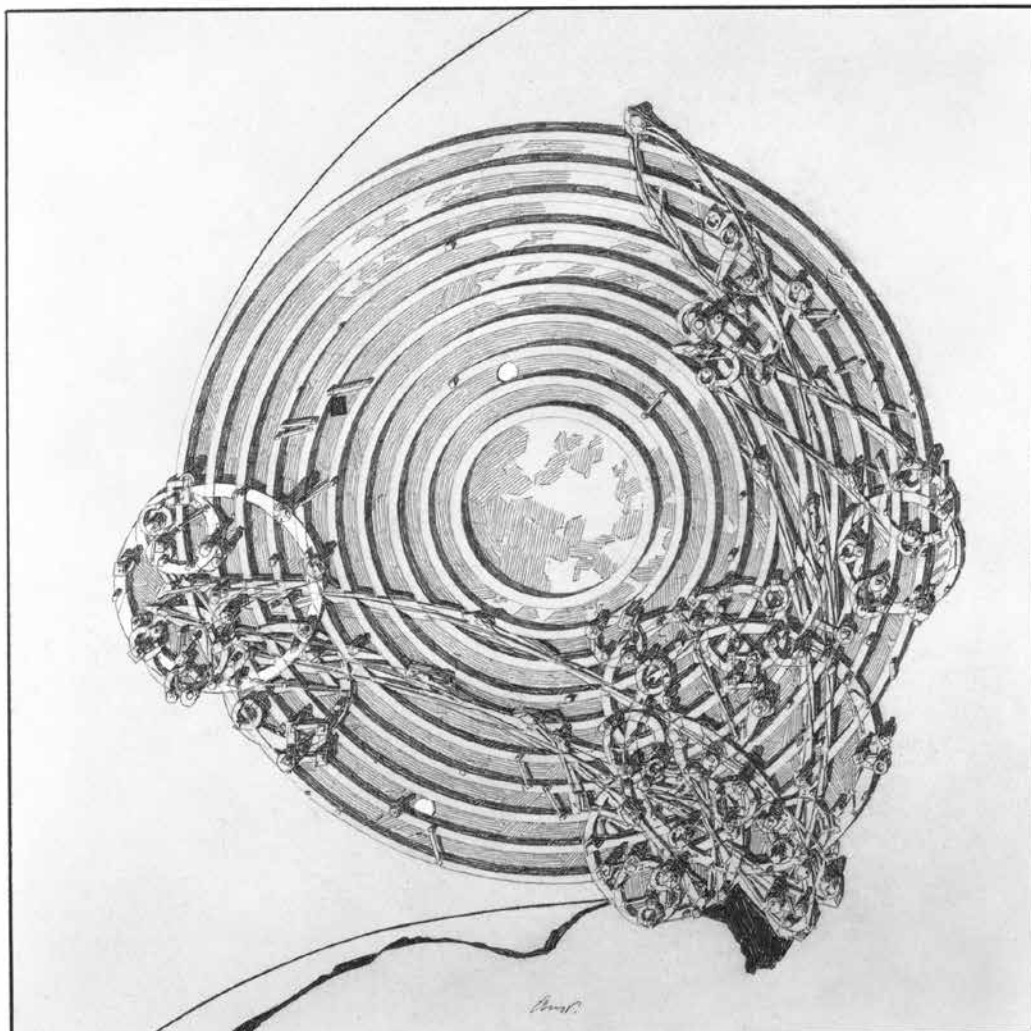
Lebbeus Woods, “Centricity,” **Places**, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Summer 1988), accessed: http://places.designobserver.com/media/pdf/Centricity_181.pdf.

3

Lebbeus Woods, **Radical Reconstruction** (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997).



- M₇ [Luna 1]



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William S. 1987

Lebbeus Woods, **Concentric Fields**, 1987



The Mundane
Afrofuturist Manifesto

The undersigned, being alternately pissed off and bored, need a means of speculation and asserting a different set of values with which to re-imagine the future. In looking for a new framework for black diasporic artistic production, we are temporarily united in the following actions.



***The Mundane Afrofuturists recognize
that:***

We did not originate in the cosmos.

The connection between Middle Passage and
space travel is tenuous at best.

Out of five hundred thirty-four space travel-
ers, fourteen have been black. An all-black
crew is unlikely.

Magic interstellar travel and/or the won-
drous communication grid can lead to an
illusion of outer space and cyberspace as
egalitarian.

This dream of utopia can encourage us to
forget that outer space will not save us
from injustice and that cyberspace was pre-
figured upon a “master/slave” relationship.

While we are often Othered, we are not
aliens.

Though our ancestors were mutilated, we are
not mutants.

Post-black is a misnomer.

Post-colonialism is too.

The most likely future is one in which we
only have ourselves and this planet.



The Mundane Afrofuturists rejoice in:

Piling up unexamined and hackneyed tropes,
and setting them alight.

Gazing upon their bonfire of the
Stupidities, which includes, but is not
exclusively limited to:

- Jive-talking aliens;
- Jive-talking mutants;
- Magical negroes;
- Enormous self-control in light of
great suffering;
- Great suffering as our natural state
of existence;
- Inexplicable skill in the martial
arts;
- Reference to Wu Tang;
- Reference to Sun Ra;
- Reference to Parliament Funkadelic
and/or George Clinton;
- Reference to Janelle Mon  e;
- Obvious, heavy-handed allusions to
double-consciousness;
- Desexualized protagonists;
- White slavery;
- Egyptian mythology and iconography;
- The inner city;
- Metallic colors;
- Sassiness;
- Platform shoes;
- Continue at will...



We also recognize:

The harmless fun that these and all the other Stupidities have brought to millions of people.

The harmless fun that burning the Stupidities will bring to millions of people.

The imaginative challenge that awaits any Mundane Afrofuturist author who accepts that this is it: Earth is all we have. What will we do with it?

The chastening but hopefully enlivening effect of imagining a world without fantasy bolt-holes: no portals to the Egyptian kingdoms, no deep dives to Drexciya, no flying Africans to whisk us off to the Promised Land.

The possibilities of a new focus on black humanity: our science, technology, culture, politics, religions, individuality, needs, dreams, hopes, and failings.

The surge of bedazzlement and wonder that awaits us as we contemplate our own cosmology of blackness and our possible futures.

The relief of recognizing our authority. We will root our narratives in a critique of normative, white validation. Since “fact” and “science” have been used throughout history to serve white supremacy, we will focus on an emotionally true, vernacular reality.

The understanding that our “twoness” is inherently contemporary, even futuristic. DuBois asks how it feels to be a problem. Ol’ Dirty Bastard says “If I got a problem, a problem’s got a problem ’til it’s gone.”

An awakening sense of the awesome power of the black imagination: to protect, to create, to destroy, to propel ourselves towards what poet Elizabeth Alexander describes as “a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination.”

The opportunity to make sense of the nonsense that regularly—and sometimes violently—accents black life.



The electric feeling that Mundane Afrofuturism is the ultimate laboratory for world-building outside of imperialist, capitalist, white patriarchy.

The sense that the rituals and inconsistencies of daily life are compelling, dynamic, and utterly strange.

Mundane Afrofuturism opens a number of themes and flavors to intertextuality, double entendre, politics, incongruity, polyphony, and collective first-person-techniques that we have used for years to make meaning.



The Mundane Afrofuturists promise:

To produce a collection of Mundane
Afrofuturist literature that follows
these rules:

1. No interstellar travel—travel is limited to within the solar system and is difficult, time consuming, and expensive.
2. No inexplicable end to racism—dismantling white supremacy would be complex, violent, and have global impact.
3. No aliens unless the connection is distant, difficult, tenuous, and expensive—and they have no interstellar travel either.
5. No internment camps for blacks, aliens, or black aliens.
6. No Martians, Venusians, etc.
7. No forgetting about political, racial, social, economic, and geographic struggles.
8. No alternative universes.
9. No revisionist history.
10. No magic or supernatural elements.
11. No Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, or Bucks.
12. No time travel or teleportation.
13. No Mammies, Jezebels, or Sapphires.
14. Not to let Mundane Afrofuturism cramp their style, as if it could.
15. To burn this manifesto as soon as it gets boring.

— Martine Syms & whomever will join me
in the future of black imagination.

*A version of this manifesto appeared on rhizome.org in December 2013

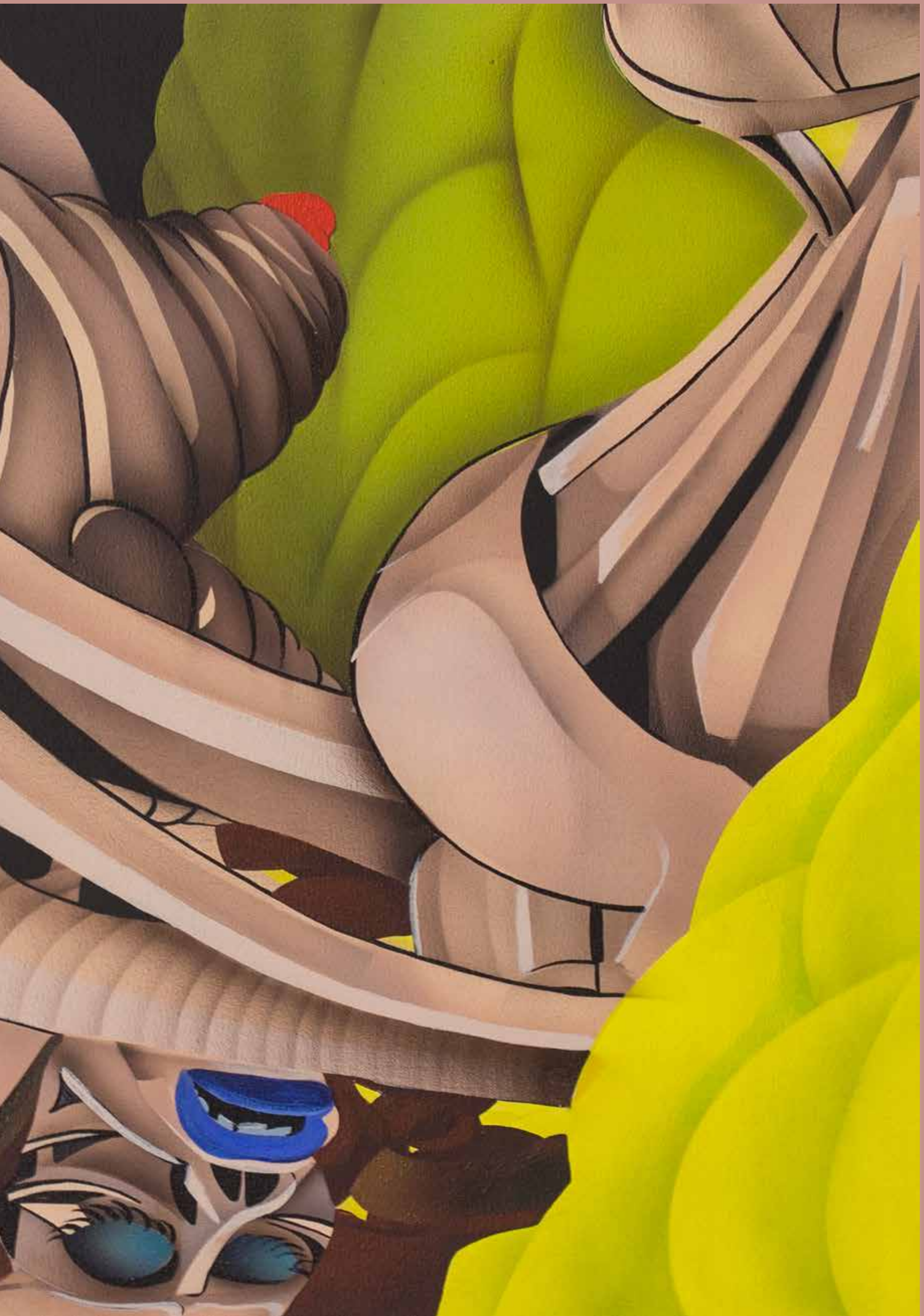


Swinging Sandy, the Gymnast
and
Ms. October











Notes on Marxist
Art History



Revolving Blades and Wheels from Olavs Magnus, *History of the Northern Peoples*, 1555

1

Marxist art history is not the result of a clinical procedure, performable by any scholar equipped with the correct text or theoretical apparatus; it is, and can only be, the yield of a negativity at work within the historian—a residue, not simply of capitalist relations in the abstract, but of the particular market on which academic labor is bought and sold.

2

Marxist art history has no meaning if it is not written in the service of communism; the same forces that make possible the latter determine the characteristics of the former. But these forces are not immutable: each generation is constrained to write history under conditions that would have been unrecognizable to, and unbearable for, its immediate predecessors. What happens once in the dialectic of labor and capital does not happen twice.

3

For the generation of the New Left, whose commitments and imperatives were shaped as much by the exploits of Che Guevara, Mao, and Giap as by the ubiquitous pomp and circumstance of American hegemony, Marxism meant ideological warfare first and foremost: a struggle to seize the apparatus of knowledge-production from its masters, and to repurpose it in the interests of the underclass. Armed with theoretical materials of French and German derivation (especially Althusser and Adorno), New Left art historians sought to infiltrate a discipline dominated, on one hand, by Cold War liberalism, and on the other, by outright conservatism; refusing activist platitudes as well as the orthodoxies of the previous generation of Marxist art historians (e.g. Frederick Antal, Francis Klingender, and Meyer Schapiro), they sought to reconstruct, in the words of Otto Karl Werckmeister, “a history of art as a product of society, subject to its economic conditions and political organization.” This history amounted to more than a mere tallying of patrons and painters; for example, in his landmark essay, “On the Social History of Art” (1973), T.J. Clark posits ideology as a material substance in its own right: “A work of art may have ideology (in other words, those ideas, images and values which are generally accepted, dominant) as its material, but it *works* that material; it gives it a new form and at certain moments that new form is in itself a subversion of ideology.” In pursuit of an ideological history of art, Clark and his colleagues necessarily limited their focus to the markets and professional discourses proper to art and artists. It was not a question of interpreting art *in terms of capital*, but rather of locating and theorizing the possibility of ideological subversion: a New Left politics *avant la lettre*.

4

Although the New Left found itself anointed, academically if not politically, in the aftermath of May 1968, the foundations of its critical project quickly proved unstable; conservative retrenchment was soon the order of the day. Caught unawares by the revolts of the 1960s, and waking to the flagging profitability of its industrial core, the ruling class responded in the mid-1970s with an all-out campaign of political and economic reform, reorganizing supply chains, workflows, and investment schemes along more circuitous (and, for workers, more precarious) lines and attacking the bases of proletarian power, from social welfare and trade unions to public institutions of education and culture. The academy was swept up in this counter-revolutionary tide: as early as 1973, Werckmeister could write that a competitive ethos was overtaking the formerly collective enterprise of humanist scholarship, favoring “performatory achievements” over the rigors of empirical research. No longer buoyed by external movements or countercultures, Marxist academics would be forced to professionalize according to the writ of the market, abandoning the political tasks of historical materialism in pursuit of individualized projects and idiosyncratic discourses. Inevitably, Marxism would become merely one of several possible critical-theoretical methodologies—a tool in a toolkit: a hammer without a nail.

5

Today, this backlash is a fait accompli. Universities have long since shed their ideological opposition to the for-profit sector, repositioning themselves as off-site research-and-development facilities for Big Pharma, Big Energy, and Big Data (to say nothing of their usual paymasters in the war industry)—and also, more insidiously, as factories of student loan debt, now repackaged and sold as a secu-

ritized commodity. In this education-industrial complex, conformity need no longer be guaranteed ideologically; economic and carceral stimulants have proven more than adequate to the production of docility. All forces of violence, soft and hard, converge on these self-described “educational delivery systems,” from institutionalized rape and racism to myriad forms of self-annihilation, social atomization, depression, and fear. Far from constituting a world apart, the millennial campus is the concatenated image of society at large: the same baton blows and rubber bullets greet dissenters here as elsewhere. Ensconced in a Piranesian landscape of upscale “residential life” facilities and LEED-certified biomed laboratories, white-collar aspirants compete to enter the overheated rental and job markets of New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other so-called “top-tier” cities. Meanwhile, for the blue-collar majority, the term “college” increasingly describes a virtual experience stripped of any and all transformative potential, personal or economic; a bachelor’s degree is simply the prerequisite of a lifetime of treading water. This transformation of the academy from agent of social reproduction to petty vendor of educational goods and services follows the writ of the bond rating agencies, in whose eyes the cultivation of financial assets overrides all other priorities. Capital, and capital alone, keeps the university afloat, calling the shots—calling in the cops.

6

In the 1960s, the lecture hall was ground zero of the New Left insurgency; however, for the present generation, this struggle has shifted to the university gates, which function more than ever as barriers to entry—once opened to proletarian youth, if only slightly, but now decisively closed. For many would-be academics as well, these gates seem increasingly insurmountable: each year, a smaller portion of academic job seekers finds entry into the full-time core of the profession; inevitably, the majority will be shunted into the ultra-exploitative part-time, or adjunct, sector, a netherworld of rock-bottom wages and nonexistent job security. Although labor unions have recently begun organizing in this vast bottomland of the academic system, their efforts are frustrated less by the disposability of adjunct labor than by the essentially undesirable, and even shameful, character of the profession. *Adjuncts do not want to be adjuncts, much less to self-identify as such*; after all, the difference between part- and full-time academic labor is merely statistical, not meritocratic. To advance a Marxist position under these conditions can only mean fighting the professional order, not to preserve it, but rather to destroy it, even at the cost of undermining what remnant of legitimacy still attaches to the tenure system. This is our predicament: bereft of a common stake in the academy, we are compelled to struggle from outside its protectorate—not as “academic workers,” but simply as comrades.

7

Rosalind Krauss, 1976: “If psychoanalysis understands that the patient is engaged in a recovery of his being in terms of its real history, modernism has understood that the artist locates his own expressiveness through a discovery of the objective conditions of his medium and their history. That is, the very possibilities of finding his subjectivity necessitate that the artist recognize the material and historical independence of an external object (or medium).”

8

For us, too, history is only writeable subjectively, as a movement toward objectivity. In the discourse of psychoanalysis, “objective conditions” are established in the realm of the Other—the mother’s desire, the father’s law, etc. It is the same with academic research: the conditions that govern scholarly objectivity are coextensive with our exploitation and domination by the market.

9

No subject exists immediately in the world: all subjectivity exists by and through media, the material substrate of relations. There are no relations without subjects, and no subjects without relations. If a relationship can be conceived, then a subject of that relation must exist, even if its existence cannot be verified. All materials, including imaginary materials, are potential media. There is neither any identity between materials and media nor is there any limit to the number of relations a particular material can afford; there is only the manifold of relational configurations into which materials can be arrayed—configurations which the historian cannot help but alter,



even if only negatively. We therefore agree with Krauss (and, with Krauss, Lacan) up to a point: the history of the subject is locatable only in terms of media (the plural of medium); but we can neither speak of the “independence” of media apolitically nor affirm that this independence ought to be preserved; indeed, we would say the opposite. Since every medium is a medium of something (some latent subjectivity), whatever appears autonomous, i.e. self-mediating, can be revealed to be the medium of something autonomous—the subject *of* autonomy. However, this apparent autonomy is only ever secured dialectically, hence dependently: the independence claimed by a self-grounding subject develops in relation to the subordination of other subjects, other ‘sensuous particulars.’ Autonomy is only ever shored up by means of domination. We call *totalization* the process of a subject’s becoming-autonomous.

■ 10 ■

The art historian is above all a student of relations. In few other disciplines would matters of world-historical importance rest on nearly imperceptible orders of difference, from the details of brushwork or fabrication to the minutiae (and aporia) of ekphrasis. This attunement to relations is art history’s greatest strength and the source of its usefulness for anti-capitalist purposes. Capital is not merely an object of artistic mediation; it is also a force as real and fundamental as the artist’s hand, and perhaps even more so. In other words, we must treat capital like a subject: the subject of the commodity relation.

■ 11 ■

Among all possible constellations of objects and subjects, certain modes of relation have a totalizing capacity—that is, they capture and recode other relations according to a sort of viral logic, supplanting other subjects in the name of a unitary totality (Deleuze and Guattari refer to these as “abstract machines”). The commodity relation is the most abstract, and therefore the most pervasive, of all totalizing subjects. For us, as for Hegel, totality is not an empty category; the universality of any mode of relation implies the existence of a correspondingly universal subject—that is, a subjectivity that has itself as its own ground. Capital is one such self-grounding subject. Marxism’s concern for the totality articulated by capitalist relations does not excuse it from studying other, less totalizing relations; but there is no avoiding the reality of capital-as-totality, and no other way of treating “sensuous particulars” than as moments of that totality.

■ 12 ■

During the course of the past two centuries, art gradually succumbed to the commodity relation; this much we know. But how did it happen? In a recent essay published in Mute magazine, Daniel Spaulding points to modernism’s ambiguous complicity in this slow-moving disaster: “Under capitalism, art is and is not like any other commodity. It is and is not like any other congelation of abstract labour time. It occupies something like a permanent gap in the structure of value’s reproduction, and hence is in contradiction with the value-form even as it is nothing other than this relation to it. During the epoch of programmatism [a term taken from *Théorie Communiste*], it was the specific form of this contradiction that accounted for art’s positivity, as a practice that was able to sustain itself, indeed to thrive on its predicament, at least for a time. Modernist art was also negative because it stood for everything beyond the law of value. In certain of those extreme moments that defined its very being, it was nothing less than the concrete figure of utopia. As such, however, it perhaps remained a specific and conflicted instance of the value-form’s own properly utopian content, which is to say its prefiguration of a socialist mode of production that would be even more thoroughly mediated by labour than is capitalism, though under the conscious direction of its human bearers. Hence if class consciousness in its Lukácsian formulation is the self-consciousness of labour, recognising its own alienated essence in the commodity-form, modernist art could be described as something like the moment of value’s self-reflexivity, when it pauses in its circulation and dithers. Modernist art is value thinking its own sublation. [...] In practice this meant that modernism continually ran up against the materiality of its means as the truth of its mythic or utopian ambition, and that this mereness in turn had to be ideologically mediated. (Clement Greenberg’s later work does this.) Moreover, modernist

artists also repeatedly found that their attack on signification threw them into perverse solidarity with the value-form’s own powers of dissolution. Words in liberty and arbitrary signs began to look like money, value’s most general equivalent. Here, it is the art of Picasso in the years around 1912 that remains exemplary. Disenchanted the sign turned out to leave it open to subsumption by the value-form, a process that Picasso himself soon felt it was imperative to resist via a return to outmoded forms of mimesis.”

■ 13 ■

It is one thing to recognize that modernism’s resistance to the money-form rested on its faith in an even more extreme catalogue of social abstractions—such that, ultimately, the latter’s failure would leave art with only the commodity to lean on. But it is a different thing to ask how this sublative urge found a quarter among the avant-garde; and how it came to be mediated, even if only precariously and imperfectly, in view of the obstacle that was, and remains, the “materiality of [art’s] means.” What for Spaulding is art’s intractable materiality—a term that comes to stand in for “everything beyond the law of value”—might be better described, in dialectical terms, as art’s becoming simultaneously anti- and ultra-social, trading particular subjects—someone or somebody—for everybody and nobody at once. Modernism’s history would be a sum of betrayals, a saying-farewell to “forms of mimesis,” and, what amounts to the same thing, to forms of life: ways of laboring, of loving, of walking, of fighting, etc. What purpose has Marxist art history if not to query the graveyard of life-forms, and to perform the autopsy of their disappearance? It is not enough to cite the inevitability of art’s falling to the value-form; in every case—whether it be Titian or Valie Export, *Sans Soleil* or São Paulo graffiti—it bears asking how, dialectically, value and art became aligned. How does capital act on art, and through what intermediaries? Which subjectivities are extinguished in order that capital might assert its autonomy?

■ 14 ■

The media of art are not, as many critics assume, inherently suited to commodification, a relation of purely quantitative or notional equivalence. Difference more than equivalence is art’s primary concern: in the hands of a skilled artist, simple materials and marks become the bearers of all manner of unlikely subjectivities, human and animal, divine and ancestral, corporeal and mineral, etc. This is not to say that art and capital always stood at cross-purposes. In Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, mercantilism effectively laid the foundation of modernism, combining and centralizing huge quantities of dissimilar subjects and objects under the aegis of the world market, and thereby opening a way beyond the contradictory ontologies of Renaissance pictoriality. What resulted was a radical pictorial monism—one form of existence for all things, as unified by the four boundaries of the page or canvas—of which Velazquez and Rubens, Chardin and Goya, were equally inheritors. Under the rule of industrial capital, this monism would be broken along with capital’s claim to perpetuity; yet the breaking was hardly foreordained. No one could know precisely how much of the familiar, tangible world could be let go of before a picture ceased to mediate anything at all—aside from its equivalence to other works made according to the same procedure—or how much of art’s “materiality” could be sloughed off and deskilled before the discipline collapsed from the loss.

■ 15 ■

The subsumption of art to capital is coextensive with, but not analogous to, the subsumption of labor to capital. By coextensive, we mean *related to*; we do not mean *reflective of*. Marxist method is dialectical rather than hermeneutic: instead of interpreting texts according to other texts (as per Panofsky), it positions objects in relation to their corresponding subjects. Theories of reflection are inapposite to Marxism. Art neither imitates nor depicts the totality; it is only ever a part and a moment of that totality. Marxist art history seeks a cartography that is simultaneously an archaeology—a sort of four-dimensional archive of capitalist and non-capitalist relations, interwoven. It is from these depths that the image of utopia is to be assembled.

■ 16 ■

There is only one truly viable alternative to capitalism: the revolution that destroys it. For us, class struggle is not the prelude to a new, perfected society called “communism”; in its revolutionary



form, this struggle simply *is* communism—the implementation of communist measures here and now. The term “communization” denotes a process of the destruction of capital, not a dreamworld to be realized at some future date. Nonetheless, we defend the necessity of utopia as the durable record of proletarian subjectivity—an image encompassing all promises made to it and all memories of its past. It is only in view of this image, utopia, that the proletariat is able to maintain a relationship with its impossibility as a class. It is of its own nothingness, ultimately, that value thinks when “thinking its own sublation”—as in, *We would be nothing without capital*. Communism is the movement that makes this nothing into everything.

■ 17 ■

Although the proletariat is, by definition, unable to realize utopia, it can nonetheless gesture toward it negatively. This project has as its end the end of all autonomous spheres and domains; the academy is merely one such domain, where proletarian life has ceased to be possible.

■ 18 ■

Like all other professional institutions, the academy is a medium of capital: nominally meritocratic, it has been bent by the force of commodity relations to the point of redundancy. Although academic commodities have always been proffered competitively, it is now the market alone—*sans* ideology—that guarantees their continued production.

■ 19 ■

The methods of Marxist art history can only be derived from the movement that builds a plurality: *we*, *ours*. However, there is no vector of this movement within the academy; plurality is possible only negatively, as everything the academy forbids, everything it designates as abject and improper.

■ 20 ■

Marxist art history can be practiced neither individually nor collectively; it can only be a symptom of the negation of this binary. If Marxist art history provides no materials for the realization *and* negation of proletarian subjectivity, then it ought not to be written.

■ 21 ■

There is no alternative to the academy, no para-academic project that would relieve the burden of proletarianization; there is only the pitched battle against the academy itself, as against the society that reproduces it. The destruction of capital need not end at the university’s gate, but it could certainly begin there.

■ 22 ■

The struggle against the academy cannot be undertaken in the service of academic advancement; it is night-work, *wrong* work, a labor denominated in stolen minutes and hours. This labor is not a compensation for what the academy disallows; its purpose is to render the academy impossible, illegitimate, and contemptible.

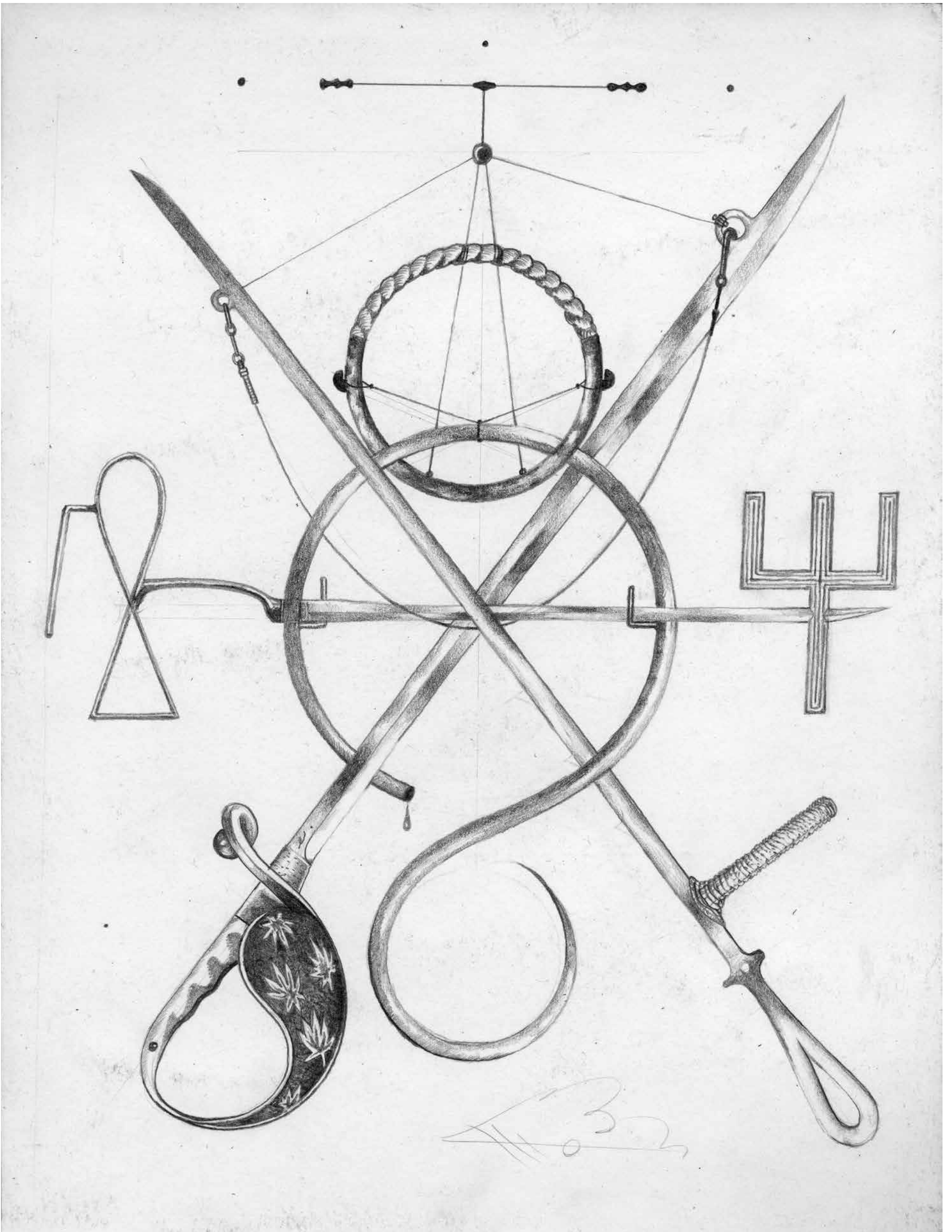
■ 23 ■

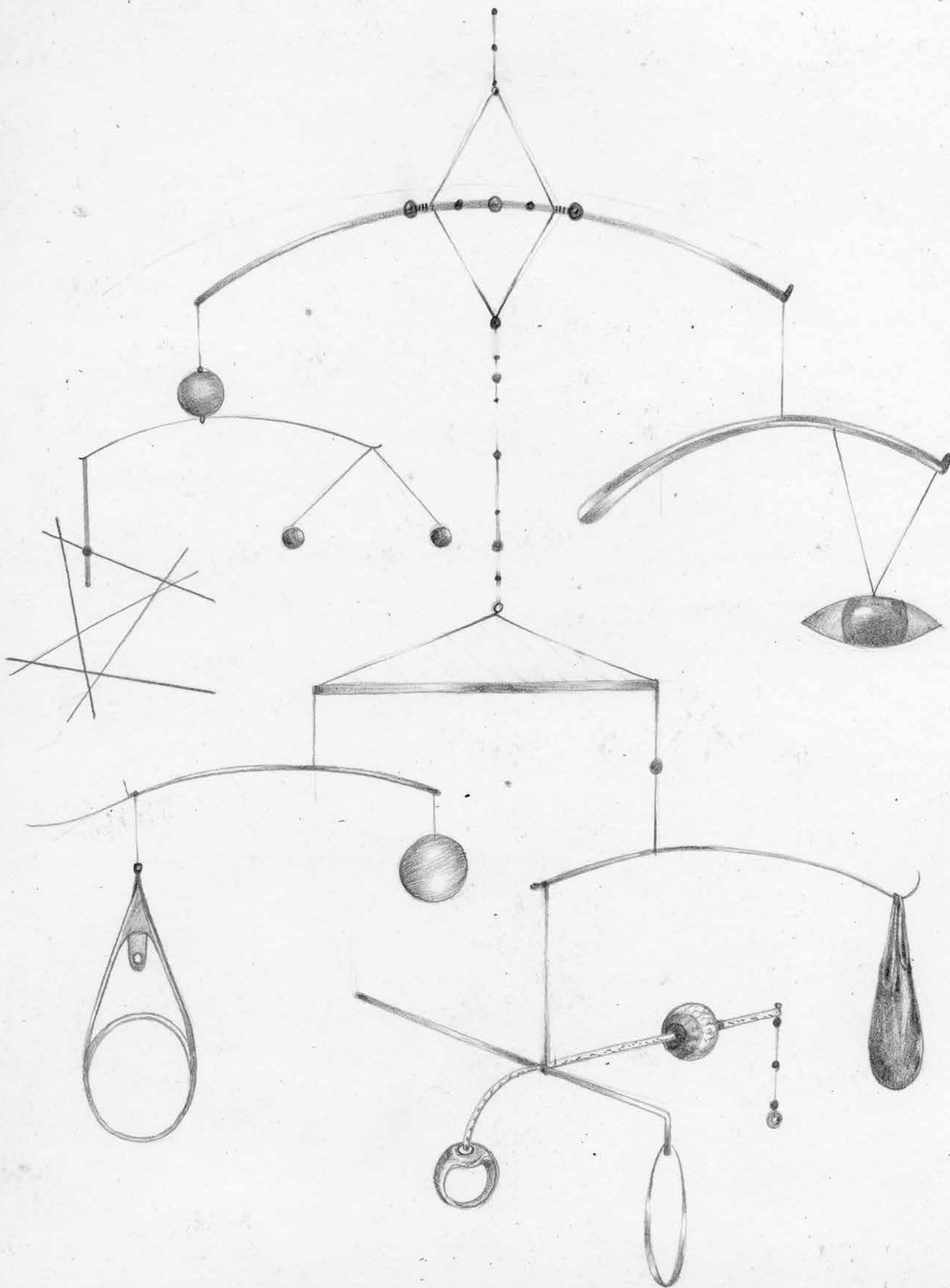
Marxist art history is a working draft; there is no preferable format for its distribution, no proper context of its publication. Every document of Marxist art history bears the trace of its impropriety; we can only weaponize this attribute, it cannot be bent to the shape of a new legitimacy.

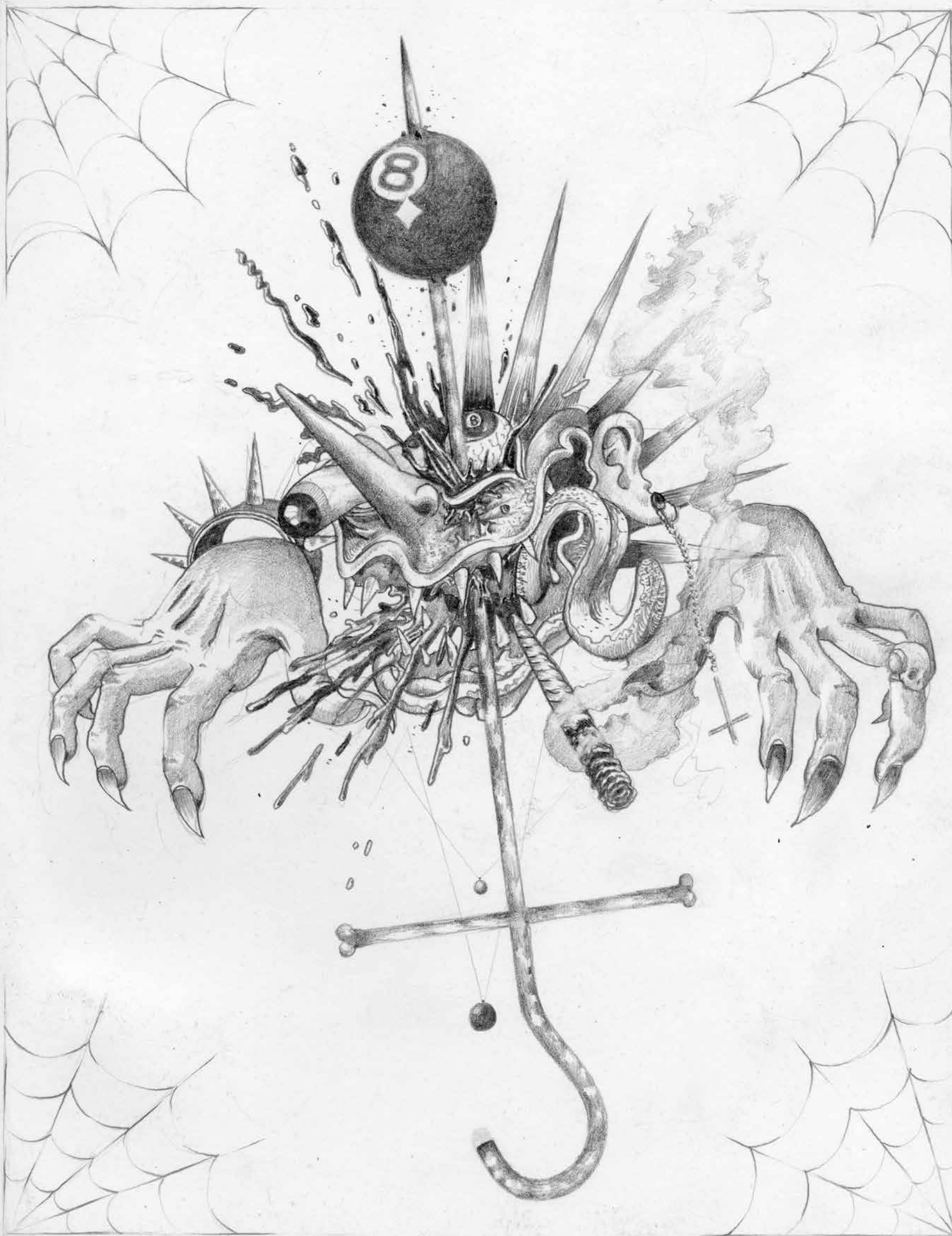
■ 24 ■

The objects of Marxist art history are dictated, not by the discipline at large, but by the subjectivity of its authors. Revolution is the only worthwhile outcome of this research.

Los Angeles, April–June 2014







I went down to Nag Hammadi.
What's your name and who's your daddy.

Hamper's full, the laundry's dry.
These pots might have some jinn inside.

That whale must answer for his crimes.
He ate four trainers and some lions.

Devil horns and nothing else on.
Matthew Murdock, Foggy Nelson.

Foggy notion just crossed my mind.
Trouble ahead, lotion behind.

Get with the program, mandrake root.
Let raven croak and howlet hoot.

A liver, observe, is eating an eagle.
The liver is me, we learn in the sequel.

Sometimes an eagle is just a cigar.
Mock on, mock on, Truffaut, Godard.

A bout of sniffles, something's off.
Turn your head to the side and cough.

Daughters and sons, dollars and cents.
Cat's in the cradle, dog far hence.

About that soufflé, a word if I may.
Roadside abortion, curds and whey.

If it's romance you're after in Phoenix,
just ask a teen girl for a kleenex.

Could you finish up a little faster?
You're old enough to be my sister.

My battle cry is Nevermore.
I give these suckerfish what for.

I ruin them. I'm through with men.
I build the new Jerusalem.

This earth, my sole inheritance,
spits up its precious lubricants.

I kick an empty gas can.
Behold: the next-to-last man.



The Scored
Life

Gary Shteyngart's 2010 novel **Super Sad True Love Story** takes place in a near future United States where the social status of individuals is almost completely identified with their credit ratings. These ratings are not discrete, private matters but public information, available to anyone with a quick search on an *äppärät*. (*Äppäräts* are portable digital devices carried by everyone in Shteyngart's fictional world, except the most abject or socially excluded; they are analogous to smart phones, their primary purposes being social media participation and visual media access.) In this world, interpersonal interactions are inextricable from a constant process of evaluation; every moment serves as an opportunity to measure a person's debts against her assets, to calculate her equity, or to forecast her economic viability. Biography and credit history converge, the future unfolding from the present less as a narrative of personal growth than as an always contingent assessment of financial risk. **Super Sad True Love Story** is a novel about risk; it is a novel about the ways in which contemporary life has become a wrestling match between the negotiation of economic risk and desperate attempts to cleave out a space for life irreducible to capitalist futurity.¹

The novel follows the life of Lenny Abramov, a moderately successful yet all too precarious white-collar worker. Lenny is an employee of Post-Human Services, a division of the Staatling-Wapachung Corporation that focuses on "indefinite life extension." A salesman, his job is to identify prospective clients not only by discerning socioeconomic position—life extension is a commodity only the wealthiest can afford—but also by soliciting and eliciting a desire for immortality. The novel draws a sharp distinction between simply being able to afford immortality and truly wanting it when Lenny encounters an "ITP," or an "Impossible to Preserve, the vital signs too far gone for current interventions, the psychological indicators showing an 'extreme willingness/desire to perish.'" ² The label ITP fuses together a biological diagnosis and a psychological diagnosis. Not only does it indicate a body lacking the necessary health for immortality but it also designates a pathological state of not wanting to live on indefinitely; it names an acquiescence to history, a failure to desire an infinite extension of that economic opportunity called life.

This failure to embrace the quest for immortality registers in specifically financial terms. "Even more despairing," Lenny assesses, "was his [the ITP's] financial status. I'm quoting directly from my report to boss man Joshie: 'Income yearly \$2.24 million, pegged to yuan; obligations, including alimony and child support, \$3.12 million; investible assets (excluding real estate)—northern euro 22,000,000; real estate \$5.4 million, pegged to the yuan; total debts outstanding \$12.9 million, unpegged.' A mess, in other words" (ibid.). In technical terms, the "mess," here, is low equity, an excess of liabilities in comparison to assets. In this context, debt comes to signify not merely financial obligation but an annihilation of futurity: debt trades portions of the future off as collateral for the experiences of the past; it

accumulates, as Marx once put it, like a nightmare on the brain of the living. Lenny goes on to impugn this ITP for his inability to properly manage his financial affairs, going so far as lament: "Why was he doing this to himself? Why not keep off the drugs and the demanding young women, spend a decade in Cofu or Chiang Mai, douse his body with alkalines and smart technology, clamp down on the free radicals, beef up the stock portfolio, take the tire off the belly, let us fix that aging bulldog's mug?" (ibid.). Lenny's evaluation fabricates a continuity, indeed, an indistinguishability, between biological health and financial health, or between a physical fitness regime that enables peak athletic performance and economic behavior that maximizes profitability. To live well, then, means applying all of one's self, body and mind, to the task of maximizing the value extracted from every moment of every day, and as the interrogative mood ("Why not...?") of Lenny's lament suggests, this possibility of living well becomes an imperative, a duty: If you can live well, you must live well—or, more concisely, *Live well!*

If the command to live well appears innocuous at first glance, it is only because we have become so accustomed to the rhetoric of self-actualization, that we are blind to its implications and conditions. In **Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Soul**, Nikolas Rose argues that political power has increasingly come to operate "not through the crushing of subjectivity in the interests of control and profit, but by seeking to align political, social, and institutional goals with individual pleasures and desires, and with the happiness and fulfillment of the self."³ In other words, control and exploitation no longer entail alienation from one's authentic self but instead can function through the alignment of individual satisfaction with social inequality, or through the matching of personal happiness with socioeconomic hierarchy. This point elaborates Michel Foucault's model of power according to which power is neither a negation of the self, nor a repression of desires, but rather a channeling of desires, thoughts, and actions into paths that produce and reproduce hierarchies and inequalities.⁴ Realizing your desires, actualizing your potential, discovering your true self—these activities are complementary to the contemporary exercise of power. This complementarity is quite evident, for example, in the information technology market, with businesses like Google and Apple not only selling experiences of individuality (e.g., the iPod as a device for self-expression) but also relying on self-expression, creativity, and intellectual play as the very source of their profits. As a Google spokesman put it, the company strives "to create the happiest, most productive workplace in the world," and it does so by combining the pleasures once associated with free time (such as gyms, cafés, and a Lego play station) with the demands of work (understood not as the reduction of the individual to rote tasks but as the mobilization of every capacity and skill in brainstorming, design, innovation, and excellence).⁵

More directly relevant to our consideration of Shteyngart's novel is Foucault's description of neoliberalism as "a matter...of con-



structing a social fabric in which precisely the basic units would have the form of the enterprise” and in which we find the “replacement every time of *homo œconomicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo œconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, as being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of earnings.”⁶ Neoliberalism usually refers to an economic policy cocktail consisting of the privatization of public goods, the reduction of government spending on social welfare programs, and the ideological valorization of the market as the solution to every social problem. Foucault’s conceptualization of neoliberalism contributes a ground-level perspective to this definition of neoliberalism; it names a transformation in contemporary subjectivity whereby individuals come to take on more and more responsibility for economic risk: to be an entrepreneur of one’s self means to invest in oneself with all the attendant risks such investment involves—for instance, the failure to return a profit on investments in one’s own education. (Of course, unlike corporations, which rely on shareholders to spread out the risk of the enterprise, individuals can pool risk only so much, leaving them much more vulnerable than corporations.) From this neoliberal perspective, living well means maximizing returns on the investments of one’s time and energy, with the crucial qualification that everything one does is at least potentially an investment.

This rhetoric of self-investment informs and is conditioned by the rise of financialization as a social logic. In the U.S. context, financialization designates a transformation in the economy that begins in the 1970s, accelerating during the Reagan and Clinton administrations and deepening its hold on society since then.⁷ It constitutes a response to deindustrialization, an attempt to compensate for a decline in productive capital and manufacturing by inventing new ways of extracting profit. Two of its most evident traits are the deregulation of the stock market and the stock market’s expansion and fragmentation into so many niches for trading the most abstract economic entities, including credit derivatives, which transfer the risk of a debt, or weather derivatives, which hedge against adverse weather conditions. In these strange arenas, even losses can turn a profit, since, when derivatives are involved, one can as easily speculate on the decrease of a commodity’s price as on its rise. This aspect of financialization receives the most attention in journalism and public political discourse, with hedge funds and insider trading becoming figures of vice in a morality play writ large. We all know at least the general outlines of the rise of “toxic assets”—evil investments, as it were—that led to the financial crisis of 2008 and the Great Recession that followed.

But financialization also takes a subtler, if no less insidious, form in the coding of every aspect of daily life in terms of financial speculation. According to Randy Martin, “Financialization promises a way to develop the self, when even the noblest of professions cannot emit a call that one can answer with a lifetime. It offers a highly elastic mode of self-mastery that channels doubt over uncertain identity into fruitful activity.”⁸ Instead of a narrative in which one progresses, with a relative sense of security, from an entry-level position along a career path towards a golden age of retirement, financialization promises the excitement of investment and speculation; uncertainty, insecurity, and precarity signal the proliferation of opportunities, the intensification of both risk and reward. “Money must be spent to live, certainly, but now daily life embraces an aspiration to make money as well. These are opportunities that quickly have obligations to invest wisely, speculate sagely, and deploy resources strategically. The market is not only a source of necessary consumables; it must be beaten. To play at life one must win over the economy.”⁹ Martin’s terminology of winners and losers draws our attention to the full implications of Lenny Abramov’s incredulity in the face of “the mess” of an ITP he encounters. Lenny faces somebody who refuses to play the game of the market, even though there is no escape from that game’s rules. The ITP is one who has lost the game of life by handling his investments in a foolish fashion, which is to say that while this ITP recognizes the first part of financialization’s moral imperative (to live well, one must spend), he fails to recognize the second part: to live well, one must spend *well*.

Shteyngart’s novel can be read as an example of financialization, a product of the infection of everyday life by financial discourses, but it can also serve as a critical take on it, an attempt to map the power relations involved in financialization so as to seek out possibil-

ities for a life beyond it. Which is to say that the novel’s critical power lies not in separating itself from finance but in immersing itself in its complications. Martin explains that financialization divides populations into winners and losers based on their capacity, or incapacity, to take on greater amounts of risk: a winner is someone who can accumulate risk—for example, a person using one loan to fund education, another to buy a house, juggling investment after investment, multiplying chances for profit (and for losses), all the while managing to achieve at least the thinnest sliver of a profit margin; a loser, on the other hand, either fails to take risks, playing it too safe and losing out on opportunities for profit, or she takes on risk but falls prey to any number of possible fiscal traps (failing to meet loan payments on a regular basis, for instance, with the consequence of lowering one’s creditworthiness).¹⁰ The fracture lines of risk apply not only to local or national contexts but also to descriptions of the contemporary geopolitical condition as such: geographical regions are divided up according to credit ratings, with newspapers judging the well-being of a nation according to the rise or fall of Standard and Poor’s assessment of its creditworthiness; the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank calculate the soundness of nations according to how well they conform to free market models of entrepreneurship, lending nations economic aid only on the condition that they comply to the discipline of austerity measures.

Super Sad True Love Story investigates the dividing line between financial winners and losers. We have already seen how Lenny judges one potential customer an ITP, deciding that he is unfit for immortality, but we should also note that while Lenny has long fantasized about immortality (the opening line of the novel reads: “Today I’ve made a major decision: *I am never going to die*”), he is not the healthiest specimen in either financial or physical terms. In fact, he risks falling into the category of an ITP himself. The novel calls attention to Lenny’s subpar performance in work and personal life repeatedly, and it does so not from an external point of view but from Lenny’s own perspective. (Most of the novel is told in the first-person from Lenny’s point of view through diary entries, but as I discuss below, it is also told from the point of view of Lenny’s love interest, Eunice Park, in the form of email and text exchanges.) Lenny repeatedly castigates himself for his physique, his inability to successfully pitch to prospective clients, and his lackluster love life. Evaluation thus turns not only outward but also inward. Lenny constantly assesses his own worth, not only in strictly financial terms but also in the more general terms of personal destiny, happiness, and his overall future prospects. However, even Lenny’s nonfinancial anxieties tend to register themselves within a fiscal frame, as if it were only in relation to finance that other aspects of life gain significance.

For instance, in a scene in which Lenny is out at a bar with a group of friends, *äppärät* programs rate him in comparison to the other bar goers, ranking him according to how relatively attractive or unattractive he is in regards to appearance and personality. These scores become even more cutting when two parties—Lenny and a “pretty brunette,” in this case—consent to an evaluative procedure that assesses their relative desires for one another: “A bunch of figures appeared on my screen: ‘FUCKABILITY 780/800, PERSONALITY 800/800, ANAL/ORAL/VAGINAL PREFERENCE 1/3/2’” (89). When Lenny is confused as to how his *äppärät* can so precisely score his desires, his friend Vishnu explains that it factors in the individuals’ respective digital footprints, that is, all of the data that has accumulated through their digital interactions (the presumption being that in this near future society, every social interaction, every action, is either in itself digital or doubled by a digital avatar). Vishnu and Lenny then go on to examine Lenny’s “profile,” which includes his income, debt, age and “lifespan estimated at eighty-three,” family history (including medical history: “Parental ailments: high cholesterol, depression”), liabilities, recent purchases, “Consumer profile: heterosexual, nonathletic, non-automotive, non-religious, non-Bipartisan,” and “Sexual preferences: low-functioning Asian/Korean and White/Irish American with Low Net Worth family background; child-abuse indicator: on; low-self-esteem indicator: on” (90). This form of digital profiling integrates personal proclivities into comparative standards, reducing sexual object choices to an on-off toggle (e.g., child-abuse indicator: on), a range of ethnicities, and economic background. This standardization goes hand in hand with the meshing of the economic and the noneconomic,



the construction of a seamless plane in which medical status, sexual orientation, consumption patterns, and fiscal management are so many modulations of a continuous process of economic decision-making.

Shteyngart extrapolates a worst-case scenario of what happens when life gets reduced to finance; his novel functions as a technology for raising consciousness regarding the implications of neoliberal measures by transforming everyday performance anxieties (Do I work hard enough? Am I good enough in bed? Am I in good enough shape?) into fuel for a critical reappraisal of contemporary capitalism. It diagnoses a condition we might call *the scored life*: a way of inhabiting the world in which social practice and financial calculation are synonymous, in which emotion and desire blur together with impersonal economic machinations, and in which “success”—that capitalist form of salvation—comes to be replaced by a far more fleeting version of grace—the narrow sliver of time when an investment escapes from risk to turn a profit, a moment that, treadmill-like, necessarily generates yet another opportunity for investment and exposure to risk. In this mode of existence, every act, every thought, carries with it a score, a rating of worth communicated in the complex, yet reductive, tongue of finance capital. The scored life brings together the contemplative life privileged in certain strands of ancient Greek philosophy with the practical acumen of the modern entrepreneur. From this standpoint, truth becomes an inevitably precarious wager on profitability internal to conducts/practices that blend a drive for novelty and adventure with a passive acquiescence to capitalist standards of value. Lenny’s deep, one might even say Socratic, self-searching and his relentless endeavors to make a name for himself at Post-Human Services are therefore not contradictory character traits but rather two sides of the same coin: the examined life has become the operating system for the entrepreneurship of the self.

Super Sad True Love Story supplements this diagnosis of the scored life with a hopeful dimension in its amorous preoccupations. Lenny’s quest for love, his pursuit of a self-consciously novelistic passion, projects a utopian romance in which the intense relations between two lovers compensate for the coldness of capitalism’s environs.¹¹ Lenny seeks redemption in the carnal particularities of women whose identities are marked in specifically ethnic terms, as if the abstractions of finance could only be cured by contact with bodies bearing the concrete weight of a racial history. The text charts a trajectory from his dalliances with Fabrizia, an Italian woman—described as “the softest woman I had ever touched,” “[h]er body conquered by small armies of hair, her curves fixed by carbohydrates, nothing but the Old World and its dying nonelectronic corporeality”—to the Korean American Eunice Park, a “nano-sized woman who had likely never known the tickle of her own pubic hair, who lacked both breast and scent, who existed as easily on an *apparat* screen as on the street before me” (21). The descriptions of these erotic figures amount to caricatures, the one channeling the suppleness of the Southern European woman who combines maternal comfort with wanton lust, the other an Orientalist vision of Eastern mystery and childish innocence. But the fantasy at work, here, also performs geopolitical labors, for the movement of Lenny’s desire from its first object to its second object traces an imaginary historical trajectory, from the putative origins of capitalism (Venetian banking being central to the rise of capitalism; the Italian city-state a prototype of the contemporary amalgamation of corporation and state) towards a future in which Asian nation-states are increasingly dominant. Whatever the reality of this representation of the future of capitalism, the novel channels and amplifies European and American anxieties regarding the Asian takeover of the global market: by the end of the novel, the United States is subjected to austerity plans from the IMF after a complete economic and political collapse, and one of the text’s final scenes depicts the arrival of a Chinese delegation from “the People’s Capitalist Party” as it prepares to decide the fate of the U.S. (322). With this in mind, we should understand Lenny’s longing for Eunice Park as an immunitary gesture, an attempt to inoculate against future failure by assimilating the (Asian) future itself. Lenny concertedly offers up Eunice as evidence to his boss, colleagues, and friends that far from becoming an obsolete creature—an ITP obsessed with old-fashioned artifacts like books¹²—he is riding waves of innovation into a resplendent technological paradise. In short, Lenny finds salvation in a concrete object of desire whose essence is capitalism’s very own abstraction from history, its incessant tendency

to shed dead weight: a woman so sleek, so virginal in appearance, that she “lack[s] both breast and scent.”

Lenny’s dissatisfaction with the scored life would seem to find its palliative in a racialized, and arguably racist, romance, the attendant fantasies of which provide an imaginary solution to capitalism’s contradictions in a coupling of East and West: to love Eunice is to reconcile the future of capitalism with its past, its emergent core with its increasingly residual periphery. Yet Shteyngart’s novel, to its credit, undercuts this fantasy in a number of ways. We have already seen how the text converts emotion and desire into economic matters, personal expressions of longing or need underwritten and overwritten by impersonal values. But the very structure of the novel, in its alternation between two intertwined but distinct points of view, undermines Lenny’s utopian romance; it challenges his desire to rescue love from money with a voice (Eunice Park’s) more able to appreciate the nuances of love’s financialization. The sections featuring Eunice’s point of view are far more sparse than Lenny’s (they are both less frequent and shorter in length), registering as dissonant notes in the novel’s progression, interruptions to Lenny’s verbose, introspective musings. They also update one of the earliest devices of the novel, namely, the epistolary mode, replacing exchanges of paper letters with digital messages and chat records from Eunice’s GlobalTeens Account. Notably, the bulk of these exchanges occur not between Eunice and Lenny but between Eunice and her friends and family members. The effect is to knock Eunice out of the orbit into which Lenny’s fantasies have placed her, to mark the gap and even incongruity between Lenny’s desires and Eunice’s being. More generally, the epistolary mode of these sections reminds the reader that language as such and the genre of the novel are collective endeavors; they are necessarily situated in a network of communication, the plurality of their modes of speech incapable of being subsumed by monologue (Lenny’s first-person accounts).

It would be tempting to search Eunice Park’s sections of the novel for an alternative to Lenny’s fantasies, but what they offer instead is an obstinate refusal of easy escapes. Eunice carefully weighs romantic love against practical necessities, especially family obligations, without ever subordinating one to the other. For Eunice, romantic love neither transcends economic determination nor becomes subordinate to it. She carefully manages how she invests her feelings and desires, by the end of the novel withdrawing her affections from Lenny to transfer them to his far more successful and savvy boss, Joshie Goldmann—a transfer, it should be noted, motivated not only by her attraction to Joshie but also by Joshie’s ability to assist her family during the political turmoil of the book’s conclusion. This management of amour may seem opportunistic—and it undeniably is to some degree—but it also enables the critique of a form of complacency, what Eunice incisively calls “this American white guy thing”: “Why on earth did Lenny think he could charm my parents? You know, he is so FULL of himself sometimes. He has this American white guy thing where life is always fair in the end, and nice guys are respected for being nice, and everything is just HONKY-dory (get it?)” (197–98). The joking phrase “HONKY-dory” speaks the truth of a situation in which the self-effacing particularity of whiteness—the race that is no race, that passes itself off as neutral, even as it promotes belief in its superiority¹³—betrays the purportedly universal opportunities capitalism puts on offer. The novel’s critical apparatus is therefore twofold. From one angle, it dismantles the capitalist ideology of progress (“life is always fair in the end”) by showing how personal and economic development gives way to the wild fluctuations of the market, while from another angle it demystifies the abstractions of finance, not by unveiling the concrete social content that stands behind them (as if derivatives and credit swaps were mere illusion) but by demonstrating the dependence of financial abstraction on race, gender, class, and sexuality. Capitalism’s administrative apparatuses make use of such social determinations in order to selectively allocate access to capital and the distribution of profits, and, as Eunice points out, the subjects of capitalism—especially those in relatively privileged positions—make use of them in order to rationalize and justify the reproduction of the status quo. In other words, optimism regarding capitalism’s future loops into gendered and racialized inequalities to constitute a vicious circle in which abstraction (i.e. the financial scoring of life) serves as an alibi for exploitation and oppression.



Lenny’s “HONKY-dory”-ness is, however, a complicated matter, for though the novel aligns Lenny with white privilege, it never quite identifies him with it, not least because of his Russian and Jewish roots. Throughout the text, Lenny remains caught between, on the one hand, a drama of disavowal in which he denies his origins in order to refashion himself into a figure of success (which is to say a real risk-taker, an entrepreneurial spirit unencumbered by the weight of collective attachments) and, on the other, a process of remembrance that hinders his assimilation into the dominant, racialized configuration of the neoliberal capitalist order. We see this tension at its most acute when Lenny brings Eunice to meet his parents, a scene saturated with Oedipal anxiety in the form of Lenny’s desire to distance himself from any identification with his parents’ Russianness. While Lenny mixes Russian into his conversations with his parents, he also denies any special attachment to the nation: “As for me, I have never been to Russia. I have not had the chance to learn to love it and hate it the way my parents have. I have my own dying empire to contend with, and I do not wish for any other” (136). However, such denial does not reflect Lenny’s reading habits (which include Russian and Eastern Bloc novels by Leo Tolstoy and Milan Kundera), nor does it prevent his diary entries from echoing the stylistic tics of Russian narrative, with its long, melancholic, and introspective meditations on the existential conundrums of life. For all that Lenny obsesses over the future, for all that he worships the idea of immortality, he cannot shake off history’s return; his origins, his heritage, seep back into his language, a melancholy atmosphere in which the deluded optimism of neoliberalism’s apologists can only suffocate. By the novel’s end, after the United States has collapsed, Lenny will long for a relation to time and a sense of self other than the entrepreneur’s opportunistic leap into the future: “Was this what Russia looked like after the Soviet Union collapsed? I tried, unsuccessfully, to see the country around me not just through my father’s eyes but through his *history*. I wanted to be a part of a meaningful cycle with him, a cycle other than birth and death” (290). More than the solace Lenny finds in a cyclical (which is to say predictable) theory of history, it is the very wish for history at all that stands out in this *prise de conscience*, the fumbling intuition that the logic of finance cannot provide the satisfaction it promises. “HONKY-dory”-ness is a powerful fantasy, one that can recruit the energies of innumerable driven individuals, but it cannot resolve or dissolve the contradictions of capitalism nor the social conflicts endemic to it.

Although Shteyngart’s **Super Sad True Love Story** may not provide a solution to the financialization of daily life, it can nonetheless suggest a future line of inquiry through a process of elimination. In the final instance, the novel refuses the romantic longing for a society pure of economic determination or financial calculation. It suggests that political considerations of finance capital cannot rely on the separation of an authentic human feeling (true love) from a base ethos of calculation. While one response to this conclusion is to throw one’s hands up in acquiescence to the scored life—in which case “fuckability” metrics are unavoidable evils to be suffered, if not necessarily enjoyed—an alternative response involves complicating our understanding of finance to include competing visions of how we invest ourselves in the world. Such a response would include visions that break with capitalist and neoliberal models of entrepreneurship (investment in the self as driven by desire for private acquisition and accumulation) in favor of more collective forms of investment.¹⁴ The point, here, is not to construct yet another easy opposition (e.g., the self versus the community, individuality versus collectivity), but rather to enable responses to the following questions: What form would a society take in which investments in the self were investments in the common good? What shape would our lives take if we replaced the financial logic of risk and the profit motive with more multidimensional considerations of value? Or, to put it more bluntly, what would post-capitalist finance look like? Such an inquiry would recognize that the scoring of life is also its wounding, its being cut to the core, and it would risk a question that from a neoliberal perspective sounds as silly as it does obscene: How might we build a society without winners and losers? What would it mean to stop keeping score?

1

This essay is dedicated to Tracy Rutler, my partner in the struggle to live and love in terms other than those offered up by capitalism.

2

Gary Shteyngart, **Super Sad True Love Story** (New York: Random House, 2010), 18. All subsequent quotations cited parenthetically.

3

Nikolas Rose, **Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Soul** (New York: Routledge, 1990), 257.

4

Foucault elaborates this theory in a number of places, but see, for example, **The History of Sexuality**, Vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1990 [1976], Trans. Robert Hurley) and “The Subject and Power” in **Critical Inquiry** (Summer 1982), pp. 777–795.

5

Quoted in “At Google, a Place to Work and Play,” **New York Times**, March 15, 2013.

6

Michel Foucault, **The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979** (London: Picador, 2010, Trans. Graham Burchell), 226.

7

While I constrict my account to the specifically American version of financialization, it should be noted that it constitutes a subplot in a global narrative of the rise of finance capital. I have relied on accounts by Giovanni Arrighi, Robert Brenner, Christian Marazzi, and David Harvey, among others. See especially, Arrighi’s **The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times** (New York: Verso, 1994), Harvey’s **The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Christian Marazzi, **The Violence of Financial Capitalism** (New York: Verso, 2011), and Brenner’s **The Boom and The Bubble: The US in the World Economy** (New York: Verso, 2003). For an account that accessibly deals with the recession that is usually dated as beginning in 2008, see John Lanchester’s **I.O.U.: Why Everyone Owes Everyone and No One Can Pay** (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

8

R. Martin, **The Financialization of Daily Life** (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 9. This essay draws on and contributes to the field of critical financial studies, which replaces the moral judgment of individual capitalists and the acceptance of capitalism as natural or axiomatic with critical reflection on the historical contingency of capitalism and the systematic power relations through which it functions. While there are far too many authors to mention, in addition to Martin, see recent work by Rob Aitken, Joshua Clover, Richard Dienst, Max Haiven, Maurizio Lazzarato, Donald MacKenzie, Annie McClanahan, Christopher Nealon, and Alison Shonkwiler.

9

Ibid, 17.

10

Randy Martin describes the division of the economy into winners and losers based on risk assessments in **An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management** (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

11

A number of authors have written on the emotional vicissitudes entangled with contemporary capitalism, with a particular focus on romantic love. See especially Eva Illouz’s **Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism** (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) and **Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and Lauren Berlant’s **Cruel Optimism** (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

12

One strand of the novel, which I do not have the space to discuss, is Lenny’s attachment to literature in a print-based form. Print, especially books, has come to be associated with an offensive smell and is, more generally, considered completely passé. Lenny’s book collection acts as a point of embarrassment, a link to the past for which he is not only ridiculed by others but also judged by his own entrepreneurial superego.

13

On the complexities of racial whiteness, see especially Richard Dyer’s foundational study, **White: Essays on Race and Culture** (New York: Routledge, 1997).

14

Richard Dienst makes a similar argument in regards to debt, which he argues should not be solely understood in capitalist terms but must also be thought of as a more general social logic of collective bonding. See **The Bonds of Debt** (New York: Verso, 2011).



Ron
Padgett

It was hard to decide
which was more likeable,
the amoeba or the paramecium.
There was a certain charm
in being of only one cell
and another charm in wiggling.
Charles Darwin
was rather likeable too.
He felt that over a great span of time—
a span so great that it can take your breath away
if you think about it too clearly—
simple organisms evolve into more complex ones.
The amoeba doesn't have to decide
what to have for lunch
but the chipmunk in the road
has to decide whether to run
this way—no! that way!—
and you have to decide
whether to swerve or just hold your breath.
The necessity of deciding
is at the origin of thinking.
(I think!)

Lying in bed this morning,
trying to decide whether to get up
and write down these thoughts,
I hesitated because I wondered
if the pleasantness I had in lying there thinking them
would still be there when I opened my eyes
and wrote them down.
I was a little like the chipmunk
for a moment
and now I'm like a man.





Contributors

A.K. Burns is an artist who lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. Burns is a co-founder of Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) and is currently part-time faculty in the graduate department of Fine Arts at Parsons The New School for Design. Burns has exhibited solo and collaborative works at venues including Tate Modern, London; the Museum of Modern Art, NY; the International Center of Photography, NY; Sculpture Center, NY; and The Poor Farm, Manawa, WI. A.K. Burns is represented by Callicoon Fine Arts, NY.

Eric Timothy Carlson (b. 1984) is an artist and designer, based in Brooklyn and currently on faculty at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

Alex Da Corte (b. 1981, Camden, N.J.) lives and works in Philadelphia. He received his BFA from the University of the Arts and his MFA from Yale University in 2012. Recently Da Corte has exhibited solo shows at Carl Kostyal in Stockholm and White Cube in London, among others. This September he will show “Eastern Sports,” a collaborative project with Jayson Musson, at ICA Philadelphia.

Kenneth Goldsmith is a poet living in New York City. He was a DJ on WFMU from 1995–2010.

Christian Haines is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Dartmouth College. His research concerns American literature, biopolitics, Marxist theory, and modernism, and his work has been published in the journals **Angelaki**, **Criticism**, **Genre**, and **Cultural Critique**. He is currently working on a book entitled **A Desire Called America: Biopolitics and Utopian Forms of Life in American Literature**.

Albert Herter is an artist and Lacanian psychoanalyst currently living and practicing in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn.

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Jamian Juliano-Villani (b. 1987, Newark, NJ) is an artist who lives and works in Brooklyn. She received her BFA from Rutgers University in 2012. She has recently exhibited at Night Gallery in L.A., 247365 and Clearing Gallery in Brooklyn, as well as Rachel Uffner and Marlborough in NY. This February she will be presenting a solo show at MOCA Detroit.

Night Workers is a convenient fiction.

Ron Padgett’s translation of **Zone: Selected Poems of Guillaume Apollinaire** will be published by **New York Review Books** in 2015. His **How Long** was a 2012 Pulitzer Prize Finalist in

Poetry. Padgett’s **Collected Poems** (Coffee House Press) received the 2014 **L.A. Times** Best Book of Poetry prize.

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Albert Herter, **Accusation**, 2014, colored pencil, acrylic ink, oil pastel, 10.5 × 14.5 inches



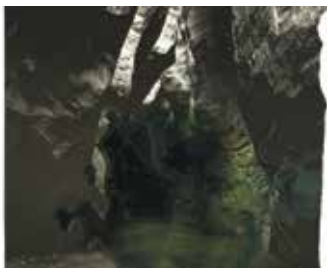
Albert Herter, **Argument**, 2014, colored pencil, acrylic ink, oil pastel, 14.5 × 21 inches



Albert Herter, **Acquittal**, 2014, colored pencil, acrylic ink, oil pastel, 10.5 × 14.5 inches

All works courtesy the artist.

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A.K. Burns, **Untitled**, 2014
Spiralina, polyurethane, and images
ripped from a catalog of photographs
by Tad Nichols of Glen Canyon,
Utah before it was dammed in 1956.
Currently the canyon brims with water
over 500 feet deep.

Courtesy the artist.

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photo: Sara Saljoughi

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Lebbeus Woods, Projects for the
reconstruction of Sarajevo, in Lebbeus
Woods, **Radical Reconstruction** (New
York: Princeton Architectural Press,
1997), pp. 34, 46.



Lebbeus Woods, **Concentric Field**, 1987

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Jamian Juliano-Villani,
Swinging Sandy, the Gymnast, 2014
acrylic on canvas
24 × 30 inches

Ms. October, 2014
acrylic on canvas
24 × 30 inches

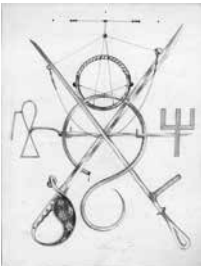
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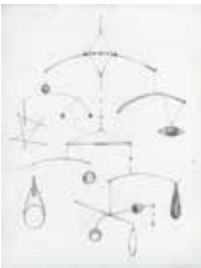


Revolving Blades and Wheels from
Olaus Magnus, **History of the Northern
Peoples**, 1555

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Eric Timothy Carlson, **Key Glyph Sigil in
Rope and Alloy**, 2014
graphite on paper
8 × 10 inches



Eric Timothy Carlson, **Mithril Mobile
and Organic Compounds**, 2014
graphite on paper
8 × 10 inches



Eric Timothy Carlson, **California**, 2014
graphite on paper
8 × 10 inches

All works courtesy the artist

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Alex Da Corte, **Untitled (The Fly / The
Wayfarer (from the Ship of Fools))**, 2014
Anodized metal frame, plexiglas, sheer
nylon, contact paper, spray paint, vinyl,
electrical tape, plastic hook, silk rose,
foil paper, sequin pins, foam, velvet
56 × 64 inches

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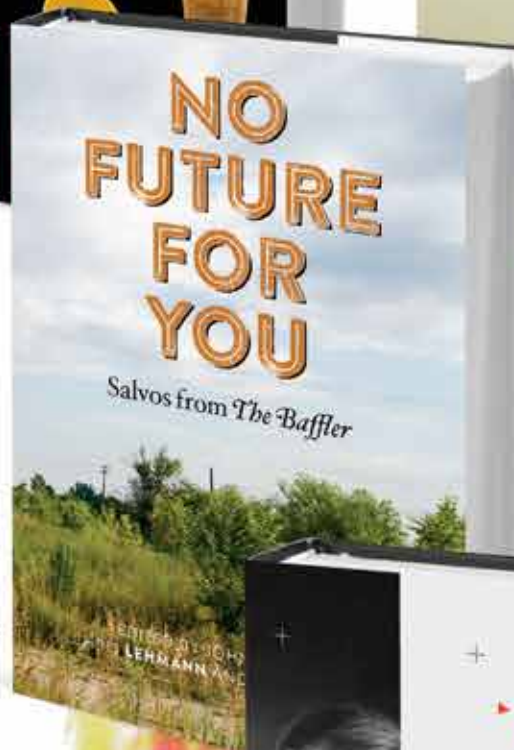
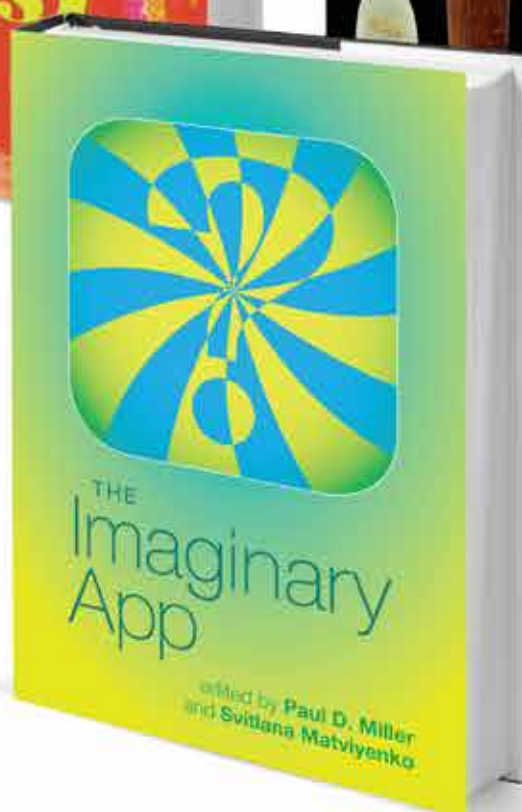
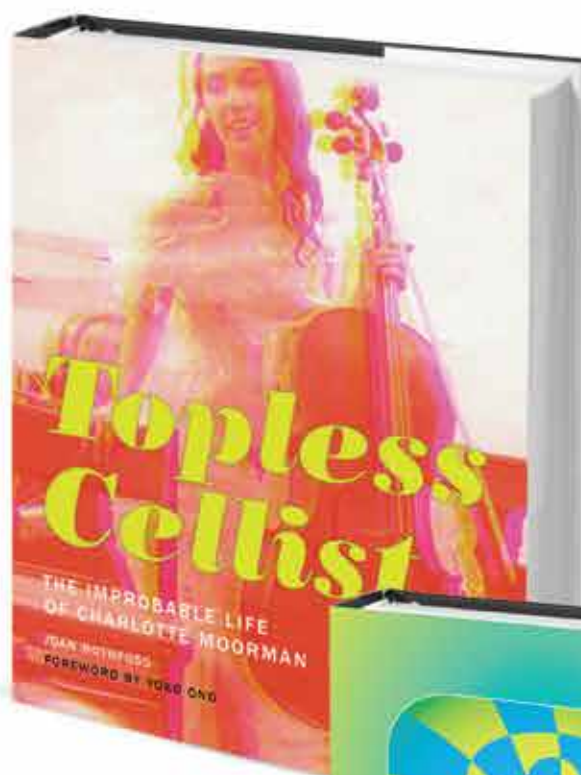
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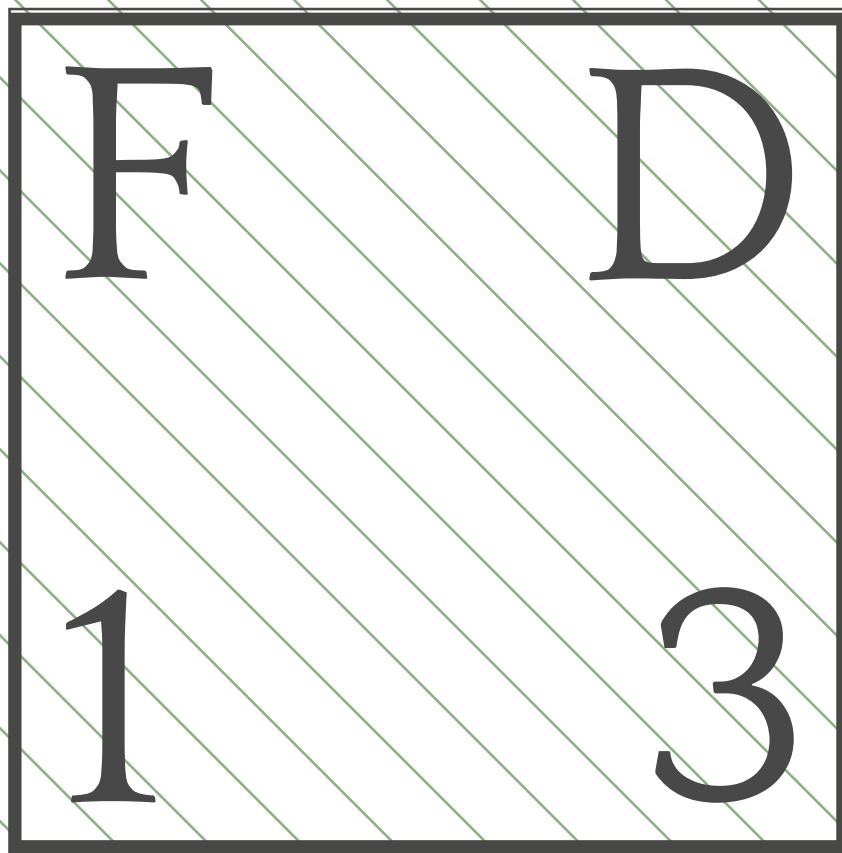
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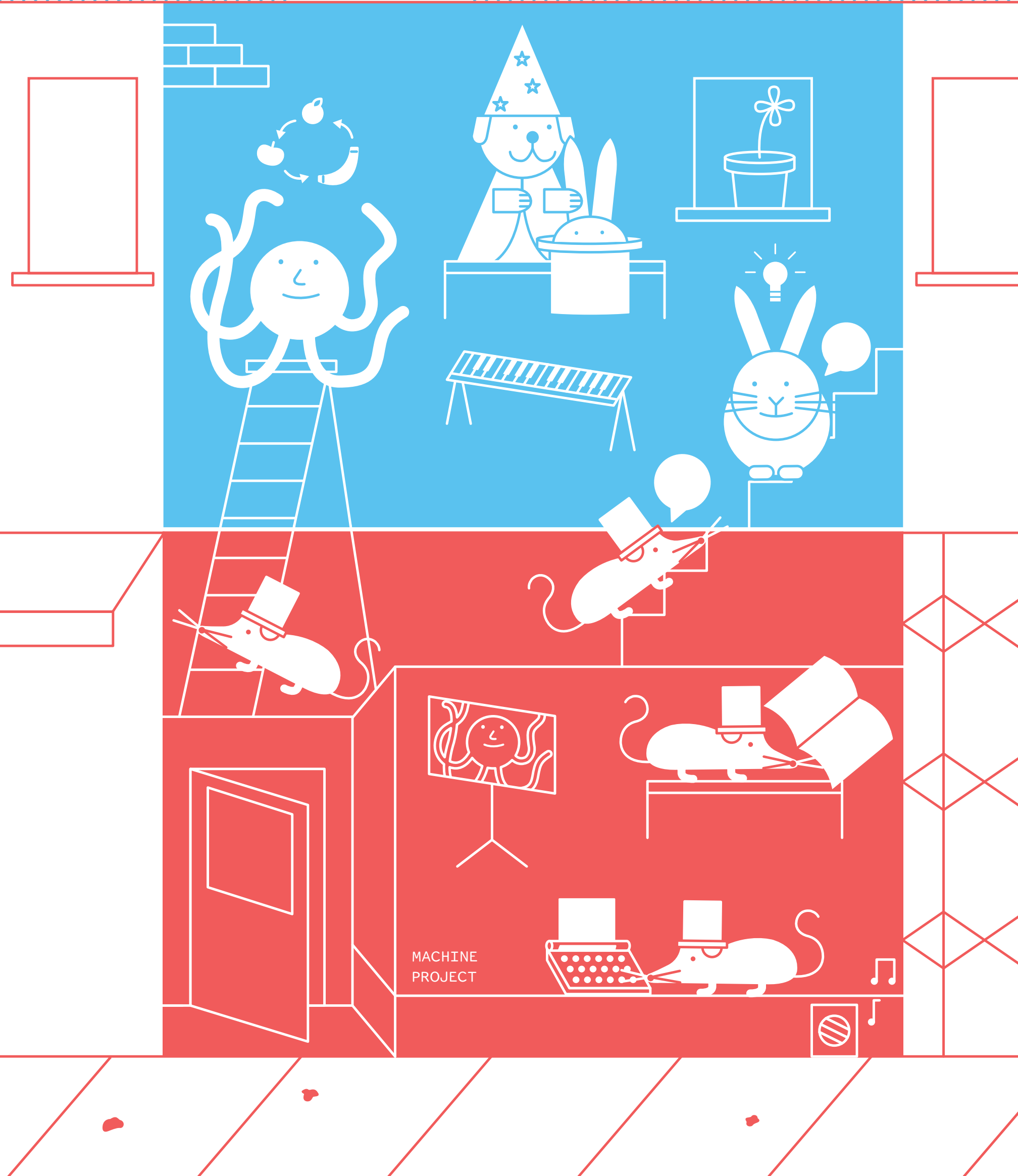
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Image: Kazumi Tanaka. Silk fabric made with *Shibori-Zome* technique (traditional Japanese resist and dye processes), 2014. Silk.
Photo credit: Carlos Avendaño.



The Fabric Workshop and Museum

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The New Temporary Contemporary

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Free parking on Thursday, October 2 provided
for Members and Donors. Membership \$20 and up.

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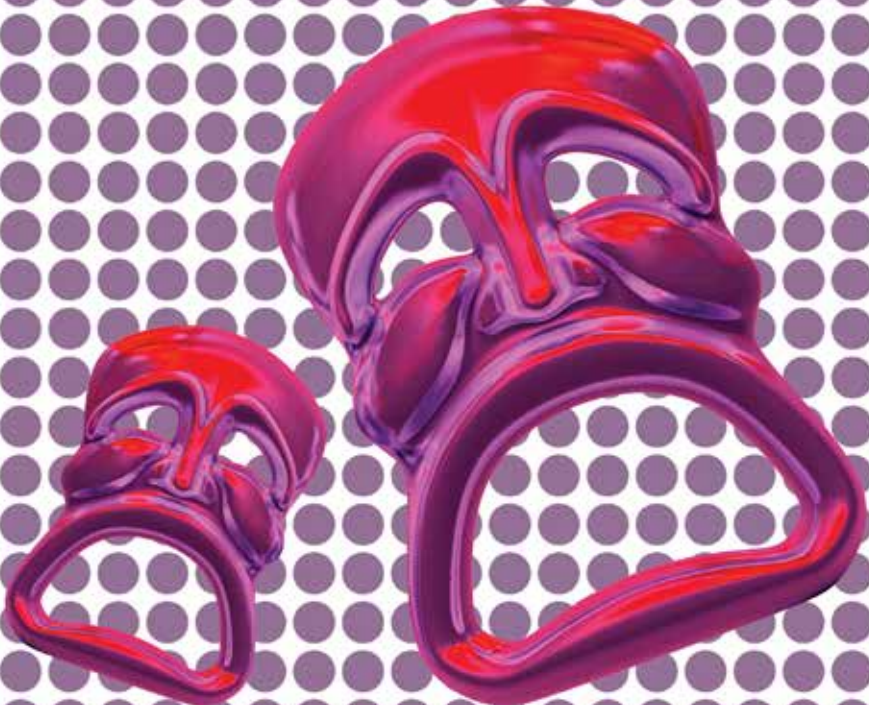


IMAGE: JUSTIN THOMAS SCHAEFER

Zachary Fabri
Video is Dead
July 26th–August 31st

Patrick Killoran
Schattenhändler
September 6th–October 30



The
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Projects

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CURRENT
Lily van der Stokker: *Huh*, runs Sep 4
through Oct 18.

UPCOMING
A solo exhibition of new paintings by Ridley Howard will open
at the Gallery Oct 30 and remain on view through Dec 13.

INSTITUTIONAL EXHIBITIONS
Alibis: Sigmar Polke 1963–2010 at the Museum of Modern Art is currently open
through Sep 3. On view through Sep 7, the 2014 *Made in L.A.* biennial at the
Hammer Museum of Art includes new work by A.L. Steiner. *More Real Than
Reality Itself*, curated by Dean Daderko, includes A.L. Steiner and can be seen
at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. *Dear Nemesis: Nicole Eisenman
1993–2013* as well as *Readykeulous: This is What Liberation Feels
Like TM*, curated by Nicole Eisenman and A.L. Steiner, open at the ICA
Philadelphia on Sep 19. Paul Ramírez Jonas is featured in *Under the
Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today*, curated by Pablo León
de la Barra, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
through Oct 1. Paintings by Nicole Eisenman and
Olivier Mosset can be seen at *Manifesta 10* at The
State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg
until Oct 31. The Exploratorium
Pier 15 is the site of Ramírez
Jonas' *We Make the
Treasure* commission
through Jan
2015.●

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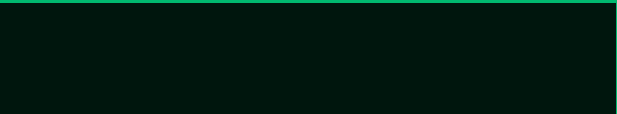
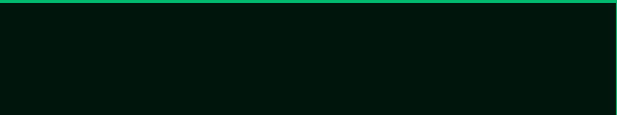
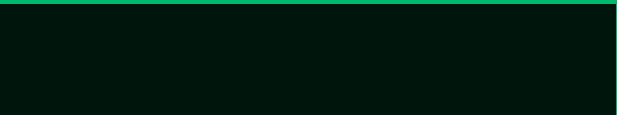
Book Fair

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Issue

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