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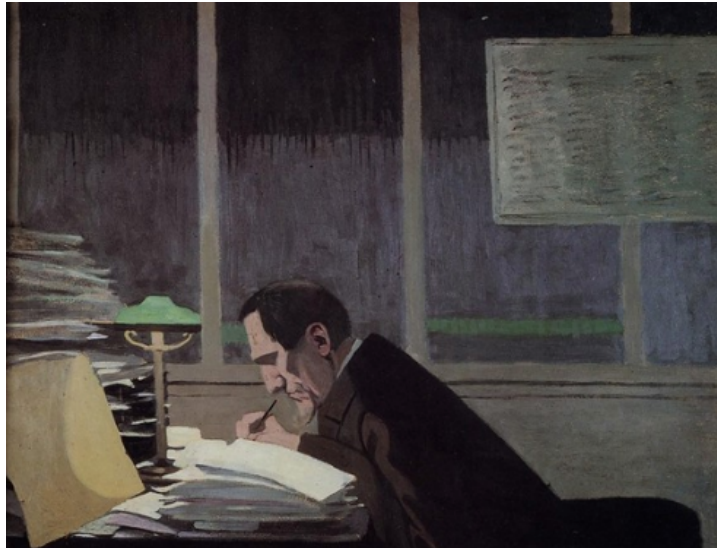
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The Price of Words

Criticism is cheap, especially in France, say Elisabeth Lebovici and Patricia Falguières. And here's why that's such a problem

By Elisabeth Lebovici and Patricia Falguières



The critical scope of Félix Fénéon (1861–1944), to whom we owe the first recognition of artists such as Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, the Postimpressionists and French avant-gardes through to Surrealism, is currently being celebrated by two major French institutions – the Musée d’Orsay et de l’Orangerie and the Musée du Quai Branly. Fénéon wrote little, but as an editor (he edited Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Oscar Wilde and James Joyce), curator, anarchist and friend of artists, he was nevertheless able to produce the critical environment necessary for these artists to be seen, contextualised and understood. This is the fundamental work of criticism: not to judge art from a position of superior authority but, more complexly, to produce the critical horizon within which the artwork becomes intelligible.

Critical discourse establishes the space within which the artwork can realise its full potential. That discourse is firstly that which takes place in art periodicals and catalogues. It is critical discourse that allows the artwork’s identification, recognition and inclusion in the artworld. This social function is all the more important because globalisation, decolonial and postcolonial questions and feminist, queer and trans revolutions have torn up the old critical maps and brought new ways of conceiving and practising art. This transformation is so truly international that, in the space of three decades, art criticism has completely reinvented itself in its methods and arguments, drawing its resources from philosophy, anthropology, the humanities, social sciences and ‘hard’ science, as much as from activist texts and militant actions. The corpus of critical texts has been greatly enriched, testifying to ‘conversations’ taking place across five continents, freed from the traditional demarcations of art and nonart, while increasingly taking into account many visual aspects of political and social phenomena.

Criticism is no longer simply a question of establishing genealogies or frameworks; it’s a question of accompanying those dynamics that demand the ongoing reconstruction of critical language. Critical tools are never fixed, but need to be continuously reconfigured. This is a far cry from the ‘sovereign judgments’, rankings, comparative evaluations and other kinds of taxonomies imposed on artists, which are still often imagined as the normal function of the ‘influential’ critic.

In a globalised, neoliberal world, even supranational megagalleries understand this. Those exquisite publications devoted to the artists they represent are no longer only luxurious objects but are replete with an impeccable scholarship that the galleries are ready to finance. Museums, like universities, are the guarantors of these new standards, their editorial rigour an essential part of the artworld ecosystem.

But French public institutions haven't understood this. Rather than being part of this ecosystem, they present themselves as models of excellence, while excusing themselves from the responsibility of properly paying those on whom they call to write their publications.

For example, the Centre Pompidou, the Réunion des Musées Nationaux and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris currently pay between €40 and €46 per page (roughly 250 words). For each essay – about a month's work – writers can expect a fee well below the minimum monthly wage, which, in France, means they cannot qualify for social security for artists and authors.

To turn intellectual work (an ensemble of competences including research, writing, graphic design, curating) into an ever more shrinkable item on your budget sheet (where shipment, insurance values and pr are not reduced) is to mark it out as superfluous. As a result, you end up excluding yourself, in effect, from transnational relations of power. A work cannot be seen, let alone exported, without critical validation. The agents of this validation are neither the auction prices nor the purchases of famous collectors, contrary to what some believe. What ensures the reception of artworks is that they are shown, scrutinised, analysed, commented on; that they gradually enter into the conversations of their generation and of following generations. An artwork that has no value other than market value cannot go down in history.

It should come as no surprise, then, that French artists have almost disappeared from major international exhibitions (including Documenta), as well as from the few dozen biennials that really matter around the world (with Venice, built around national pavilions, being the exception). This absence is not due to a 'decline of the French scene' but to the suppression of all points of critical mediation that are essential to the international accreditation without which an artist, a group or a collective cannot become visible outside of France. Those whom we might cite as counter-examples (such as – for example – Pierre Huyghe or Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster) are those who, by contrast, have been able to acquire a strong critical 'passport'.

The precarity of intellectuals in the artworld is all the more obscene given the amount of money that flows through it. It gives the impression that criticism is not a livelihood but a bourgeois pastime (or one for bourgeois women, according to a well-established sexist tradition), a luxury. The terrain thus appears to be booby-trapped for future generations of critics, on which new generations of artists will rely.

It is not enough to lament the much discussed 'end of art criticism'. It is necessary to take stock of its crushing effect on French society: it is the reduction to silence of a whole generation of artists and intellectuals that is at stake here. Some of them have taken matters into their own hands (for instance W. A. G. E. in the United States, Wages for Wages Against in Switzerland, 'les vagues' or La Buse in France). More important, as in the theatre circuit (which seems to know better – at least in France – how to make these voices heard), these are collectives that not only demand to be able to make a living from their work, but have been able to associate these demands with that of a better representation of women, racialised people, trans and nonbinary people or disabled people. And this issue – the fight against all discrimination – is inseparable from the critical horizon for which we are fighting.

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From the December 2019 issue of ArtReview

Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life

The Wretched of the Screen, Hito Steyerl

I want you to take out your cellphone. Open the video. Record whatever you see for a couple of seconds. No cuts. You are allowed to move around, to pan and zoom. Use effects only if they are built in. Keep doing this for one month, every day. Now stop. Listen.

Lets start with a simple proposition: what used to be work has increasingly been turned into occupation¹.

This change in terminology may look trivial. In fact, almost everything changes on the way from work to occupation—the economic framework, but also its implications for space and temporality.

If we think of work as labor, it implies a beginning, a producer, and, eventually, a result. Work is primarily seen as a means to an end: a product, a reward, or a wage. It is an instrumental relation. It also produces a subject by means of alienation.

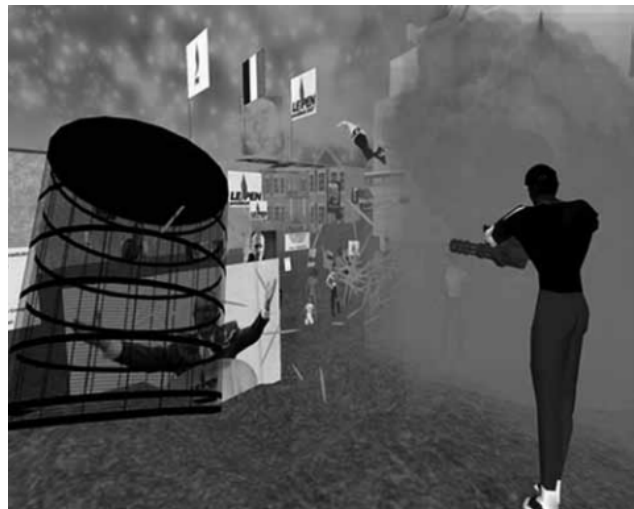
An occupation is the opposite. An occupation keeps people busy instead of giving them paid labor². An occupation is not hinged on any result; it has no necessary conclusion. As such, it knows no traditional alienation, nor any corresponding idea of subjectivity. An occupation doesn't necessarily assume remuneration either, since the process is thought to contain its own gratification. It has no temporal framework except the passing of time itself. It is not centered on a producer/worker, but includes consumers, reproducers, even destroyers, time-wasters, and bystanders—in essence, any - body seeking distraction or engagement.

Occupation

The shift from work to occupation applies in the most different areas of contemporary daily activity. It marks a transition far greater than the often-described shift from a Fordist to post-Fordist Hito Steyerl economy. Instead of being seen as a means of *The Wretched of the Screen* 104 105 earning, it is seen as a way of spending time and resources. It clearly accents the passage from an economy based on production to an economy fueled by waste, from time progressing to time spent or even idled away, from a space defined by clear divisions to an entangled and complex territory.

Perhaps most importantly: occupation is not a means to an end, as traditional labor is. Occupation is in many cases an end in itself.

Occupation is connected to activity, service, distraction, therapy, and engagement. But also to conquest, invasion, and seizure. In the military, occupation refers to extreme power relations, spatial complication, and 3-D sovereignty. It is imposed by the occupier on the occupied, who may or may not resist it. The objective is often expansion, but also neutralization, stranglehold, and the quelling of autonomy.



French political party Front National is violently attacked in Second Life by avatars as a means of protest against its ongoing Second Life campaign.

¹ I am ripping these ideas from a brilliant observation by the Carrotworkers' Collective. See their "On Free Labour," <http://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/on-free-labour/>.

² The European Union language promoting 'occupation' rather than 'employment,' marking a subtle but interesting semantic shift towards keeping the active population 'busy' rather than trying to create jobs." Ibid

Occupation often implies endless mediation, eternal process, indeterminate negotiation, and the blurring of spatial divisions. It has no built-in outcome or resolution. It also refers to appropriation, colonization, and extraction. In its processual aspect occupation is both permanent and uneven—and its connotations are completely different for the occupied and the occupier.

Of course occupations—in all the different senses of the word—are not the same. But the mimetic force of the term operates in each of the different meanings and draws them toward each other. There is a magic affinity within the word itself: if it sounds the same, the force of similarity works from within it³. The force of naming reaches across difference to uncomfortably approximate situations that are otherwise segregated and hierarchized by tradition, interest, and privilege.



Portrait of an intern as found online. The intern is named Justine, like the main character in Marquis de Sade's 1791 book *Justine*, or *The Misfortunes of Virtue*.

Occupation as Art

In the context of art, the transition from work to occupation has additional implications. What happens to the work of art in this process? Does it too transform into an occupation?

In part, it does. What used to materialize exclusively as object or product—as (art)work—now tends to appear as activity or performance. These can be as endless as strained budgets and attention spans will allow. Today the traditional work of art has been largely supplemented by art as a process—as an occupation⁴.

Art is an occupation in that it keeps people busy—spectators and many others. In many rich countries art denotes a quite popular occupational scheme. The idea that it contains

its own gratification and needs no remuneration is quite accepted in the cultural workplace. The paradigm of the culture industry provided an example of an economy that functioned by producing an increasing number of occupations (and distractions) for people who were in many cases working for free. Additionally, there are now occupational schemes in the guise of art education. More and more post- and postpost-graduate programs shield prospective artists from the pressure of (public or private) art markets. Art education now takes longer—it creates zones of occupation, which yield fewer “works” but more processes, forms of knowledge, fields of engagement, and planes of relationality. It also produces ever-more educators, mediators, guides, and even guards—all of whose conditions of occupation are again processual (and ill- or unpaid).

The professional and militarized meaning of occupation unexpectedly intersect here—in the role of the guard or attendant—to create a contradictory space. Recently, a professor at the University of Chicago suggested that museum guards should be armed⁵. Of course, he was referring primarily to guards in (formerly) occupied countries like Iraq and other states in the midst

³ Walter Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” in *Selected Writings*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 2: 694–711, esp. 696.

⁴ One could even say: the work of art is tied to the idea of a product (bound up in a complex system of valorization). Art-as-occupation bypasses the end result of production by immediately turning the making-of into commodity.

⁵ Lawrence Rothfield as quoted in John Hooper, “Arm museum guards to prevent looting, says professor,” *Guardian*, July 10, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2011/jul/10/arm-museum-guards-looting-war>. “Professor Lawrence Rothfield, faculty director of the University of Chicago’s cultural policy center, told the *Guardian* that ministries, foundations and local authorities ‘should not assume that the brutal policing job required to prevent looters and professional art thieves from carrying away items is just one for the national police or for other forces not under their direct control.’ He was speaking in advance of the annual conference of the Association for Research into Crimes Against Art (ARCA), held over the weekend in the central Italian town of Amelia. Rothfield said he would also like to see museum attendants, site wardens and others given thorough training in crowd control. And not just in the developing world.”

of political upheaval, but by citing potential breakdowns of civic order he folded First World locations into his appeal. What's more, art occupation as a means of killing time intersects with the military sense of spatial control in the figure of the museum guard—some of whom may already be military veterans. Intensified security mutates the sites of art and inscribes the museum or gallery into a sequence of stages of potential violence.

Another prime example in the complicated topology of occupation is the figure of the intern (in a museum, a gallery, or, most likely, an isolated project)⁶. The term "intern" is linked to internment, confinement, and detention, whether involuntary or voluntary. She is supposed to be on the inside of the system, yet is excluded from payment. She is inside labor but outside remuneration: stuck in a space that includes the outside and excludes the inside simultaneously. As a result, she works to sustain her own occupation.

Both examples produce a fractured timespace with varying degrees of occupational intensity. These zones are very much shut off from one another, yet interlocked and interdependent. The schematics of art occupation reveal a checkpointed system, complete with gatekeepers, access levels, and close management of movement and information. Its architecture is astonishingly complex. Some parts are forcefully immobilized, their autonomy denied and quelled in order to keep other parts more mobile. Occupation works on both sides: forcefully seizing and keeping out, inclusion and exclusion, managing access and flow. It may not come as surprise that this pattern often but not always follows fault lines of class and political economy.

In poorer and underdeveloped parts of the world, the immediate grip of art might seem to lessen. But art-as-occupation in these places can more powerfully serve the larger ideological deflections within capitalism and even profit concretely from labor stripped of rights⁷. Here, migrant, liberal, and urban squalor can again be exploited by artists who use misery as raw material. Art "upgrades" poorer neighborhoods by aestheticizing their status as urban ruins and drives out long-term inhabitants after the area becomes fashionable⁸. Thus art assists in the structuring, hierarchizing, seizing, up- or downgrading of space; in organizing, wasting, or simply consuming time through vague distraction or committed pursuit of largely unpaid para-productive activity; and it divvies up roles in the figures of artist, audience, freelance curator, or uploader of cellphone videos to a museum website.

Generally speaking, art is part of an uneven global system, one that underdevelops some parts of the world, while overdeveloping others— and the boundaries between both areas interlock and overlap.

Life and Autonomy

But beyond all this, art doesn't stop at occupying people, space, or time. It also occupies life as such.

Why should that be the case? Let's start with a small detour on artistic autonomy. Artistic autonomy was traditionally predicated not on occupation, but on separation—more precisely, on art's separation from life⁹. As artistic production became more specialized in an industrial world marked by an increasing division of labor, it also grew increasingly divorced from direct

⁶ "The figure of the intern appears in this context paradigmatic as it negotiates the collapse of the boundaries between Education, Work and Life." Carrotworkers' Collective, "On Free Labour."

⁷ As critiqued recently by Walid Raad in the building of the Abu Dhabi Guggenheim franchise and related labor issues. See Ben Davis, "Interview with Walid Raad About the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi," ARTINFO, June 9, 2011, <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/37846/walid-raad-on-why-the-guggenheim-abu-dhabimust-be-built-on-a-foundation-of-workers-rights/>.

⁸ Central here is Martha Rosler's three-part essay, "Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism," e-flux journal, no. 21 (December 2010); no. 23 (March 2011); and no. 25 (May 2011).

⁹ These paragraphs are entirely due to the pervasive influence of Sven Lütticken's excellent text "Acting on the Omnipresent Frontiers of Autonomy," in *To The Arts, Citizens!*, eds. Óscar Faria and João Fernandes (Porto: Serralves, 2010), 146–67. Lütticken also commissioned the initial version of this text, to be published soon as a "Black Box" version in a special edition of OPEN magazine.

functionality¹⁰. While it apparently evaded instrumentalization, it simultaneously lost social relevance. As a reaction, different avantgardes set out to break the barriers of art and to recreate its relation to life.

Their hope was for art to dissolve within life, to be infused with a revolutionary jolt. What happened was rather the contrary. To push the point: life has been occupied by art, because art's initial forays back into life and daily practice gradually turned into routine incursions, and then into constant occupation. Nowadays, the invasion of life by art is not the exception, but the rule. Artistic autonomy was meant to separate art from the zone of daily routine—from mundane life, intentionality, utility, production, and instrumental reason—in order to distance it from rules of efficiency and social coercion. But this incompletely segregated area then incorporated all that it broke from in the first place, recasting the old order within its own aesthetic paradigms. The incorporation of art within life was once a political project (both for the Left and Right), but the incorporation of life within art is now an aesthetic project, and it coincides with an overall aestheticization of politics.

On all levels of everyday activity, art not only invades life, but occupies it. This doesn't mean that it's omnipresent. It just means that it has established a complex topology of both overbearing presence and gaping absence—both of which impact daily life.

Checklist

But, you may respond, apart from occasional exposure, I have nothing to do with art whatsoever! How can my life be occupied by it? Perhaps one of the following questions applies to you:

Does art possess you in the guise of endless self-performance?¹¹ Do you wake feeling like a multiple? Are you on constant auto-display?

Have you been beautified, improved, upgraded, or attempted to do this to anyone/thing else? Has your rent doubled because a few kids with brushes relocated into that dilapidated building next door? Have your feelings been designed, or do you feel designed by your iPhone?

Or, on the contrary, is access to art (and its production) being withdrawn, slashed, cut off, impoverished, and hidden behind insurmountable barriers? Is labor in this field unpaid? Do you live in a city that redirects a huge portion of its cultural budget to fund a one-off art exhibition? Is conceptual art from your region privatized by predatory banks?

All of these are symptoms of artistic occupation. While, on the one hand, artistic occupation completely invades life, it also cuts off much art from circulation.

Division of Labor

Of course, even if they had wanted to, the avant-gardes could never have achieved the dissolution of the border between art and life on their own. One of the reasons has to do with a rather paradoxical development at the root of artistic autonomy. According to Peter Bürger, art acquired a special status within the bourgeois capitalist system because artists somehow refused to follow the specialization required by other professions. While in its time this contributed to claims for artistic autonomy, more recent advances in neoliberal modes of production in many occupational fields started to reverse the division of labor¹². The artist-as-dilettante and biopolitical designer was

¹⁰ The emphasis here is on the word obvious, since art evidently retained a major function in developing a particular division of senses, class distinction, and bourgeois subjectivity even as it became more divorced from religious or overt representational function. Its autonomy presented itself as disinterested and dispassionate, while at the same time mimetically adapting the form and structure of capitalist commodity

¹¹ The Invisible Committee lay out the terms for occupational performativity: "Producing oneself is becoming the dominant occupation of a society where production no longer has an object: like a carpenter who's been evicted from his shop and in desperation sets about hammering and sawing himself. All these young people smiling for their job interviews, who have their teeth whitened to give them an edge, who go to nightclubs to boost the company spirit, who learn English to advance their careers, who get divorced or married to move up the ladder, who take courses in leadership or practice 'self-improvement' in order to better 'manage conflicts'—the most intimate "self-improvement," says one guru, 'will lead to increased emotional stability, to smoother and more open relationships, to sharper intellectual focus, and therefore to a better economic performance.'" The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 16.

¹² Peter Bürger, *Theory of the AvantGarde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

overtaken by the clerk-as-innovator, the technician-as-entrepreneur, the laborer-as-engineer, the manager-as-genius, and (worst of all) the administrator-as-revolutionary. As a template for many forms of contemporary occupation, multitasking marks the reversal of the division of labor: the fusion of professions, or rather their confusion. The example of the artist as creative polymath now serves as a role model (or excuse) to legitimate the universalization of professional dilettantism and overexertion in order to save money on specialized labor.

If the origin of artistic autonomy lies in the refusal of the division of labor (and the alienation and subjection that accompany it), this refusal has now been reintegrated into neoliberal modes of production to set free dormant potentials for financial expansion. In this way, the logic of autonomy spread to the point where it tipped into new dominant ideologies of flexibility and self-entrepreneurship, acquiring new political meanings as well. Workers, feminists, and youth movements of the 1970s started claiming autonomy from labor and the regime of the factory¹³. Capital reacted to this flight by designing its own version of autonomy: the autonomy of capital from workers¹⁴. The rebellious, autonomous force of those various struggles became a catalyst for the capitalist reinvention of labor relations as such. Desire for self-determination was rearticulated as a self-entrepreneurial business model, the hope to overcome alienation was transformed into serial narcissism and overidentification with one's occupation. Only in this context can we understand why contemporary occupations that promise an unalienated lifestyle are somehow believed to contain their own gratification. But the relief from alienation they suggest takes on the form of a more pervasive selfoppression, which arguably could be much worse than traditional alienation¹⁵.

The struggles around autonomy, and above all capital's response to them are thus deeply ingrained into the transition from work to occupation. As we have seen, this transition is based on the role model of the artist as a person who refuses the division of labor and leads an unalienated lifestyle. This is one of the templates for new occupational forms of life that are all-encompassing, passionate, selfoppressive, and narcissistic to the bone.

To paraphrase Allan Kaprow: life in a gallery is like fucking in a cemetery¹⁶. We could add that things become even worse as the gallery spills back into life: as the gallery/cemetery invades life, one begins to feel unable to fuck anywhere else¹⁷.

Occupation, Again

This might be the time to start exploring the next meaning of occupation: the meaning it has taken on in countless squats and takeovers in recent years. As the occupiers of the New School in 2008 emphasized, this type of occupation tries to intervene into the governing forms of occupational time and space, instead of simply blocking and immobilizing a specific area:

¹³ It is interesting to make a link at this point to classical key texts of autonomist thought as collected in Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, eds., *Autonomia: PostPolitical Politics* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).

¹⁴ Antonio Negri has detailed the restructuring of the northern Italian labor force after the 1970s, while Paolo Virno and Franco "Bifo" Berardi both emphasize that the autonomous tendencies expressed the refusal of labor and the rebellious feminist, youth, and workers' movements in the '70s was recaptured into new, flexibilized, and entrepreneurial forms of coercion. More recently Berardi has emphasized the new conditions of subjective identification with labor and its self-perpetuating narcissistic components. See, among others, Antonio Negri, "Reti produttive e territori: il caso del Nord-Est italiano," in *L'inverno è finito: Scritti sulla trasformazione negata (1989-1995)*, ed. Giovanni Caccia (Rome: Castelvecchi, 1996), 66-80; Paolo Virno, "Do You Remember Counterrevolution?," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); and Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)), 2010.

¹⁵ I have repeatedly argued that one should not seek to escape alienation but on the contrary embrace it as well as the status of objectivity and object-hood that goes along with it.

¹⁶ In "What Is a Museum? Dialogue with Robert Smithson," *Museum World* no. 9 (1967), reprinted in Jack Flam, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 43-51.

¹⁷ Remember also the now unfortunately defunct meaning of occupation. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries "to occupy" was a euphemism for "have sexual intercourse with," which fell from usage almost completely during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Occupation mandates the inversion of the standard dimensions of space. Space in an occupation is not merely the container of our bodies, it is a plane of potentiality that has been frozen by the logic of the commodity. In an occupation, one must engage with space topologically, as a strategist, asking: What are its holes, entrances, exits? How can one disalienate it, disidentify it, make it inoperative, communize it?¹⁸

To unfreeze the forces that lie dormant in the petrified space of occupation means to rearticulate their functional uses, to make them non-efficient, noninstrumental, and non-intentional in their capacities as tools for social coercion. It also means to demilitarize it—at least in terms of hierarchy—and to then militarize it differently. Now, to free an art space from art-as-occupation seems a paradoxical task, especially when art spaces extend beyond the traditional gallery. On the other hand, it is also not difficult to imagine how any of these spaces might operate in a non-efficient, non-instrumental, and non-productive way.

But which is the space we should occupy? Of course, at this moment suggestions abound for museums, galleries, and other art spaces to be occupied. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that; all these spaces should be occupied, now, again, and forever. But again, none of these spaces is strictly coexistent with our own multiple spaces of occupation. The realms of art remain mostly adjacent to the incongruent territories that stitch up and articulate the incoherent accumulation of times and spaces by which we are occupied. At the end of the day, people might have to leave the site of occupation in order to go home to do the thing formerly called labor: wipe off the tear gas, go pick up their kids from child care, and otherwise get on with their lives¹⁹. Because these lives happen in the vast and unpredictable territory of occupation, and this is also where lives are being occupied. I am suggesting that we occupy this space. But where is it? And how can it be claimed?

The Territory of Occupation

The territory of occupation is not a single physical place, and is certainly not to be found within any existing occupied territory. It is a space of affect, materially supported by ripped reality. It can actualize anywhere, at any time. It exists as a possible experience. It may consist of a composite and montaged sequence of movements through sampled checkpoints, airport security checks, cash tills, aerial viewpoints, body scanners, scattered labor, revolving glass doors, duty-free stores. How do I know? Remember the beginning of this text? I asked you to record a few seconds each day on your cellphone. Well, this is the sequence that accumulated in my phone; walking the territory of occupation, for months on end.

Walking through cold winter sun and fading insurrections sustained and amplified by mobile phones. Sharing hope with crowds yearning for spring. A spring that feels necessary, vital, unavoidable. But spring didn't come this year. It didn't come in summer, nor in autumn. Winter came around again, yet spring wouldn't draw any closer. Occupations came and froze, were trampled under, drowned in gas, shot at. In that year people courageously, desperately, passionately fought to achieve spring. But it remained elusive. And while spring was violently kept at bay, this sequence accumulated in my cellphone. A sequence powered by tear gas, heartbreak, and permanent transition. Recording the pursuit of spring.

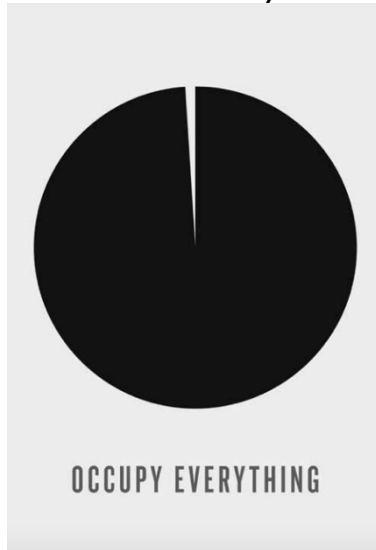
Jump cut to Cobra helicopters hovering over mass graves, zebra wipe to shopping malls, mosaic to spam filters, SIM cards, nomad weavers; spiral effect to border detention, child care, and digital exhaustion²⁰. Gas clouds dissolving between highrise buildings. Exasperation. The territory of occupation is a place of enclosure, extraction, hedging, and constant harassment, of

¹⁸ Inoperative Committee, *Preoccupied: The Logic of Occupation* (2009), 11.

¹⁹ In the sense of squatting, which in contrast to other types of occupation is limited spatially and temporally.

²⁰ I copied the form of my sequence from Imri Kahn's lovely video *Rebecca makes it!*, where it appears with different imagery.

getting pushed, patronized, surveilled, deadlined, detained, delayed, hurried— it encourages a condition that is always too late, too early, arrested, overwhelmed, lost, falling.



Colin Smith, Poster for the Occupy Movement, 2011.

Your phone is driving you through this journey, driving you mad, extracting value, whining like a baby, purring like a lover, bombarding you with deadening, maddening, embarrassing, outrageous claims for time, space, attention, credit card numbers. It copy-pastes your life to countless unintelligible pictures that have no meaning, no audience, no purpose, but do have impact, punch, and speed. It accumulates love letters, insults, invoices, drafts, endless communication. It is being tracked and scanned, turning you into transparent digits, into motion as a blur. A digital eye as your heart in hand. It is witness and informer. If it gives away your position, it means you'll retroactively have had one. If you film the sniper that shoots at you, the phone will have faced his aim. He will have been framed and fixed, a faceless pixel composition²¹. Your phone is your brain in corporate design, your heart as a product, the Apple of your eye.

Your life condenses into an object in the palm of your hand, ready to be slammed into a wall and still grinning at you, shattered, dictating deadlines, recording, interrupting.

The territory of occupation is a green-screened territory, madly assembled and conjectured by zap - ping, copy-paste operations, incongruously keyed in, ripped, ripping apart, breaking lives and heart. It is a space governed not only by 3-D sovereignty, but 4-D sovereignty because it occupies time, a 5-D sovereignty because it governs from the virtual, and an n-D sovereignty from above, beyond, across—in Dolby Surround. Time asynchronously crashes into space; accumulating by spasms of capital, despair, and desire running wild.

Here and elsewhere, now and then, delay and echo, past and future, day and night nest within each other like unrendered digital effects. Both temporal and spatial occupation intersect to produce individualized timelines, intensified by fragmented circuits of production and augmented military realities. They can be recorded, objectified, and thus made tangible and real. A matter in motion, made of poor images, lending flow to material reality. It is important to emphasize that these are not just passive remnants of individual or subjective movements. Rather, they are sequences that create individuals by means of occupation. They also subject them to occupation. As material condensations of conflictive forces, they catalyze resistance, opportunism, resignation. They trigger full stops and passionate abandon. They steer, shock, and seduce.

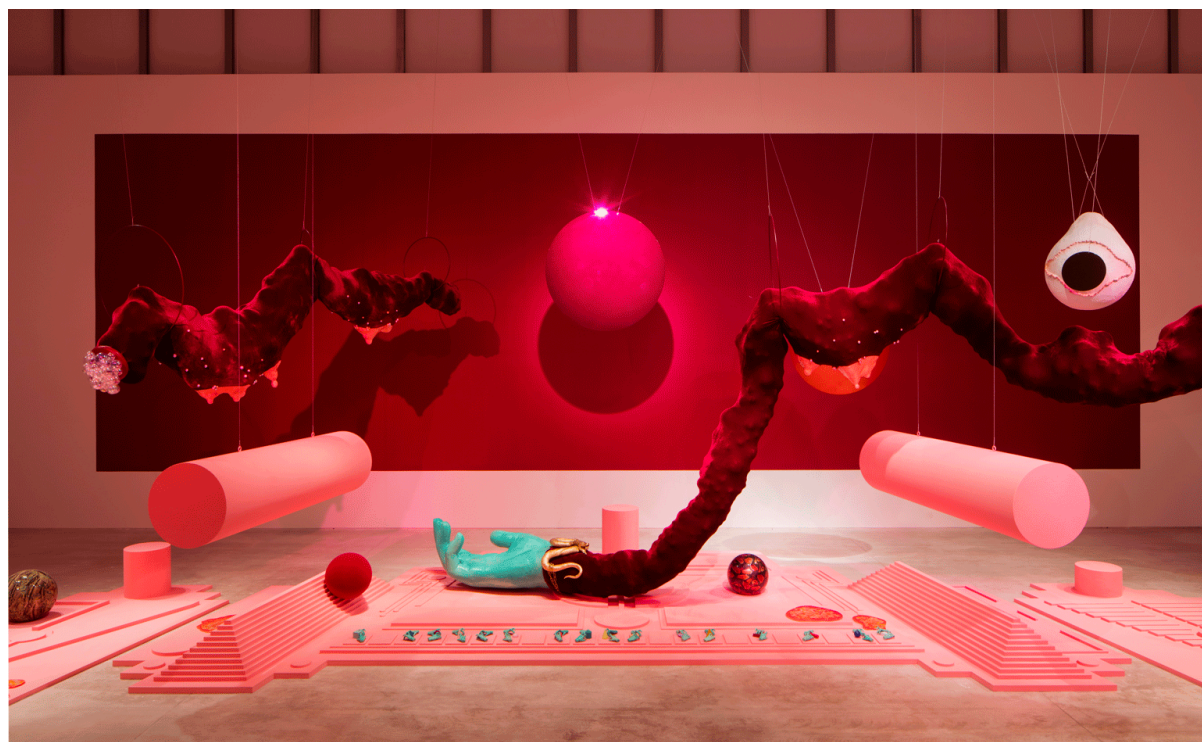
I might have sent something to you from my phone. See it spreading. See it become invaded by other sequences, many sequences, see it being re-montaged, rearticulated, reedited. Let's merge and rip apart our scenarios of occupation. Break continuity. Juxtapose. Edit in parallel. Jump the axe. Build suspense. Pause. Countershoot. Keep chasing spring.

These are our territories of occupation, force - fully kept apart from each other, each in his and her own corporate enclosure. Let's reedit them. Rebuild. Rearrange. Wreck. Articulate. Alienate. Unfreeze. Accelerate. Inhabit. Occupy.

²¹ This description is directly inspired by Rabih Mroué's terrific lecture, "The Pixelated Revolution," on the use of cellphones in recent Syrian uprisings.

Why We Need Collectives Now More Than Ever

From the unexpected Turner Prize win to a collective-centric exhibition at DRAF, the drive to work collaboratively is a defining trait of the decade. But as the art market and drive for #content grows ever more omnivorous, can collectives align their work as a form of resistance? Words by Alice Bucknell. Published in Elephant Magazine, 23.12.19



DC Semiramis, 2019, by Tai Shani, installation view at Turner Contemporary, Margate. Photography: David Levene

On 4 December, *The Season of Cartesian Weeping*, a group show at David Roberts Art Foundation curated by Hana Noorali and Lynton Talbot, culminated with a book launch. But instead of a slick exhibition catalogue, the publication—produced by the collective Am Nuden Da and documenting five other exhibitions—was one of the works included in Noorali and Talbot’s exhibition. The publication encapsulated all the ideas at work in the DRAF show, which focused on the power of collective action, as it worked against the demands of an art world obsessed with formal, marketable, and indeed, Instagrammable, content.

The night before, the four 2019 Turner Prize nominees—Lawrence Abu Hamdan, and Helen Cammock, Oscar Murillo, and Tai Shani—declared themselves a collective and awarded everyone the prize. It was the biggest upset of the art world since Banksy’s work shredded itself to pieces at Sotheby’s, the most powerful art auction house on the planet, instantly doubling its value.

Finally, a week after the Turner Prize fanfare had almost settled, Maurizio Cattelan duct taped a banana to Perrotin’s Art Basel booth in Miami and called it art. It became a sensation: influencers forked out the fair’s \$65 entrance fee to get a selfie with the iconic fruit; an opportunistic performance artist consumed the banana and, following a press blast, flew himself to New York the next day for mass interviews. Three editions of this “era-defining masterpiece” continued to sell for upwards of \$120,000.

Whether you consider them collective or not, all of these group actions involve a dance of power between players in the art world. Within all three instances, artists find themselves

working inside the framework of the system in order to disrupt it—or exploit it further. The DRAF show and banana moment represent two opposite ends of the spectrum: in the former, artists and curatorial collectives are given an institutional platform (such as DRAF) to exhibit unconventional and largely unmarketable work; the other, meanwhile, takes a banal object and a half-baked punchline, and drops them into a bubbling vat of VIPs to alchemize value.



*Ceremony of the Void, 2017, installation and performance in DRAF Studio. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Antoine Levi, Paris.
Photo by Dan Weil*

We are living in mass banana times, where prestigious foundations, institutions, and commercial galleries are aware of the market value of a good controversy. The struggle, then, is for artists to negotiate the boundary between claiming an opportunity and being taken advantage of by those in power. This, precisely, is what makes *The Season of Cartesian Weeping* such a significant exhibition.

“We were thinking of procedures more than outcomes,” co-curator Lynton Talbot says, explaining the pared-back appearance of the exhibition, which features projects by five art collectives and platforms: Parrhesiades (with Johanna Hedva), East London Cable, -f-r-i-e-n-d-s- (with Mark Aerial Waller), OFFSHORE, and Am Nuden Da. “Negotiating with the platform of an art foundation, we asked ourselves, how do we keep ourselves impervious to institutional extraction?”



*Ceremony of the Void, 2017, installation and performance in DRAF Studio. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Antoine Levi, Paris.
Photo by Dan Weil*

Stepping into DRAF's Mayfair outpost, visitors encounter a minimalist and at times impenetrable getup. In the first room, a projector with three sets of headphones, two birth charts—one for the philosopher and mystic Simone Weil, the other for Robin Finck (the guitarist of Nine Inch Nails)—an XXL post-it note scribbled with black ink, and a monitor embedded in an architectural model. Room two offers a nebulous wall-pasted flow chart, a striped canvas bodega awning, photographs of children's toys and a broom.

The aesthetic language of the show was intentionally restricted, as both a fight against the pressures of marketability, the curators suggest, and to let the ideas and processes behind the projects take centre-stage. While the second room, heavy on found sculpture, felt like it could've had a good run in 1960s Fluxus, the front room was more porous and tender, stemming from Johanna Hedva's new audio work *Reading is Yielding* (2019), an audio piece that traverses astrology, philosophy, the internet and mysticism, in the process of reading and being read to.



Honey-Suckle Company, Real Time Spasm – Fuck the Sugar System (It's Easier to Make a Hole Than to Build a Pole), 1998. Performance view on the occasion of HSC3D at the 1st Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, 1998. Courtesy the artists

More on-the-nose in addressing the social and financial logistics and institutional negotiations of collective practice was East London Cable (ELC)'s contribution, a video installed within an architectural model of Raven Row, where the group is in-residence until December 2020. Clips from ELC's annual meeting brought viewers into the collective's world as they joke over failed funding applications and plot shared meals, weaving discussions about their work with the minutiae of everyday life.

"We are more like a network than a collective," explains Jos Bitelli, a member of the ELC. "And we try to share resources like Raven Row as much as possible, to use the space for affective and

generative production as well as building a collective movement at the speed of trust." ELC's contribution also thawed out the occasionally icy theory of the show, bringing Talbot and Noorali's ideas to an intimate scale.



Tang Da Wu, They Poach the Rhino, Chop Off His Horn and Make This Drink, 1989. Linen rhino, plastic bottles and axe, dimensions variable. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Documentation of performance at National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore, 1989. Performance © Tang Da Wu. Photo: Koh Nguang How. Courtesy of Koh Nguang How.

In the past, collectivizing has proven a vital way of bucking political oppression, from the post-war Fluxus group in Europe to the less-celebrated Gutai group in 1950s Japan and avant-garde Korean performance art in the sixties and seventies. Using an anarchistic and highly theatrical approach to performance and large-scale immersive environments, Korea's Fourth Group and Zero Group (Mudongin) challenged the traditional role of art while defying the authoritarian pressures of the Yushin Regime. Mining the politics of play, these groups took over public space with quizzical performances used as proxies for political action. For instance, Zero's *A Happening with a Vinyl Umbrella and a Candle*, staged at the Union Exhibition of Young Artists in 1967, was essentially a collective demonstration against Japanese imperialism.

Back in the west some twenty years later, collectives like Honey-Suckle Company (HSC), founded in post-reunification Berlin, attempted to fend off the inevitable crush of globalization. Positioning their practice as a holistic healing method, the group worked between the realms of art, fashion and music to deliver anti-capitalistic effervescent experiences. While subversive in the 1990s, HSC finds a natural parallel in the quirky healing retreats and immersive art installations commissioned by content-hungry megabrands, from Gucci to Red Bull, three decades later. HSC's first retrospective, *Omnibus*, is currently on show at the ICA; sand-filled and pale-pink hued rooms peppered with memorabilia present a nostalgia-tinged rendition of their work that doesn't shy away from its own Instagrammability.



Christopher Kulendran Thomas, *New Eelam*, 2018, in collaboration with Annika Kuhlmann. *I Was Raised on the Internet* installation view at Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2018. Courtesy: the artist.

Wise now to the cultural capital embedded in the marketing of experimental practices, museums, galleries and fairs are rushing to mine history's archive of unsung (and unmarketed) collectives; The Guggenheim, Hauser & Wirth, and Sotheby's have all staged Gutai retrospectives in the past five years. Artists, increasingly suspicious of top-down exploitation, must negotiate the boundaries between sponsorship and selling out.

As a pre-emptive defence against the marketability of nearly everything, some collectives even adopt the alias of a company. Brandishing brand language, corporate aesthetics and business strategy, groups and projects like DIS, curators of the riotous 9th Berlin Biennale in 2016, OFFSHORE (whose corporate wall text was included in *The Season of Cartesian Weeping*) and Christopher Kulendran Thomas and Annika Kuhlmann's real estate company, *New Eelam*, use incorporation as protective armour while working inside the system, a strategy which comes at the risk of alienating its audience.

But as Cattelan's banana suggests, holding a mirror up to the commercial senselessness of the art world won't stop it in its tracks; it only feeds the flames. The 2019 Turner Prize reveals just how deep contemporary art is entrenched in its economic function: the generative intent behind sharing the prize inevitably increased the market value of all four nominees' work, perpetuating further inequality. Escaping the content accelerator would require artists to step out of the system entirely, and for collectives to strategize the nature and value of their own practice. *The Season of Cartesian Weeping*, an unmarketable and largely immaterial exhibition of alternative collective practice, offers a rare glimpse into that world of possibility. Now it's up to us to adjust our own field of vision for what art looks like, and what it can do.

Reviews

South of Nothing

The Photographs of Soham Gupta

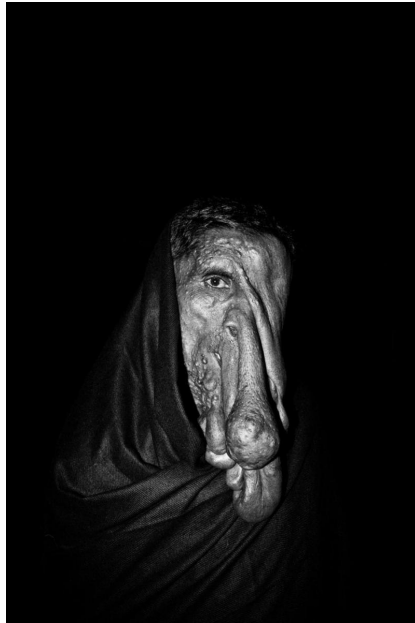
By Sukhdev Sandhu, *Bidoun Magazine*



Soham Gupta, *Untitled*, 2018. From *Angst* (Akina, 2018)

O Calcutta! It's hard to know, especially if you've been weaned on turn-of-the-20th-century accounts of the Indian city, how to feel toward it. Pity? Fear? Macaulay thought Calcutta almost too primitive to qualify as a city, "a place of mists, alligators and wild boars." Kipling deemed it "one of the most wicked places in the universe." Later, documentarians and television reporters, especially those inclined to sanctify the work of Mother Teresa, portrayed Calcutta as a den of poverty and squalor, as an endless night that only the celestial light of Christianity could redeem. Leprosy and typhoid, turpitude and soul rot: if a city could be the sum of every snarling, spammy TripAdvisor review ever written, it might look like Calcutta.

At first glance, Soham Gupta's photographs seem like more of the grotesque and gangrenous same. His is a cast (and maybe a caste) of city-dwellers — mostly men, more young than old — in various states of infirmity or distress. They wear shabby or filthy clothing. They ooze lesions or ulcers. Those that smile reveal erratic teeth. Some are disfigured by vitiligo, strabismus, or burn marks. One, almost impossible to look at for any length of time, has enormous tumors that resemble drooping testicles, a missing eye, and a clump of swellings where his mouth should be. This latter-day Elephant Man appears as a slur of facial parts.



Soham Gupta, Untitled, 2018. From Angst (Akina, 2018)

Here is a man, naked (why?), a stump for a right hand, leaning toward the camera in a posture of permanent imploration. One man holds his penis between finger and thumb: he looks startled — is he mid-piss? Mid-wank? Here's an older guy, crouching amid a putrefactory stretch of land rife with plastic bags, grungy cartons, and discarded food, filling his face with what might be maggots. Others exhibit enormous foreheads, mysterious smiles, eyes puffy from insect bites or alleyway brawls (or worse). Often there's an abject androgyny at play: it can be difficult to distinguish the men from the women.



Soham Gupta, Untitled, 2018. From Angst (Akina, 2018)

The photographs themselves do not reveal much about the circumstances of their taking. It is always night-time. There is scant backlighting. No street signs or familiar buildings to give us our bearings. No context. Most of Gupta's subjects occupy — or are stranded in — the frame. They are

alone, only tenuously connected to any nocturnal or subaltern community. (To even talk about “community” seems like a romantic projection.) They emerge from an opaque night only to return to it. A shot of a man draped in tarpaulin is ambiguous: the tarp blanket offers insulation; it also looks like a ragged coffin. The whole city has become a black studio in which Gupta’s men and women prowl and perform.



Soham Gupta, *Untitled*, 2018. From *Angst* (Akina, 2018)

Perform? “All of these pictures are staged,” Gupta has said. I don’t know what exactly he means by “staged,” but for some the very word will set alarm bells ringing. Viewers accustomed to seeing India through a humanitarian lens will be discombobulated, perhaps even disturbed, by these photographs. They’re not exposés or cries for reform, indicting the disparity between the rich and the poor in contemporary India. Do they display a relish for the outsiderdom they capture? It’s easy enough to imagine them being attacked as hipster slumming or some kind of human ruin porn. That was a charge leveled at Iranian-Jamaican photographer Khalik Allah’s *Field Niggas* (2015), a film that consisted almost exclusively of close and medium shots of the prostitutes, wobbly crackheads, and aggrieved itinerants who hang around the corner of Lexington and 125th Street after midnight.



Soham Gupta, Untitled, 2018. From Angst (Akina, 2018)

But what makes Gupta's work so delirial and discomforting is precisely the blur of real and unreal, real and surreal, real and fantastic. His photobook *Angst* opens with a suite of six page-sized portraits: the first four depict a man unable to remain upright, steadily floored by exhaustion or intoxicants, at once pitiful but also – whisper it – funny in his uselessness. The sequence concludes

with a young glitter-faced, sweat-panted woman, crawling on her knees, licking her arm contentedly – and then a faddishly dressed young man whose evident stupefaction may or may not derive from MDMA.



Soham Gupta, *Untitled*, 2018. From *Angst* (Akina, 2018)

Angst is full of imagery that seems indebted to social realism and Global South reportage, but hazier and weirder. Gupta's men and women often recall monged-out ravers, free-festival dowagers, racially indeterminate club kids. (I am reminded of Boy George, in Charles Atlas's *The Legend of Leigh Bowery*, describing a particular look as "space age Paki.") If some of his subjects seem poised between living and dying, between present and future, there are specters here, too, of the street Arabs and lodging-house outcasts of Victorian shilling-shockers and penny dreadfuls; of Hamsun and Munch and the frigid terror of Scandinavian modernity; of Tod Browning and Diane

Arbus and Larry Clark and Johnny Knoxville; of the country proles wreaking vengeance on jaded urbanites in Omar Ali Khan's *Zibakhana* (2007); of the Gathering of the Juggalos. In one shot, a matted-haired man, his face obscure to us, appears to be clutching an outsized doll; then a thought occurs — perhaps it's the doll who owns the man.



Soham Gupta, *Untitled*, 2018. From *Angst* (Akina, 2018)

"In Calcutta," writes Gupta, "when you have nothing except frustrations within you, life makes A MASTER OF CAUSTIC HUMOR OUT OF YOU." Gupta's own writing appears throughout *Angst*, a book that aligns itself less with classic photo-textual consciousness-raisers such as Jacob Riis's *How The Other Half Lives* (1890), Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903), or James Agee & Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) than with Hubert Selby Jr.'s *The Room* (1971), a novel set in a prison cell and narrated by a nameless wild-tongued protagonist: "They don't know the terrors that go through your mind as you lie there in the pit waiting for a hint of light to tell you that the night is over." Often occupying just a fraction of the page, there are micro-vignettes, blurring poetics, sorrowful howls, gibbets of found dialogue, *City of Dreadful Night* reveries. Bits of the text, printed in capital letters, give off the febrile hysteria of a Chicago tabloid.

Gupta is not interested in developing sociological analyses or grand theories about Calcutta's immiserated. From their fragmented lives, the improvisatory dances they do to get through each day, the rough-and-tumble of their neighborhoods, he fashions eerie, harrowed text-image portraits that also reflect his own concussed, free-forming inscape. Here everything — the night, its

architecture, its denizens – are mutable, mutant, theatrical. Trees and bushes assume corvine shapes, slum dwellers morph into stumpy homunculi, fortified homes become Anglo-Saxon circuit boards. Night is real and night is confected. Soham Gupta is laughing and Soham Gupta is crying. Tragic laughter and bawdy tears. “WHEN LIFE’S HARD,” he writes toward the close, “TIME’S A MOTHERFUCKER.”



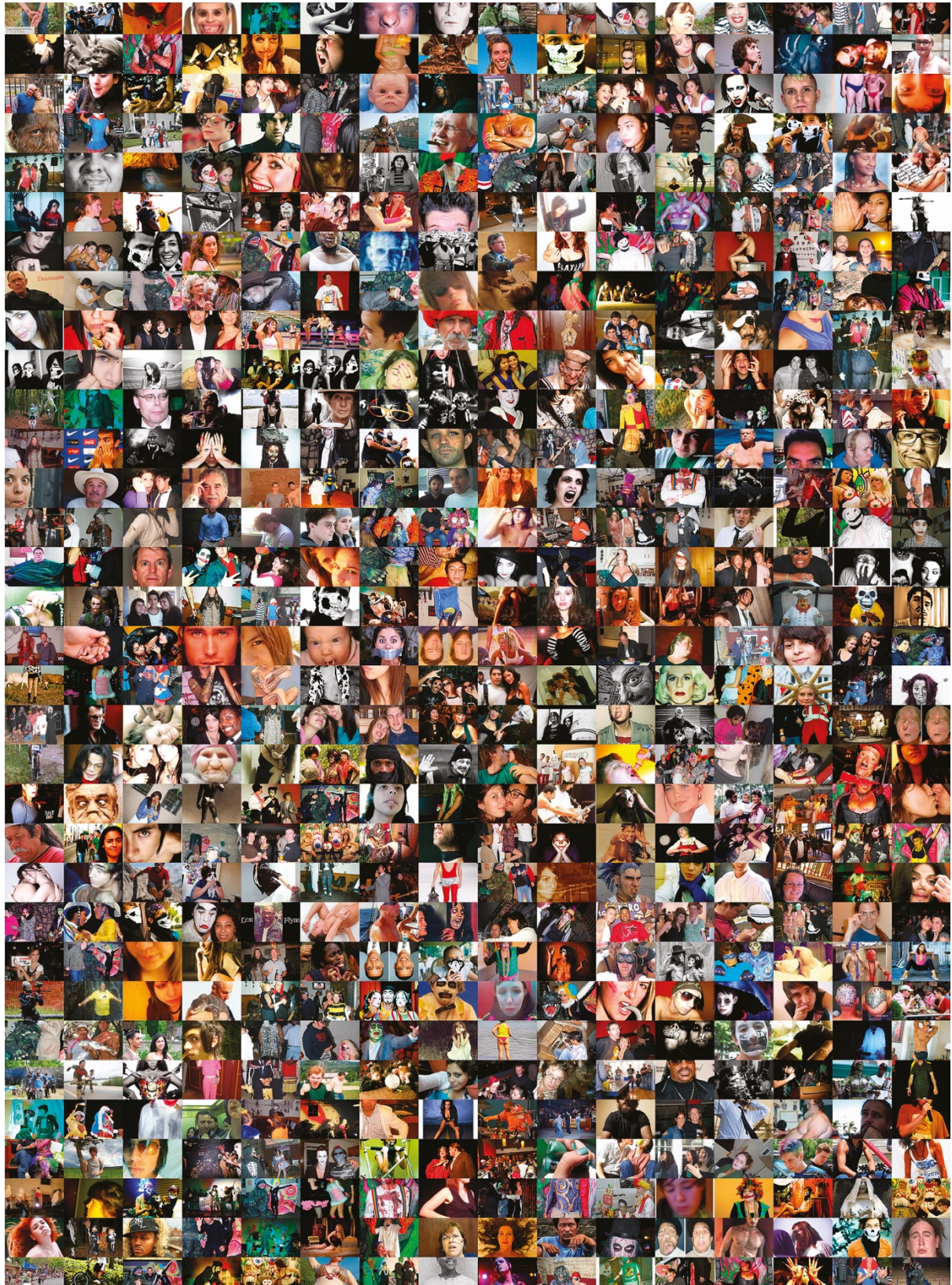
Soham Gupta, *Untitled*, 2018. From *Angst* (Akina, 2018)

Trevor Paglen: From 'Apple' to 'Anomaly'

Written by Tim Clark, *British Journal of Photography*

Barbican, The Curve

Published on 10 October 2019



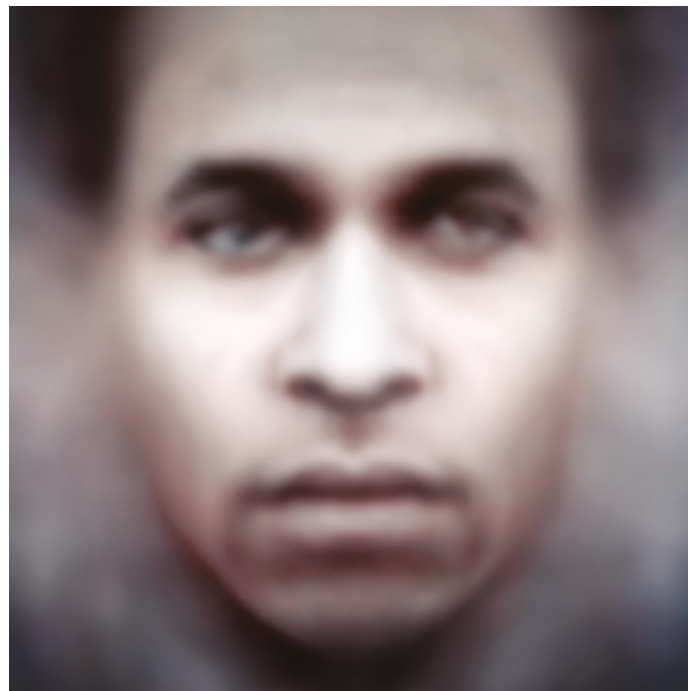
Anomaly, Unusual Person – Paglen Studio Research Image, ImageNet Class. © Trevor Paglen.

As machines are trained to see without human intervention, Trevor Paglen looks at the hidden prejudices and bias inherent in AI with a new Barbican exhibition

In his 2016 essay, *Art in the Age of Machine Intelligence*, Blaise Aguera y Arcas, the leader of Google's Seattle AI group and founder of Artists and Machine Intelligence, considers the complex and ever-evolving relationship between art and technological possibilities.

A parallel is drawn between the advent of the photographic medium in the 19th century and the current revolution in machine intelligence, and their profound impact on production and reproduction. He has no doubt that AI will have a transformative affect on our perception of external reality in ways currently unimaginable. As conceptual borders between humans and non-humans become increasingly blurred, he discusses the idea of art generated by 'hybrid beings', and how machines extend human thought and imagination.

"In the case of the software," he writes, "this processing relies on norms and aesthetic judgments on the part of software engineers, so they are also unacknowledged collaborators in the image-making. There's no such thing as a natural image; perhaps, too, there's nothing especially artificial about the camera."



'Fanon' (Even the Dead Are Not Safe) Eigenface, 2017. Courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York. © Trevor Paglen.

This serves as a useful introduction to the latest body of work from American artist Trevor Paglen, *From 'Apple' to 'Anomaly'*, on display at The Curve at London's Barbican Art Gallery from 26 September to 16 February. Paglen has undertaken the 32nd commission for The Curve as part of a year-long programme, entitled *Life Rewired*, which explores changing aspects of human identity in an age in which we are augmented by instruments and technologies, taking in subjects such as big data and virtual reality.

For this exhibition, Paglen has centred his exploration on the manner in which AI networks have been taught to see the world as a result of being fed vast amounts of visual information by engineers that are sorted into various groupings known as 'training sets'.

Typically, supervised training sets are collections of known data made up of images, sound and video libraries that train computers to recognise objects or other domain-specific knowledge, such as what humans look like, for example. As the media and computational vision has developed in tandem, machines become autonomous systems that intervene and are coercive in the world, and thus inevitably elements of subjectivity and bias within the research community become particularly apparent within such statistical observations. An investigation into these secret agendas, politics, prejudices and epistemological assumptions, as well as their real-world implications, is precisely what Paglen is intent on probing.



Installation view. © Tim P. Whitby / GettyImages.

"Machine-seeing-for-machines is a ubiquitous phenomenon," Paglen has commented, "encompassing everything from facial-recognition systems conducting automated biometric surveillance at airports to department stores intercepting customers' mobile phone pings to create intricate maps of movements through the aisles. But all this seeing, all of these images, are essentially invisible to human eyes. These images aren't meant for us; they're meant to do things in the world; human eyes aren't in the loop."

Some 30,000 individually printed photographs are to be installed across the entire surface of the curved wall in the Barbican gallery, forming a complex mosaic organised according to more than 200 categories selected by the artist. While these are labelled so that visitors can identify the respective classifications, no further textual explanation as to the reasons for the choices is given. To understand the lineage of this body of work involves a brief outline of Paglen's source for the images – ImageNet, a publicly available dataset consisting of annotated photographs intended for computer vision research and understanding algorithms. There are more than 14 million images in the dataset, with over 21,000 categories, and one million that have bounding box annotations that identify objects within the images. These were culled directly from the internet by academics made up from a consortium of American universities,

including Princeton and Stanford, and, curiously, the ImageNet project does not contain the copyright for the material.

The appeal to Paglen, however, lies in the politics and practices of categorisation. For the most part, these are benign, as is the case with, say, 'strawberry' or 'orange', while other classifications take on more untoward implications, such as those filed under 'debtors', 'alcoholics' or 'unusual person'.

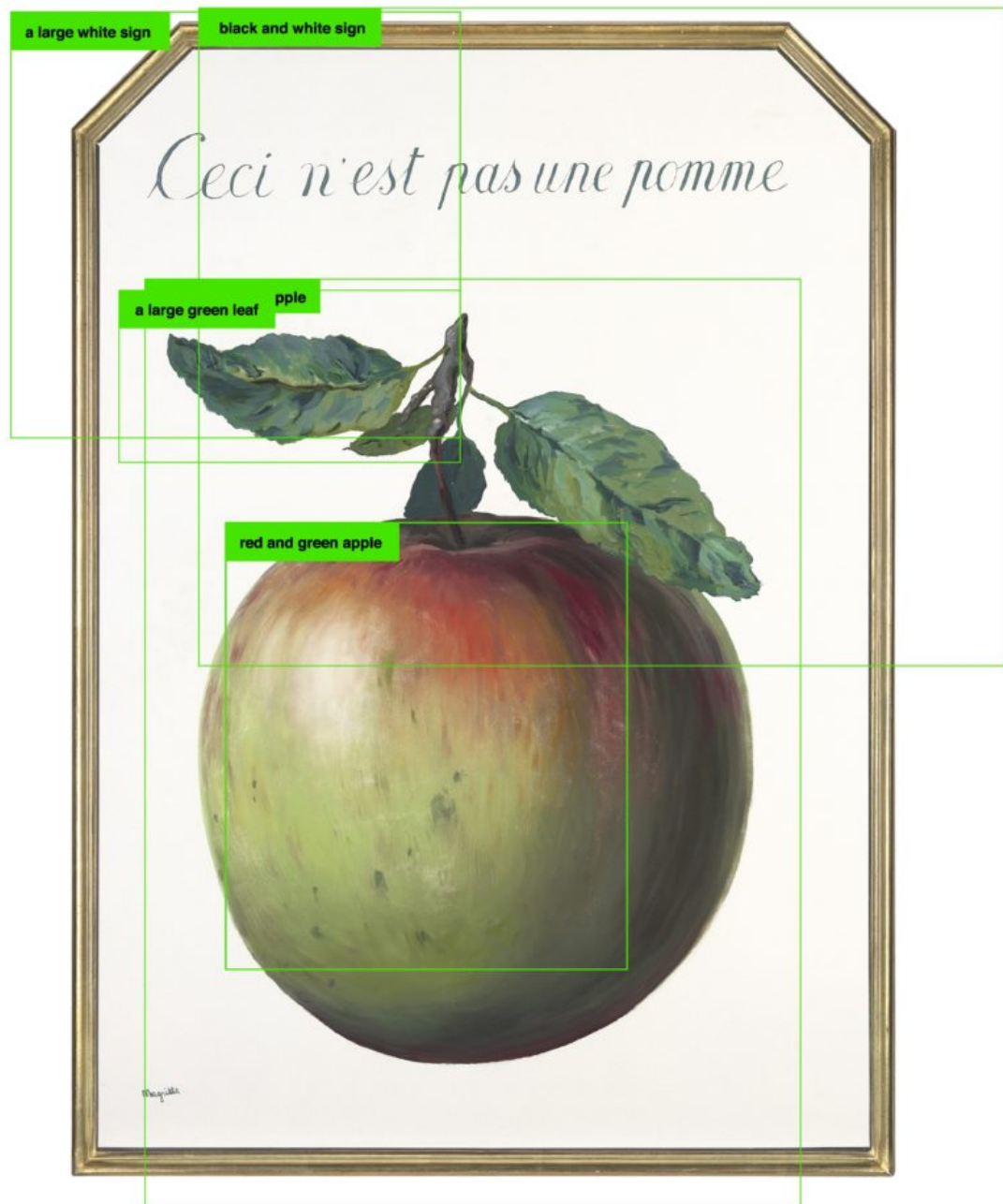


Four Clouds Scale Invariant Feature Transform; Maximally Stable Extremal Regions; Skimage Region Adjacency Graph; Watershed, 2017. Courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York. © Trevor Paglen.

Evidently, the act of programming is also one of making judgments. And although the images may elude artistic signature – since it is the language that speaks and not the authors within this empirical mass of images – the groupings nonetheless reflect an inherent lack of impartiality towards their subjects. As Aguera y Arcas and countless others before have reminded us, technology is never neutral. These thoughts press harder even when we consider the significance of the two specific categories used with the exhibition's title; apple and anomaly – one is a strict noun, the other relational, thus its connotations are potentially open to misdirection.

As a proposition, *From 'Apple' to 'Anomaly'* invites the viewer to consider that the world of images has grown distanced from human eyes as machines have been trained to see without us. Paglen often refers to this new state of machine-to-machine image-making as "invisible images", in light of the fact that this form of vision is "inherently inaccessible to the human eyes". He has also on occasion posited that we are perhaps operating within a surrealist moment for images, similar to the semiotics that come to bear in René Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pomme*. So it's no surprise that the famed painting serves as the subject in one of Paglen's individual works, *The Treachery of Object Recognition*.

Throughout his career, Paglen has developed a long-standing interest around issues of surveillance, CIA black sites, drone warfare, the essence and apparatus of America's security systems, and much more. His is a practice broadly underpinned by an investigation into the relationship between vision, power and technology.



Paglen's work has been widely exhibited at institutions internationally, ranging from Tate Modern and The Met to biennials in Taipei and Istanbul. Among many awards and accolades, he has been the recipient of the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize 2016 and the prestigious McCarthy Fellowship in 2017.

Now based in Berlin, he remains one of the most urgent chroniclers of our times, highlighting the forces that lay beyond what is immediately evident. This exhibition is testament to a highly original

artist, always on the move, always enquiring, re-inscribing what it means to learn to see, all the while keeping a critical and more responsible relationship to the world, to what we understand of the world of images.

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From 'Apple' to 'Anomaly' by Trevor Paglen is on show at Barbican's The Curve gallery in London from 26 September 2019 until 16 February 2020

Tang Jo-Hung at Taipei Fine Arts Museum

In the work of this Taiwanese artist, Adeline Chia sees deities, symbolism and mid-life crises
By Adeline Chia



A few years ago, suffering a loss of hearing and having exhausted all conventional treatments, Taiwanese artist Tang Jo-Hung consulted mediums to treat his condition. The experience subsequently inspired a series of paintings called *Fairy*, for which he won the First Prize at the Taipei Arts Awards in 2016. The paintings are pastiches of religious imagery, combining human subjects and a private symbology: a naked Jesus in boots, a priestess with fat lips blowing smoke and a Chinese deitylike figure riding a giant fish. While not easily read, the paintings' immediacy – fearless brushstrokes and seductive hues – suggests the urgent transcription of divine visions. But things are not quite as they seem. The fish-riding immortal, for example, has the knot of a necktie peeking out from under the collar of his magisterial robes. A costumed medium? A salaryman attaining sainthood? In his introduction to the exhibition, Tang says he doesn't believe in the spirits and gods of religion or folklore. 'They only exist in a world where I fantasise that I believe in gods and I am occasionally devout.' That might explain the enigmatic quality in these works: half-exalting, half-satirical.

His *Fairy* series, as well as 41 other paintings, mostly from the past five years, are included in this survey. Tang's style is predominantly influenced by Western modernisms, Edvard Munch-esque Continental expressionism and the gestural vigour of Abstract Expressionists such as Willem de Kooning. He also owes a debt to Pablo Picasso (Tang completed his art studies in Spain), in the fractured Cubist surfaces that blend portrait and landscape (*White Old Guy. Star. Countless Mountains*, 2019). Blue and Rose Period harlequins are recast into new archetypes, such as a man-child in a pointy hat being piggybacked by an older man (*Set off. Go Down a Hill. The Elderly Piggybacks the Youth*, 2019).

His subjects, meanwhile, draw from a variety of references: everyday life (*The Goddess in Downward-Facing Dog is Looking in the Mirror at Herself*, 2019), theatre (*Holding up the Hat While Running in a Stage Play*, 2018) and some commingling of the two (*Waiter on Roller Skates*, 2018). There's also Napoleon blowing a trumpet (*Napoleon Must Win*, 2019) and Faust with three arms (*Fausto*, 2019).

Most of the scenes are staged in a timeless nowhereland of the artist's imagination; not all of them are immediately intelligible. Others are generic portraits of Westernised human figures, rootless, which could have come from anywhere. The work is more compelling when it draws explicitly from personal experience, such as the *Old Man* series – a midlife crisis described on canvas – which, the artist says, was the result of him hitting forty-five.

A caustic sensibility informs *Seek Divine Guidance* (2019), which reflects on the search for magical cures. A slender, elongated man kneels in front of a little vase emitting smoke, gazing at a tendril of mist with salacious wonder. His body is thin and hungry, and his neck cranes forward like a turtle. During seances, Tang seems to say, the spirit being consulted may not be the most frightening creature in the room. The desperado is.

Tang Jo-Hung: Old Man. Fairy. and a Bit of Everything at Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei 17 August – 10 November

From the Winter 2019 issue of ArtReview Asia