Conceptualism – Intersectional Readings, International Framings

Situating 'Black Artists & Modernism' in Europe

CONTENTS

Introduction

Nick Aikens
susan pui san lok
Sophie Orlando

We are incredibly proud to present this collection of revised and expanded papers from the conference 'Conceptualism: Intersectional Readings, International Framings, Black Artists & Modernism in Europe Since 1968' that took place at the Van Abbemuseum. On 6 December 2017, the first delegates arrived in Eindhoven, along with the season's first snow. Stepping out of the cold and into the warm and welcoming environs of the museum, the conference was the culmination of some eighteen months' research, development and planning, a collaboration between the United Kingdom-based Black Artists & Modernism (BAM) project and the Van Abbemuseum.

Artists, curators and academics were convened in exploratory conversations, with artistic practice at the core, around which two broad and converging problems were considered: how to rethink conceptualism inter-sectionally and internationally as strategy rather than movement; and how to situate 'black artists' and 'modernism' within Europe. In this introduction we outline the framework and key concerns of the conference as well as introduce the contributions that comprise the e-book. We then situate the conference in the work of both BAM and the Van Abbemuseum. We hope this constellation of ideas will inspire many 'unfinished conversations' to come.

CONCEPTUALISMS

'Conceptualism' follows two earlier BAM conferences in the UK: 'The Work Between Us' at Bluecoat, Liverpool, 20 January 2016 focused on Rasheed Araeen's seminal 1989 exhibition, 'The Other Story' and related 'regional' exhibition histories in Britain; 'Now & Then, Here and There' at Chelsea College of Art and Tate Britain, London, 6–8 October 2016 examined the historical and contemporary framing of black artists through modernist and museological practices, and critical vocabularies. Meanwhile, 'Conceptualism – Intersectional Readings, International Framings' seeks to open up new understandings of Conceptualism produced by artists based in Europe after the political and social upheavals of 1968. In attempting to 'situate black artists and modernism in Europe' in relation to conceptual practices and their relationship to the intersections of race, gender and sexuality, the conference and publication look to break open and fracture one of modernism's most sedimented histories. We adopt Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss's definition of Conceptualism as a 'wide array of works and practices which, in radically reducing the role of the art object, reimagined the possibilities vis-à-vis the social, political, and economic realities within which it was being made' (1999). Intersectionalism is associated with a feminist approach that has acknowledged differences across 'universalist' feminism since its first and second waves. Developing internationally from the context of the United States, it examines the interrelation of race, class, gender and sexuality, understanding power differentials as co-constituted and co-constitutive. In the UK, feminist art historians have negotiated these situated positions since the mid-1980s through new art history, cultural studies and Black feminism.

Shifting perspectives on black artists and modernism to somewhere beyond British and transatlantic frames, the turn to Europe highlights the specificities and limits of discourses on 'Blackness' and 'Conceptualism' between geographic neighbours in politically entwined contexts. Conceptual art is often considered resistant to identity politics. In this book, conceptualisms are looked at in artistic practices based in – or connected to – Europe, stimulating debate around intersectional readings in relation to these practices and artworks. Such engagement can shift the question of how they *represent* identity politics to how they *produce* identity politics. Returning to the materiality of particular artworks and their display, interpretation and consumption, how might we reread and reframe them beyond the opposition of conceptual/sociological content, from intersectional and international perspectives? In other words, how might we resist seeing artworks as holders for either a single idea or as representative of a socio-political context, to approach it as a carrier for multiple, 'intersecting' concerns, positions and framings? Given the contingency of art history's revisions of evermore situated perspectives, how might conceptualism per se be rethought and re-visioned through artistic practices?

'Conceptualism – Intersectional Readings, International Framings' unfolded over several days, framed by two keynote presentations: Iris Dressler on 'Subversive Practices' and Valerie Cassel Oliver on 'Expanding Consciousness: In the Wake of Conceptualism'. Foregrounding artistic and curatorial practice, both reflected on multiple strategies of museological intervention and interruption. Signalling the need to attend to the specificity of local, historical, cultural, social and geopolitical contexts, their rich contributions opened up questions and dialogues around the potential continuities and discursive intersections between seemingly disparate British, European and American narratives.

The structure of this e-book reflects that of the conference, with parts I and II very much corresponding to the two days. Dressler and Cassel Oliver set and reset the tone for each half of the book, followed by sections that engage respectively with 'intersectional readings' (Alexandra Kokoli, Elisabeth Lebovici, susan pui san lok) and 'international framings' (Juan Albarrán, Alice Correia, Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, Wei Yu). Four further sections develop the research initiated through a series of seminars organised by Sophie Orlando and generously hosted by FRAC Lorraine, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne and Institute of International Visual Arts. These seminars consisted of close readings of specific works by Nil Yalter, stanley brouwn, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc and David Medalla held in the institutions' collections or archives and selected by Orlando in consultation with the host organisations. In each case, the objective was to orientate discussions of the works in relation to modernism, and to deprivilege biographical or sociopolitical readings.

In addition to sections on Yalter (Laura Castagnini, Fabienne Dumont, Sumesh Sharma), Medalla (Eva Bentcheva, Sonia Boyce, David Dibosa) and Abonnenc (Lotte Arndt, Jennifer Burris, Sandra Delacourt), the book offers an edited transcript of a roundtable discussion on brouwn. In light of brouwn's passing in the summer of 2017, we want to note here the importance of foregrounding his work within the context of the conference. The roundtable was preceded by a screening of his 1989 film, *steps*. The artist's long-time resistance to biographical and/or socio-historical narratives underscored the question at the heart of the conference: how does one speak about the work? Documentation of a closing performance by Patricia Kaersenhout is included; her ongoing work, *Stitches of Power. Stitches of Sorrow* (2014), powerfully invites the viewer to participate in the collective work of remembering and resisting, displacing old erasures with new inscriptions.

By way of acknowledging (if also inadequately conveying) the significance of timing – the conference coincided with the opening of *Rasheed Araeen: A Retrospective*. The resonance of Araeen's radical, conceptual and material practice reverberated deeply for many of those present.

BLACK ARTISTS & MODERNISM

BAM is a three-year project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (2015–18), led by Sonia Boyce as Principal Investigator, and susan pui san lok and David Dibosa as Co-Investigators. The project questions the art historical amnesia around artists of African, Asian and Caribbean heritage in Britain, specifically in discussions of biography, ethnicity and identity politics that supersede if not 'eclipse' the significance of the artworks that speak to and impact art narratives throughout the last century. BAM investigates the often understated connections between black British artists' practices and their relationships to modernism (an 'unfinished' project that extends into postmodernism), acknowledging the 'conjuncture' of generations of black British artists that have been both 'for' and 'against' modernist dictates (Hall 2006).

The much-contested term 'black' is understood and deployed in plural and sometimes in contradictory ways – with no fixed definition, it represents a range of sympathetic positions in relation to both 'black art' and 'black artists'. Broadly, black art refers to largely UK-based practices driven by criticality and critique, whether in relation to racially conditioned cultural and political hegemony, Western philosophies of modernity or Western imperialism and related processes of othering. Ultimately, black art is understood as productive of political and critical agency. Black artist, then, is deployed by some as a critical affiliation or

asserton of political affinity, and by others as an ethnic or demographic identification. While BAM may lean towards the former, we continue to encounter the 'multicultural managerialism' that produces and reproduces administrative and bureaucratic definitions of black that default to ethnicity and/or geography (Maharaj 1999, pp. 4–8).

BAM's conceptual premise and methodologies include these contradictions and contestations. On the one hand, the category of black artists enables the identification of work by artists of African, Asian and Caribbean heritage in UK public art collections; on the other, BAM seeks to challenge the very basis of such identification and differentiation to attend to the work itself. Pursuing entwined strands of monographic and museological research, BAM asks: How do we come to know – or forget – the work? Found in collections, yet lost or marginalised as minor, parochial or derivative within art historical and museum narratives, how might we begin to re-evaluate and resituate certain artists, practices and works, from intersectional and inter-national perspectives? What connections and constellations begin to emerge when we take into account the artwork over the artist, and attend to 'the work between us' (Fisher 1997)?

THE VAN ABBEMUSEUM

The Van Abbemuseum's collaboration with BAM is informed by a recent and ongoing trajectory of research and programming interrogating and complicating the museum's modernist history, its links with European colonialism and the subsequent exclusions fostered within modernism at large. This goes back to its founding: Karel 1, the tobacco company of the museum's benefactor Henri Van Abbe, purchased its tobacco from the fields of Sumatra in Indonesia, a former colony of the Netherlands (Karabinos 2017).

The museum's collection and early financial support allowed it to open in 1936 as the first institution dedi-cated to modern art in the Netherlands. Its formation as a modern museum, like so many others, is bound up in the economy and exploitation of colonial relations.

It is vital that museums question the institutional production of modernism as a set of narratives and museological practices shaped via its collections and exhibitions. One clear task is to engage with artists, histories and strategies that have been overlooked by the Western modernist canon. Recent research and programming initiatives offer counter narratives to the exclusions of art history. 'The 1980s. Today's Beginnings?' (2016) aimed to assess the contributions of emergent, diverse subjectivities in the cultural field across Europe during a decade of profound change. The subsequent related exhibition 'The Place Is Here' (2017), presented across three institutions in the UK, focused on the artwork, archives and ideas of black artists in Britain during the 1980s. At the same time, in the context of the Netherlands, the Van Abbemuseum recognises the urgent need to contribute to the belated but welcome discussions about the relationship this country has to its colonial history, and to counter what theorist Gloria Wekker (2016) terms 'White Innocence' in relation to questions of racism and exclusion. Recent projects and acquisitions of works by Patricia Kaersenhout, Iris Kensmil and Melvyn Motti, whose singular practices challenge different elements of modernist history from anti-colonial and decolonial perspectives, reflect the complex and nuanced politics of the national – and international – debate.

'Conceptualism', therefore, represents a key moment within this trajectory as part of the two-year programme 'Decolonise/Demodernise' (2016–18) that also includes a series of exhibitions and commissions. Significantly for the Van Abbemuseum, situating the concerns of BAM within a European context has encouraged the

museum to engage with the works of Dutch Conceptual artist stanley brouwn within its own collection from new perspectives. Equally, BAM's complex, productively unresolved relationship with modernism demands the museum think through its stated aim to de-modernise. How can a Western European museum, so complicit in modernism's formation call for its undoing? How can looking into specific artistic practices shift the terms of the debate away from institutional manoeuvring back to the work itself?

REFERENCES

Fisher, J. 1997, 'The Work Between Us', in O. Enwezor (ed.), *Trade Routes: History and Geography*, 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, exhibition catalogue.
Hall, S. 2006, 'Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three "Moments" in Post-war History', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 61, no. 1, pp. 1–24.
Karabinos, M. 2018, 'Here or There: Locating the Karel I Archive', in N. Aikens (ed.), *Deviant Practice: Research Programme 2016–17*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, pp. 20–47, viewed 9 December 2019, https://vanabbemuseum.nl/fileadmin/files/ Onderzoek/Deviant_Practice/4788VAM_Deviant_ Practice_def_HR_spreads_2.pdf.
Wekker, G. 2016, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Subversive Practices:
Art Under Conditions of Political Repression in 1960s and 1980s South America and Europe[1]

Iris Dressler

NETWORK

The 2009 exhibition 'Subversive Practices'[2] at Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart (WKS) was framed by an earlier research project titled *Vivid Radical Memory* (2006–7), initiated by media arts historian at the University of Barcelona and former member of Grup de Treball (working group) Antoni Mercader.[3] Carried out in cooperation with the exhibition venue and the Center for Culture and Communication Foundation (CCCF) in Budapest, the aim was to further the exchange and pooling of research by creating an online database involving the survey, critical analysis and redefinition of Conceptual art practices. The practices under consideration from the 1960s to 1980s were generated under conditions of military dictatorship, communist and socialist regimes in Latin America and Europe – the so-called marginalised peripheries within the Western canon. *Vivid Radical Memory* gave rise to the conceptualisation of an exhibition that, similar to the WKS project on political spaces of action *On Difference* (2005/2006) (Dressler & Christ 2007), had sections developed by different curators and a symposium in partnership once more with WKS and CCCF,[4] with the addition of Arteleku in San Sebastian, which organised workshops.[5] Some works were later shown at Trafó Gallery in Budapest.[6] Despite these projects, disregarding practices outside the sphere of the Western canon continues with the exception of but a few positions, though these practices simultaneously cultivate strategies for dealing with political repression.

Attempts to define and redefine Conceptual art are as old as the concept itself, developed by its 'discursive fathers' Joseph Kosuth, Seth Siegelaub (both at the

Subversive Practices: Art Under Conditions of Political Repression in 1960s and 1980s South America and Europe - Iris Dressler

15

same time experts at its marketing) (Alberro 2003, p. 42ff) and Sol LeWitt.[7] Notwithstanding that some of the 'best advocates' of Conceptualism have long been 'united in thinking... that the episode is essentially concluded',[8] the shifting and expansion of the concept is still discussed from the most varied perspectives in terms of its relevance to contemporary art. Speaking against an imminent end to this 'episode', representatives of quite different generations participated in both *Vivid Radical Memory* and 'Subversive Practices' involving curators and art researchers born from the 1940s to the 1980s and artists born from the 1920s to the 1960s. The period encompasses European fascism; the Second World War; Cold War; the 1956 uprising in Budapest; the Cuban Revolution; the Vietnam War; military dictatorships in Latin America; feminist, homosexual and Black Power movements; 1968 (Prague Spring, Paris May, student protests in Mexico, the passing of Marcel Duchamp); the death of Mao; antinuclear and peace movements of the 1980s; 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Tiananmen Square massacre in Peking, the US invasion of Panama); the dissolution of the Soviet imperium and the communist regimes in Eastern Europe; the 'triumph' (and failure) of capitalism and Western democracies; the growing importance of the new 'megacities'; the breakneck development of new information and communication media; and much more. Given this diversified background, art since the 1960s must be reconsidered — especially that which thwarts narrowminded, self-referential models prevalent within the art world. Such radical practices could be summarised under Conceptual art, which in terms of methods, aesthetics, discourses and spaces of agency is both heterogeneous and decentralised. The term became less familiar by 1989, at which point any serious analysis that art's past and present rested on an exclusionary US and Eurocentric viewpoint had long lost any semblance of feasibility.

'OFF-CENTRE' PERSPECTIVES

Since the early 1990s, the self-referential Anglo-American discourse of Conceptual art — reduced to linguistics and just a few (usually male) protagonists from the US and Western Europe — has been challenged, stranded on its own tautological pitfalls (Buchloh 1998, p. 89ff). This comes especially from the perspective of artistic practices beyond the 'art centres' of New York and London: artists Mari Carmen Ramírez (1993, pp. 156–67; 1999, pp. 53–71), Luis Camnitzer (2000, pp. 105–19; 2007), Ana Longoni (2004; Longoni & Mestman 2000 & 2004), László Beke (1999a, pp. 41–51; 1999b, pp. 212–33) and Edit András (2006, pp. 163–77); anthologies *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (1999), *Rewriting Conceptual Art and Listen Here Now! Argentinian Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde* (2004); archives like the Artpool Art Research Center in Budapest or that of Graciela Carnevale (cited in Longoni 2004, pp. 8–12 & 2008) in Rosario; research networks like the *Red de Investigadores sobre Conceptualismos del Sur* (Network for Researching the Conceptualisms of the South) (Freire & Longoni 2009); and — not least — by the curators contributing to 'Subversive Practices'.

'Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s' curated by Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss along with eleven others is without question one of the major groundbreaking exhibitions re-evaluating Conceptual art. Held in 1999 at the Queens Museum in New York, it sketched a multicentric cartograph of Conceptualism, displaying various geopolitical points of origin. In the preface to the catalogue, the project initiators made a point to differentiate between *Conceptual art* as a 'term used to denote an essentially formalist practice developed in the wake of minimalism' and *conceptualism*. The latter not only 'broke decisively from the historical dependence of art on physical form and its visual apperception' but also implied a wide

array of artistic practices that 'reimagined the possibilities of art vis-à-vis the social, political, and economic realities'. Moreover, the aspect of dematerialisation was not necessarily linked to the disappearance of the object but was rather said to zero in on the redefinition 'of the role of the object as a carrier of meaning' (Camnitzer, Farver & Weiss 1999, p. viii). The eleven sections within the exhibition were grouped according to geopolitical parameters. They comprised six continents and were concentrated on the respective local situations and relevant specificities as decisive factors of a global, multicentric Conceptualism. The 'Global Conceptualisms' curators' contributions to the catalogue and the many approaches to redefining Conceptual art speak from *peripheral* spaces of agency, or, to borrow a term from Ana Longoni, 'off-centres' (Longoni 2007, p. 202).[9] What emerges is a heterogeneous portrait wherein region- and time-specific context is as important as the effect of the global information society from at least the 1960s on. From this vantage point, the works of Latin American artists, for example, are viewed, as emphasised by Ramírez, 'not as reflections, derivations, or even replicas of centre-based Conceptual art but, instead, as local responses to the contradictions posed by the failures of post-World War II modernisation projects' (Ramírez 1999, p. 54). Existing global art history from the 1960s to '80s cannot accommodate wrongfully unconsidered names. Conceptual art must instead involve ongoing self-initiated reorganisation of its maps and registries. This would, for instance, also mean that artists like Lygia Clark, Cildo Meireles, Ion Grigorescu or Sanja Iveković who have attained international recognition no longer be viewed as isolated phenomena but rather within their artistic, intellectual and sociopolitical contexts, be they local or global, historical or current.

TERMINOLOGICAL DIFFERENTIATIONS

Is 'Conceptual' art, then, especially in the sense of a homogenous style or movement, even relevant? In his retrospective reflections from 1989, Benjamin Buchloh describes the 'historical moment of Conceptual art', necessarily limited to the US and Western Europe, as 'such a complex range of mutually opposed approaches' that he warned against those 'forceful voices… demanding respect for the purity and orthodoxy of the movement' (Buchloh 1998, p. 117 and p. 119). Most artists in Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1960s and '70s didn't lay claim to this label. Some, like Juan Pablo Renzi, member of the strongly political Grupo de Vanguardia de Rosario (Group of Avant-Gardists in Rosario),[10] vehemently rejected it as a fashionable term that only served to periodically reanimate the art market and conforming to bourgeois culture.[11] In contrast, Peruvian critic Juan Acha spoke of postmodern 'no-objetualismos' (non-objectualisms) whose most important aspect consisted 'in destroying in us the humanist Renaissance tradition'.[12] Here Acha references artistic practices that have eluded the commodification of art, instead making use of simple, transient materials integrating indigenous and popular culture traditions — first and foremost producing social spaces of agency (del Valle Cárdenas & Villacorta Chávez 2006, p. 51; López 2010, p. 12). Local, content-related specifications of the term are still coming, most recently 'Conceptualisms of the South'. In the 1970s, Spanish art historian Simón Marchán Fiz's (1972) 'ideological conceptualism', emphasising the sociopolitical character of conceptual practices in Argentina and Spain, was received critically, especially its extrapolations by Ramírez and others as essentialising Latin American Conceptualism. The term is inclined towards a reductive definition of 'political art', a dichotomy of content and form and a hardly feasible codification of political Latin American art versus apolitical US American art (López 2010, p. 11ff; Gilbert 2009).

Argentinian intellectual Oscar Masotta introduced the term dematerialisation in 1967 during his lecture 'Después del Pop: nosotros desmaterializamos' (After Pop, We Dematerialize) (Masotta 2004, pp. 208–16) at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, then the most significant locale for advanced art in Buenos Aires. He alluded not to Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, who weren't to publish their text *The Dematerialization of Art* until the following year, but to El Lissitzky's 1926 essay 'The Future of The Book' (Lissitzky 1967, pp. 39–44) that asserts in an increasingly materialistic world, dematerialisation (for instance, through radio) was paradoxically evolving into a pervasive social pheno- menon. Massota, who had close ties to the media- interventionist Grupo de Arte de los Medios de Comunicación de Masas (Art with Mass Communica- tions Media), highlighted an informational art whose immaterial, invisible 'material' was made of 'none other than the processes, the results, the facts, and/or the phenomena of information set off by the mass infor- mation media' (Masotta 2004, p. 214). For example, they disseminated press releases through the media about an executed Happening that never took place, and in a second media briefing, denied the event (Jacoby et al. 2004, p. 223ff; Masotta 2004).[13] Artist Ricardo Carreira uses the term 'deshabituación' (dishabituation) to describe a process of alienation relating to the political transformation of the environ- ment (Carreira cited in López 2010, p. 12); Edgardo Antonio Vigo speaks of 'aesthetic deviation' or 'appointment' (*señalamiento*) as a tactic to shift perspectives on everyday things and signs permeated with power politics to allow poetic, resistive dimensions to emerge; he simultaneously debunks the museum as exclusive locus of aesthetic experience, and the idea of art geared towards producing 'new' works.

Hungarian artist Gyula Pauer wrote of his sculptural practice in his *First Pseudo Manifesto* (1970): 'The PSEUDO sculpture, ... does not seem to be what its genuine form actually is.' There is a presence and absence, materiality and immateriality, illusion and reality of sculpture that aims to expose how the artistic object has been manipulated into a consumer good: 'The PSEUDO sculpture is a sculpture representing itself as a manipulated sculpture, thus proving the existence of the state of manipulation. PSEUDO reveals itself as a false image, or at least as a complex object that also gives a false image.'

The 'empty action' as Moscow group Collective Actions phrased it instigates a shift in viewer perception. Through the introduction of 'an extra-demonstrational element' the viewer is meant to become aware that an action is not about what they see, but what occurrs in their own consciousness, captured in relation to their own memories (Monastyrski 1998, p. 92ff). Within Moscow Conceptualism, which encompasses both literary and artistic practices, terms like 'subversive affirmation' – in exaggerated imitation of totalitarian discourse – were introduced (Arns & Sasse 2006, pp. 444–55).

Beyond new 'isms' for movements or styles, the primarily concern of these definitions above appears to be to differentiate critical stances and transcend beyond the narrowly conceived frame of self-referential art discourse lodged in the power dispositifs of mass media, capitalism, Eurocentrism and colonialism; concrete political systems of power; and structuralism, semiotics, information, philosophy or psychology. The objective is to use art to influence, alter or manipulate (private, public, media-related) reality and its perception.

... UNDER CONDITIONS OF POLITICAL REPRESSION

A decisive aspect of the Conceptual art practices under concern here, established within extreme, complex political, cultural and economic forms of repression, manifest free spaces for thought and agency. Mail Art played a crucial role, facilitating a worldwide reach independent of exclusive distribution channels within the West-dominated art sector and relatively safe from censorship. The exchange of ideas and artistic experiments was inexpensive and inconspicuously produced. Collective working processes involved varied publics and subversive appropriation of communication systems, allowing for collaborative relationships between artists from Latin America and Eastern Europe such as that between Robert Rehfeldt (DDR), Clemente Padín (Uruguay) and Guillermo Deisler (Chile, and later Bulgaria and the GDR). Entire exhibitions could travel the globe at low cost, such as 'Festival Hungría '74', which arrived at the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC, Center for Art and Communication) in Buenos Aires as a collection of ideas and proposals put forward by Hungarian artists.[14] Even in a nation-state as isolated as Romania was then, artists like Iosif Király could establish international contacts.

The methods of Conceptual art, Mail Art, Happenings or Actionism are tied to the conditions of censorship and political violence in which they grew. The dematerialisation of art meant not leaving any trace behind. Here, 'aesthetic of administration' implies not a self-critical and atopic mimesis of a 'totally administered world' (Buchloh 1998, p. 140 and p. 155) but, more frequently, a subversive appropriation and critique of the rigid bureaucratic structures of totalitarian regimes. While conceptual practices in Western Europe and the US critiqued modernity, this was not true of Hungary, since, as Edit András notes, 'modernism was an active agent in the opposition to an ideology-driven official

culture' (András 2006, p. 166). Romania took another turn, as Ileana Pintilie (2002) summarises in the term 'Romanian Actionism', describing the most varied artistic working methods having emerged between the 1960s and '80s as — despite, and beyond the reach of, official art doctrine – can hardly be compared with phenomena like Wiener Aktionismus given the heterogeneous performative practices at that time. Strict censorship meant these were carried out in private spaces or in nature with only a very small select audience watching — or none at all. The body, as a first and last entity for maintaining resistive practices was central there and throughout Eastern Europe or Latin America: see the autodestructive stance of Letícia Parente, Petr Štembera or Dan Perjovschi; the radicalised form of surrender to transgender enactments of Carlos Leppe, Ion Grigorescu or Sergio Zevallos; and the radical noncompliance with totalitarian biopolitics.

Conceptual art forms in Eastern Europe and Latin America deal with the exploration of educational theories and practices. In the mid-'70s the Hungarian artist Miklós Erdély developed (in collaboration with, among others, Dóra Maurer), alternative models for teaching art, with the intention of providing an antithesis to official art doctrine. Up to his death, Erdély continued to hold different workshops (Hornyik & Szöke 2008; *Creativity Exercises* 1976) investigating interdisciplinary, collaborative performative and processual working forms on which László Beke (1999, p. 231) wrote: 'The creative ideas during this period were interconnected with a utopian mentality, with ideas from the underground, and thus also with theory and practice of political protest.'

For Camnitzer (2007), whose publication *Conceptualism in Latin America* was subtitled *Didactics of Liberation*, education, politics and poetry count among the most important anchor points within Latin American Conceptualism. He traces its origins to the activities of the

Uruguayan guerrilla group Tupamaro in the 1960s and educator and author Simón Rodríguez (1769–1854) who tutored Simón Bolivar, among others. Rodríguez published his ideas on art, politics and education along with a the graphic configuration that anticipated concrete poetry. According to Camnitzer, for 'both, the Tupamaros and Rodríguez, the central concern was not aesthetics, but the erosion of information' (2007, p. 10).

Valentín Roma (2007, pp. 214–15), in his reevaluation of Spanish Conceptualism during the Franco dictatorship, especially regarding the Grup de Treball and its environs, highlights at various points – incidentally reflecting the essence of his and Daniel García Andújar's 'Subverisve Practices' section – the interlacing of art, architecture, design and education. He turns against museographical and art historical tendencies in Spain that pursue an 'artification' of the Grup de Treball to classify them within a specific style or art movement. Moreover, Roma indicates that the Grup is an interdisciplinary, critical working platform of art and knowledge production and can be understood solely within the context of their intellectual surroundings: the design schools Elisava and Eina founded in the 1960s in Barcelona, exhibition and event venues opened by design store Sala Vinçon or by the Association of Architects of Catalonia (COAC); Ricardo Bofill's Taller de Arquitectura (architecture workshop) with the participation of architects, sociologists and engineers; or Madrid publishing house Ariel and its graphic designer Alberto Corazón.

PERSPECTIVES

To return to 'Subversive Practices', the exhibition was based upon an approximate grid that by simply turning its centre, a segmentation between South America and Europe was avoided giving rise to multiple geopolitical interconnections. To name but a few of the many sections, the 'Hungarian' section was concerned with an art historical or conservatorial challenge, the GDR concentrated on different subversive spaces of agency for artistic production, Peru examined military dictatorships of the 1960s and '70s and the violent radicalisation of the left. The spatial centre, or the 'empty middle', held a diagrammatic interpretation of Russian art group Collective Actions' *Trips out of Town* (1980–2006).

We reach an essential difficulty that extends beyond the capacities of exhibitions and projects like these that preserve works and documents concerning subversive and conceptual practices from Latin America and Eastern Europe. This problem is extremely complex. In the countries where these works originated, which actually should be responsible for them, a sustainable investment in their preservation and restoration is often missing. This task usually falls to motivated individuals. Yet an increasing number of institutions from the 'old West' show interest in promoting the conservation of these works and archives, an effort frequently coupled with the desire to procure and purchase the works. Such a practice, however, runs the risk of generating a neocolonialist dependency. Or, is in danger of exploiting research efforts in Latin America and Eastern Europe (mostly under precarious conditions). Worst case scenario, critical approaches formulated within this research are repressed through Western attempts at conservation. It is important, therefore, to develop new and different models for cooperative transnational relationships. 'Subversive Practices' is a snapshot of different research

24

Subversive Practices: Art Under Conditions of Political Repression in 1960s and 1980s South America and Europe - Iris Dressler

25

approaches to art created under conditions of extreme political repression from the 1960s to '80s in South America and Europe. Far from concluded, these are still actively pursued by the curators and many others. It is precisely this that makes it possible, first and foremost, to overcome the canonising codification of artistic practices and to instead make connections to the present.

REFERENCES

Alberro, A. 2003, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

András, E. 2006, 'Transgressing Boundaries (Even Those Marked Out by the Predecessors) in New Genre Conceptual Art', in A. Alberro and S. Buchmann (eds), *Art After Conceptual Art*, Cambridge, MA.

Arns, I. and Sasse, S. 2006, 'Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance', in *IRWIN* (ed.), MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Beke, L. 1999a, 'Conceptualist Tendencies in Eastern European Art', in L. Camnitzer, J. Farver and R. Weiss (eds), *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exhibition catalogue, 28 April–29 August, Queens Museum of Art, New York.

----. 1999b, 'Dulden, verbieten, unterstützen: Kunst zwischen 1970 und 1975', in H. Knoll (ed.), *Die zweite Öffentlichkeit: Kunst in Ungarn im 20. Jahrhundert*, Dresden.

Buchloh, B. H. D. 1998, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', in R. E. Krauss (ed.), *October: The Second Decade,* 1986–1996, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, original work published 1989 in *L'art conceptuel: Une perspective, exhibition catalogue*, 28 November 1989–18 February 1990, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris.

Camnitzer, L. 2000, 'Wonderbread and Spanglish Art', in S. Breitwieser (ed.), *Vivências / Lebenserfahrung / Life Experience*, exhibition catalogue, Generali Foundation, Cologne.

----. 2007, *Conceptualism in Latin America: Didactics of Liberation*, University of Texas Press, Austin.

Carnevale, G. 2004, 'Zur Entstehung des Archivs', in *Tucumán Arde: Eine Erfahrung: Aus dem Archiv von Graciela Carnevale*, b_books, Berlin.

----. 2008, *Inventario 1965–1975: Archivo Graciela Carnevale*, exhibition catalogue, Centro Cultural Parque de España, Rosario.

Carreira, R. 2010, *La deshabituación*, unpublished manuscript.

Creativity Exercises. 1976, directed by D. Maurer [film]. Black-and-white, 25 min (available with English subtitles).

Crow, T. 2006, 'Unwritten Histories of Conceptual Art', in A. Alberro and S. Buchmann (eds), *Art After Conceptual Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Dressler, I. and Christ, H. D. eds. 2007, *On Difference #3: Politics of Space: On the Expropriation and Re-appropriation of Social, Political, and Cultural Spaces of Action*, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, Stuttgart.

Freire, C. and Longoni, A. eds. 2009, *Conceitualismos do Sul/Sur*, Annablume, São Paulo.

Gilbert, Z. 2009, 'Ideological Conceptualism and Latin America: Politics, Neoprimitivism and Consumption', *rebus: a journal of art history & theory*, no. 4, Autumn/ Winter, viewed 26 November 2019, http://www.essex. ac.uk/arthistory/rebus/ PDFS/Issue%204/Gilbert.pdf.

Hornyik, S. and Szöke, A. eds. 2008, *Kreativitási gyakorlatok, FAFEJ, INDIGO: Erdély Miklós művészetpedagógiai tevékenysége 1975–1986* (Creativity Exercises, Fantasy Developing Exercises [FAFEJ] and Inter-Disciplinary-Thinking [InDiGo]: Miklós Erdély's Art Pedagogical Activity, 1975–1986), Gondolat, Budapest, with a summary in English.

Jacoby, R. et al. 2004, 'An Art of Communications Media (Manifesto)', in I. Katzenstein (ed.), *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s. Writings of the Avant-Garde*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Kutasy, M. 2009, 'Spuren der ungarischen Ausstellung(en) im CAYC (Zentrum für Kunst und Kommunikation), Buenos Aires, 1973–74', lecture, 30 May, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, viewed 26 November 2019, http://www.wkv-stuttgart. de/programm/2009/ausstellungen/subversive/ symposium (Spanish).

Lissitzky, E. 1967, 'The Future of the Book', *New Left Review*, vol. 1, no. 41, January–February, original work published 1926.

Longoni, A. 2004, 'Tucumán Arde heute: Zwischen Mythos und Museum', in *Tucumán Arde: Eine Erfahrung: Aus dem Archiv von Graciela Carnevale*, b_books, Berlin.

----. 2007, 'Other Beginnings of Conceptualism (Argentinean and Latin-American)', *Papers d'Art*, no. 93, pp. 155–8, viewed 28 November 2019, http:// www.vividradicalmemory.org/htm/workshop/bcn_ Essays/Inicios_Longoni_eng.pdf.

Longoni, A. and Mestman, M. 2000, *Del Di Tella a 'Tucumán arde'*, Eudeba, Buenos Aires.

----. 2004, 'After Pop, We Dematerialize: Oscar Masotta, Happenings, and Media Art at the Beginnings of Conceptualism', in I. Katzenstein (ed.), *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s. Writings of the Avant-Garde*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

López, M. A. 2010, 'How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?', *Afterall*, no. 23, Spring.

Marchán Fiz, S. 1972, *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto* (1960–1972), Akal, Madrid.

Masotta, O. 2004, 'After Pop, We Dematerialize (Excerpts)', in in I. Katzenstein (ed.), *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s. Writings of the Avant-Garde*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, original essay published 1969.

Mercader, A., Pracerisas, P. and Roma, V. eds. 1999, *Grup de Treball*, exhibition catalogue, 10 February– 11 April, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona.

Monastyrski, A. 1998, 'Vorwort zum ersten Band der "Reisen aus der Stadt"', in G. Hirt and S. Wonders (eds), *Präprintium: Moskauer Bücher aus dem Samizdat*, Temmen, Bremen.

Pintilie, I. 2002, *Actionism in Romania During the Communist Era*, Idea Design and Print, Cluj.

26

27

Subversive Practices: Art Under Conditions of Political Repression in 1960s and 1980s South America and Europe - Iris Dressler

Ramírez, M. C. 1993, 'Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America', in Waldo Rasmussen et al. (eds), *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art New York, New York.

----. 1999, 'Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960–1980', in L. Camnitzer, J. Farver and R. Weiss (eds). *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exhibition catalogue, 28 April–29 August, Queens Museum of Art, New York.

Roma, V. 2007, 'Some "De-considerations" Regarding the Grup de Treball and its Historical-aesthetic Context', *Papers d'Art*.

del Valle Cárdenas, A. and Villacorta Chávez, J. 2006, 'Uncertainties in Recent Peruvian Art: Imageries of Lima in Transformation, 1980–2006', in *Post-ilusiones. Nuevas visiones. Arte crítico (1989–2006)/ Post-Illusions: New Visions: Critical Art in Lima (1980–2006)*, exhibition catatalogue, Fundación Augusto N. Wiese, Lima.

NOTES

1   This is an edited version of a much longer text published in 2011 by Hatje Cantz under the same title in a book co-edited with Hans D. Christ. Detail on the exhibition 'Subversive Practices' can be found in the original, viewed 26 November 2019, https://www.wkv-stuttgart.de/uploads/media/intro_en.pdf.

2   'Subversive Practices' pursued an artificial cartography whose junctures, fractures and (especially) vacuities were integral to an experimental arrangement to disrupt the linear narrative of an art history that strives for completion. The nine sections introduced and connected various aspects of conceptual, experimental and subversive art from the GDR, Moscow, Hungary, Romania, Catalonia, a Brazilian museum, Argentina, Peru and Chile.

3   The Grup de Treball (1972–5) was an open affiliation of various artists, designers, architects and educators from Barcelona and other towns in Spain (Mercader, Pracerisas & Roma 1999).

4   Audio recordings of all contributions to the symposium (in English and Spanish) can be accessed at http://www.wkv-stuttgart.de/programm/2009/ausstellungen/subversive/symposium.

5   'The Dictatorship of Democracies', workshop with Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, Concha Jerez and Pilar Parcerisas, 6–17 July 2009; 'Conceptualismos otros (1960–80)', seminar with Eugenio Dittborn, Javier Aguirre, José Luis Isasa, Juan Carlos Eguillor and Morquillas, 22–25 March 2010 (both Arteleku, San Sebastian).

6   *Subversive Excerpts*, 29 January–28 February 2010, Trafó Gallery, Budapest, viewed 26 November 2019, http://www.trafo.hu/ programs/1866.

7   Also noteworthy are Henry Flynt and Edward Kienholz who, in addition to Kosuth, take credit for having coined this term (Buchloh 1998).

8   Thomas Crow (2006, p. 56) references Buchloh's aforementioned text (see previous note), Charles Harrison's text 'Art Object and Artwork' (in the same catalogue as Buchloh's contribution) and Jeff Wall's 1991 publication *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel*, Art Metropole, Toronto.

9   With this term, Longoni references both that which lies outside of the centre as well as centres that are not recognised as such.

10 The group was involved in various projects, including the project Tucumán Arde.

11 Renzi, J. P. 1971, *Panfleto no. 3: La Nueva Moda* (Pamphlet No. 3: The New Fashion) cited in Longoni 2004, p. 101. Here, Renzi was, for one, reacting to how Lucy R. Lippard and Jorge Glusberg chose to classify the Grupo de Vanguardia de Rosario as Conceptualism.

12 Acha, J. 1984, 'Teoría y práctica no-objetualistas en América Latina', in *Ensayos y ponencias Latino-americanistas* cited in Ramírez 1999, p. 61.

13 Masotta carried out similar attempts to manipulate the media.

14 In this particular case it remains unclear as to whether the exhibition conceptualised for the CAYC was actually held at the museum or merely consisted of the folder with suggestions for artistic realisations (Kutasy 2009).

28

Subversive Practices: Art Under Conditions of Political Repression in 1960s and 1980s
South America and Europe - Iris Dressler   29

I

CONCEPTUALISM AND INTER-SECTIONAL READINGS

I

Introduction Conceptualism and Intersectional Readings

Nick Aikens
Annie Fletcher

What would intersectional readings of conceptualism look like? At first glance the two terms are bound up in seemingly diverging histories and genealogies. However, as art historian Alexandra Kokoli points out in the opening essay of this section, Conceptualism has long been defined through its 'elasticity' as a concept and mode of working. Intersectionality, the term originally coined in 1989 by legal theorist Kimberly Crenshaw to describe the manner in which different forms of class, gender and sexual oppression intersect was mobilised as a means through which to name complex struggles that needed to be understood from multiple perspectives. The texts in this section do not, thankfully, stay too close to strict definitions of either term. Rather, through the analysis of specific artists and artworks they serve as a means to expand the art historical and interpretative frameworks of both conceptualism and intersectionality.

Kokoli examines the work of Quilla Constance, 'aka QC or #QC, the post-punk, neo-glam, gender-questioning performance persona of Jennifer Allen'. Through analysing the artist's address of normative representations of women and the family via the highly provocative use of trademarks, logos and QR codes, Constance offers a form of what Kokoli refers to as 'plurisignation' — multiple signs offered simultaneously and in the case of Constance delivered at a high decibel level. It is this 'intelligibility' that Kokoli sees as offering a productive resonance with the elasticity of conceptualism.

Theorist and writer Elisabeth Lebovici begins her essay 'The Death of the Author in the Age of the Death of the Authors' by introducing the index as a strategy. Looking at the work of conceptual artist Philippe Thomas within the context of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, the index, for Lebovici, becomes a signifier and refusal of both

disappearance and death, inverting the common notion of conceptualism's striving towards dematerialisation. Drawing on queer theory and specifically the writing of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the text skilfully repositions concealment and disclosure, or naming (indexing) and (de)materialisation of matters of life and death, within the context of a homophobic Western epistemological tradition.

In the third essay artist and researcher susan pui san lok looks at the sculpture of Kumiko Shimizu that adorned the exterior of the Hayward Gallery as part of the landmark 1989 exhibition 'The Other Story' alongside Tomoko Takahashi's installation. Shimizu's lavatories and wheelbarrows, taken from the scrapheap to the exterior of the art establishment become 'a decorative indictment of the capital's disparities of wealth and power'. Lok goes on to argue that we view Takahashi's sprawling installations comprising laptops, wires and electronic goods in the spirit of radical postwar artist collective Gutai group's aim to call the 'material to life'. Lok's analysis re-evaluates these artists' use of junk: 'Salvaged "ready-used" objects and industrial materials' she concludes 'are appropriated, not to evacuate their function and examine their objecthood, but to question their presumed redundancy and re-assert their immanent socio-economic, technological and political relations'. Indeed, it is through the strategy of repurposing materials, terms and theoretical frameworks that this section invites the reader to consider the possibilities for conceptualism and intersectionality cohabiting different artistic practices and analyses.

Read My QR: Quilla Constance and the Conceptualist Promise of Intelligibility[1]

Alexandra Kokoli

This essay contributes to the ongoing questioning of the definitions and boundaries of conceptualism from intersectional feminist psychoanalytic perspectives, and specifically through the practice of Quilla Constance, aka QC or #QC, the post-punk, neo-glam, gender-questioning performance persona of Jennifer Allen. A songwriter and musician, painter and visual performer in costumes designed and made by Jennifer Allen, #QC's performance practice occasionally incorporates fragments of musical performances on cello and always includes some crypto-linguistic vocal improvisation, a verbal automatism that references trance states and 'speaking in tongues' as well as scat singing in jazz.

Conceptualism has been approached as not merely a diverse and contested field but one that has historically enjoyed a centrifugal elasticity, and that even offers some in-built resistance to hegemonic dominance. In the words of Stephen Bann (1999, p. 3), 'Global conceptualism may be the visible proof that the Western hegemony in ways of seeing, ushered in by the perspectival science of the Renaissance, no longer holds sway'. Others, like Jörg Heiser, introduced intentionally eccentric approaches to conceptualism that questioned its rationalist sheen. Although Romanticism could be considered as the 'antithesis of conceptualism', Heiser (2007, p. 135) proposed that preoccupations with beauty and its opposite, the unconscious, or the

'sociological, [the] psychological, [and the] personal' can and do enrich the conceptualist canon. Thinking back on his formulation of 'Romantic Conceptualism', the central concept of a 2007 exhibition at BAWAG P.S.K. Contemporary, Heiser (2011, p. 1) adds that conceptualism could be understood as dialectical, 'as much about what it doesn't say as what it does, as much about "pure" information as the 'impure''. Considered retrospectively and inclusively, the promise of intelligibility that conceptualism typically offered has always been somewhat impure in so far as it was critical of codes and systems of signification, particularly from feminist points of view. In the *Post-Partum Document* (1974–8), for example, Mary Kelly (1999) not only proposed an intervention in Jacques Lacan's incomplete formulation of the maternal subject, but did so through the comingling and staged confrontations of a variety of signifying systems and collections of signs and symbols, each of which was proven insightful as well as inadequate in its own unique way. From another perspective and evoking Dada experimentation, Ewa Partum's poems were cut up and scattered in public places, to be collected by passers-by: *Active Poetry* (1971) simultaneously relies on and targets the assumed intelligibility of language, teasing out its contingency.

In #QC's work there is little evidence of an investment in debates around conceptualism. There is, however, an intense exploration of the boundaries between sense, nonsense and different kinds of sensibility and intelligibility, acknowledging the inflection through power relations of knowledge and its systems. As the risk-taking trickster that she is, she performatively revisits signs and symbols of social class and racial difference, such as afro combs and the Burberry plaid, including classist and racist ones, like the golliwog, while mobilising feminist psychoanalytic understandings of subjectivity that foreground its contingency, fragility and implication in systems of signification.

Since 2015, Allen has developed a way of operating in which each exhibition of her work is supplemented by paid commissions to art writers and theorists to respond to her developing practice; this key component of her practice is planned for and costed in her funding applications. Spending valuable resources on stimulating the generation of critical discourse about an art practice that purports to dismantle or transcend discourse may seem contradictory. But this is #QC's way: having her cake and eating it; or wearing both a platform and a flip flop, as she did for part of her performance at the launch of the exhibition *Transcending the Signified* (2017), MOCA London (fig. 1). As well as signalling split loyalties, the platform and the flip-flop create a calculated imbalance: wearing them, #QC performs ambivalence as well as, literally, instability. In this performance, #QC stopped in the middle of changing her footwear into something more comfortable, in a real or simulated moment of hesitation, while revealing something fundamental in both her aesthetics and ethics. It is ironic and revealing that #QC makes work *on* unintelligibility while making hard work *of* communicating with her audience, human and non-human. Significantly, it is the signified (the idea being carried by the signifier), and not the signifier itself (the carrier of meaning) that is being allegedly transcended in this body of work. Lack of understanding is framed by an intense, almost tortuous effort to put herself across, to utter what cannot be said. To quote Heiser again, #QC's work tests '"the public" (...) as a terrain for intimacy, precisely because intimacy is no longer protected by a strict sense of "the private"'. The stakes of togetherness between artist and audience are at once underlined by the artist's vulnerability and framed by her enthusiastic determination to relate without conversation. Words devolve or evolve into noise and stick in #QC's throat: she coughs and retches (fig. 2); she writhes on the floor. But she also plays the cello and knowingly charms her sometimes disconcerted audience (fig. 3). Another, even more fundamental

Fig. 1 Quilla Constance, Celsnakar Performance, Transcending the Signified, 2017, MOCA London, 11 June. Photograph by Alexandra Kokoli.

Fig. 3 Quilla Constance, Celsnakar Performance, Transcending the Signified, 2017, MOCA London, 11 June. Photograph by Alexandra Kokoli.
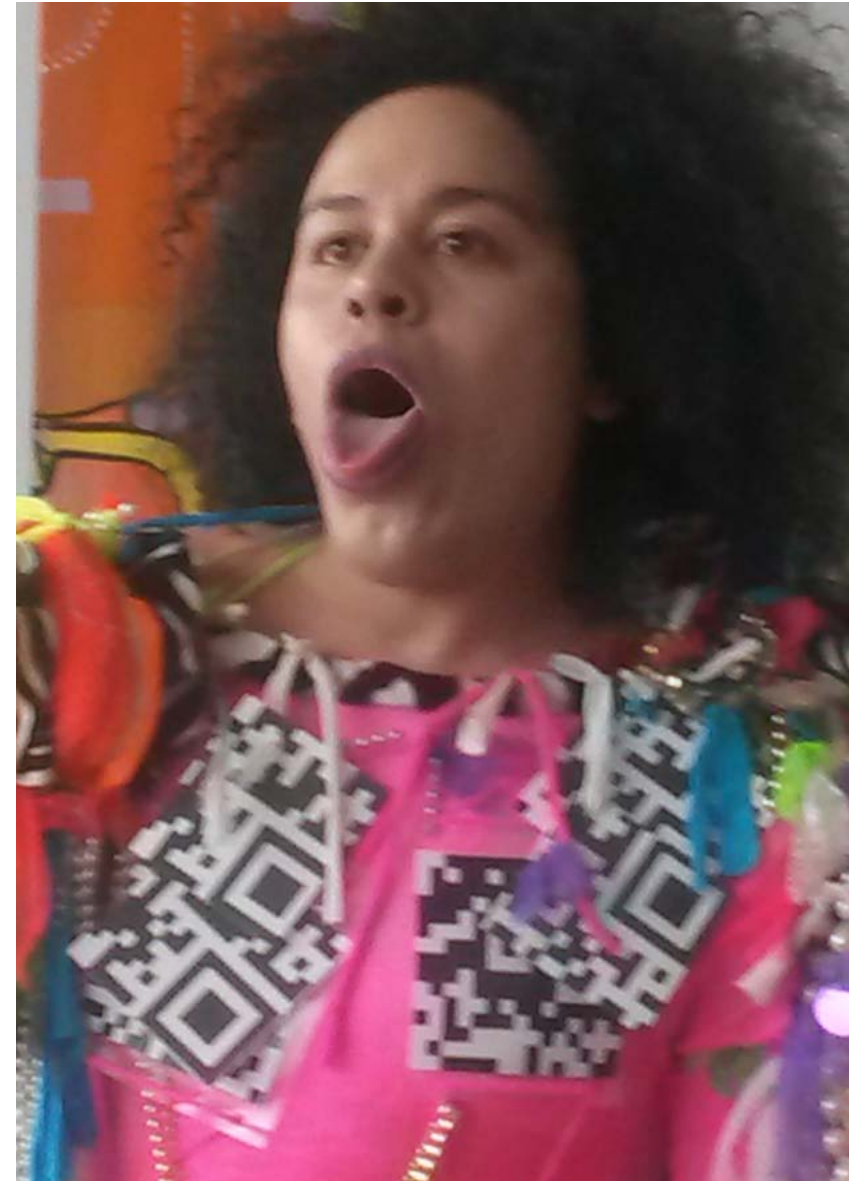
Fig. 2 Quilla Constance, Celsnakar Performance, Transcending the Signified, 2017, MOCA London, 11 June. Photograph by Alexandra Kokoli.

tension is set up here, mirroring the first, between denying and inviting the production of discourse: this tension is between a studied performance of competence in codes (music, body language, branding and other cultural systems of signification such as food) and a visceral demonstration of the painful awareness of their inadequacy. If 'signifieds' are indeed transcended, it is by painstakingly emptying out their 'signifiers'; and this emptying out is achieved not by their avoidance but through their excessive, accelerated and improper circulation, until they stop making sense: 'If we examine the process of "understanding" people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought', wrote the Martinican author and philosopher Édouard Glissant (1997, pp. 189–90), 'we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce.'

Signifiers abound and overwhelm, until in the 2016 video, *#QC_001*, #QC's eyes turn into QR codes, indecipherable by the viewer's own eyes and yet pregnant with withheld meaning. 'The piece sees Allen channel a guttural, sub-linguistic vocal performance (as #QC) – invoking a spirit of conviction reminiscent of the "holy fool" (Constance 2016). QR (i.e., Quick Response) codes make for irresistible targets in #QC's attack on intelligibility: these hyper-signifiers condense and store disproportionately large amounts of signifieds, although their reading cannot be directly performed by human eyes and requires technological mediation. The excess of QR codes is mirrored and further magnified and spoofed in #QC's costumes, which feature laminated QR code fragments strung together and looped around #QC's body. The signifying connotation of a QR code is so pronounced and so excessive that it threatens to recede back into purely visual form. #QC's necklace of DIY laminates (fig. 2

and 3) merely mimics QR codes, itself consisting of QR code-resembling fragments. Seen this way, #QC's QR embellishments may be approached as Suprematist riffs. Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) was also arguably an attempt to transcend the signified: 'To the Suprematist the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling' (Malevich 2003, p. 67). Interestingly, Suprematism has been revisited by other black artists who test the limits and borders of conceptualism, including Rasheed Araeen. In his series of paintings, *Opus* (2016), and painted wooden lattice, *Red Square (After Malevich)* (2015), Araeen revisits the spiritual and political aspirations of European Modernism to assimilate them into his own universalist project, tracing a fine but strong line 'between the representation of universality as idealisation, the elevation of a god or ideal, and structural, or better, infrastructural equality' (Newman 2017, p. 71). To the strings of tensions, contrasts and contradictions evoked by #QC, Suprematism adds a utopianism that is open to decolonial revisions towards radical democracy, as well as another pressing preoccupation: is meaning antithetical to feeling? In her aptly titled book *Read My Desire*, Joan Copjec rises in defence of the intelligibility of power as well as the intelligibility of affect, summarising her aims as follows: 'to urge analysts of culture to become literate in desire, to learn how to read what is inarticulable in cultural statements' (Copjec 1994, p. 14).

In an earlier work, #QC stages situations of pronounced affect that present themselves to be read as well as, to a degree, empathetically experienced, however disturbing this might be. In the two-channel digital video installation *Happy Christmas Mom & Dad* (2006) (fig. 4 and 5), she offers her parents (played expertly by Allen's own parents, neither of whom have an acting background) an exotic dance to the tune of a popular Christmas song. Predictably, this Freudian nightmare of a Christmas present provokes her parents'

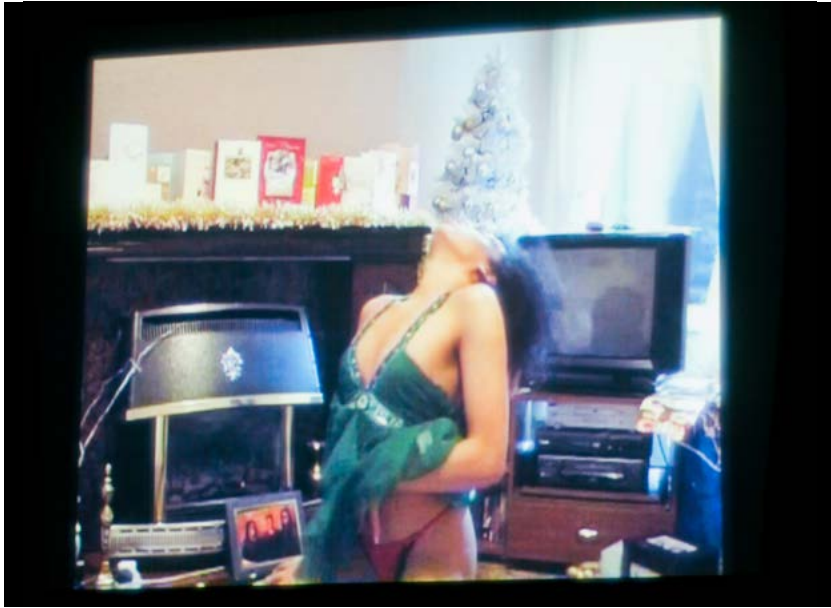Fig. 4 Quilla Constance (aka Jennifer Allen), Happy Christmas Mom and Dad, 2006, digital video installation. Photograph by Andrew Crowe.

Fig. 5 Quilla Constance (aka Jennifer Allen), Happy Christmas Mom and Dad, 2006, digital video installation. Photograph by Andrew Crowe.

Fig. 6 Quilla Constance, Pukijam, 2015, digital video still.

Fig. 7 Quilla Constance, Pukijam, 2015, digital video still.

mortification: (for dad) repressed anger with a hint of incestuous desire, and (for mum) devastation and worry over the father's reaction. Allen has remarked how no other work of hers, including some of the more intense performances, has generated as strong emotional reactions as this video in her audiences. 'How could you do this to your parents?' some have reportedly asked her in disbelief, while others walked away in disgust. To an attentive viewer, it is easy to see that the dance and the reactions were filmed separately and subsequently synced together to create the illusion of #QC stripping in front of the parents. The use of North American spelling for 'mom' suggests the context for this devastating undoing of the family romance: this isn't just any Christmas but a schmaltzy, over-produced and tele-visually mediated Christmas, an ideological instrument for hyper-normative social reproduction and seasonal consumerism in one sanitised package. Revisiting the incest taboo in a later song video, *Snow Daddy* (2010), #QC restages her family-busting striptease in the large living room of an opulent country house, this time with professional actors. *Snow Daddy*, Allen noted in an e-mail exchange with the author in November 2017, 'operates as a semblance of pop [...] the video occupies a [...] liminal space through its refusal to fully commit and conform to the requirements of pop'. *Snow Daddy*, in other words, ups the ante not only in terms of production values but as full-blown 'genre-fuck', a term obviously modelled on 'gender-fuck', which not only blurs the boundaries between established genres but also questions the separation between fiction and experience, reading and living (Kokoli 2016, pp. 70–1).

According to her website, 'QC over-identifies with an "exotic" militant punk persona to interrogate category-driven capitalist networks'. One of the most contro-versial manifestations of that persona is a punk gender-critical subversion of the repugnantly racist caricature of the golliwog in *Pukijam* (2015), a single and video that became the centrepiece of her solo

show of the same name at 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning, London curated by Maria Kheirkhah. The golliwog originates in a children's story by Florence Kate Upton, *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls* (1895), which was hugely popular at the time of its original publication. 'The story begins with two Dutch dolls, Peg and Sara Jane, on the loose in a toy shop, encoun-tering "a horrid sight, the blackest gnome." He was a caricature of American black-faced minstrels – in effect, the caricature of a caricature' (Pilgrim 2000). In *Pukijam*, this caricature of a caricature is caricatured anew into an athletic androgynous version of the Joker from the DC Comics universe, while at one point deep-fried drumsticks appear to stand in for the two Dutch dolls (fig. 6). The drumsticks get eaten soon after. The complex links between food, a fascinatingly rich cultural signifier, and intersectionally framed identity have been explored by many artists, from Mike Leigh in *Abigail's Party* (1977) to Jo Spence's phototherapy sessions with Rosy Martin and others. Fine china tea cups and cardboard buckets of fried chicken stand for opposed and oppositional British subjectivities and social positions, with #QC boldly and repeatedly crossing the boundary between them. In *Pukijam*, we see her daintily sipping tea and in the next moment gnawing on a drum stick, making a mockery of associated stereo-types. She preciously dabs paint on a canvas while drinking Jamaican Red Stripe lager ('Jamaican Pride in a Bottle', as the brand's slogan announces), a subversive allusion to Jackson Pollock's 'macho propensity for whiskey drinking' as she wrote me in a 2018 e-mail (fig. 7). In #QC's mediatised universe, fresh vegetables lose their innocence. Among the revolving objects and foods in *Pukijam* is a fennel root, chosen, as I was told, for its shape and colour, and also because of its absur-dity. I was reminded that 'finnochio' is a homophobic slur in Italian, and realised that #QC does not merely highlight the capacity of objects to signify, but encou-rages an almost paranoid reader position, squeezing hidden meanings out of stones, or fennel roots.

Fig. 8 Quilla Constance, Vjazzled single cover artwork, 2013.

Fig. 10 Quilla Constance (aka Jennifer Allen), Happy Christmas Mom and Dad, 2006, cropped screen capture. Photograph by Alexandra Kokoli.
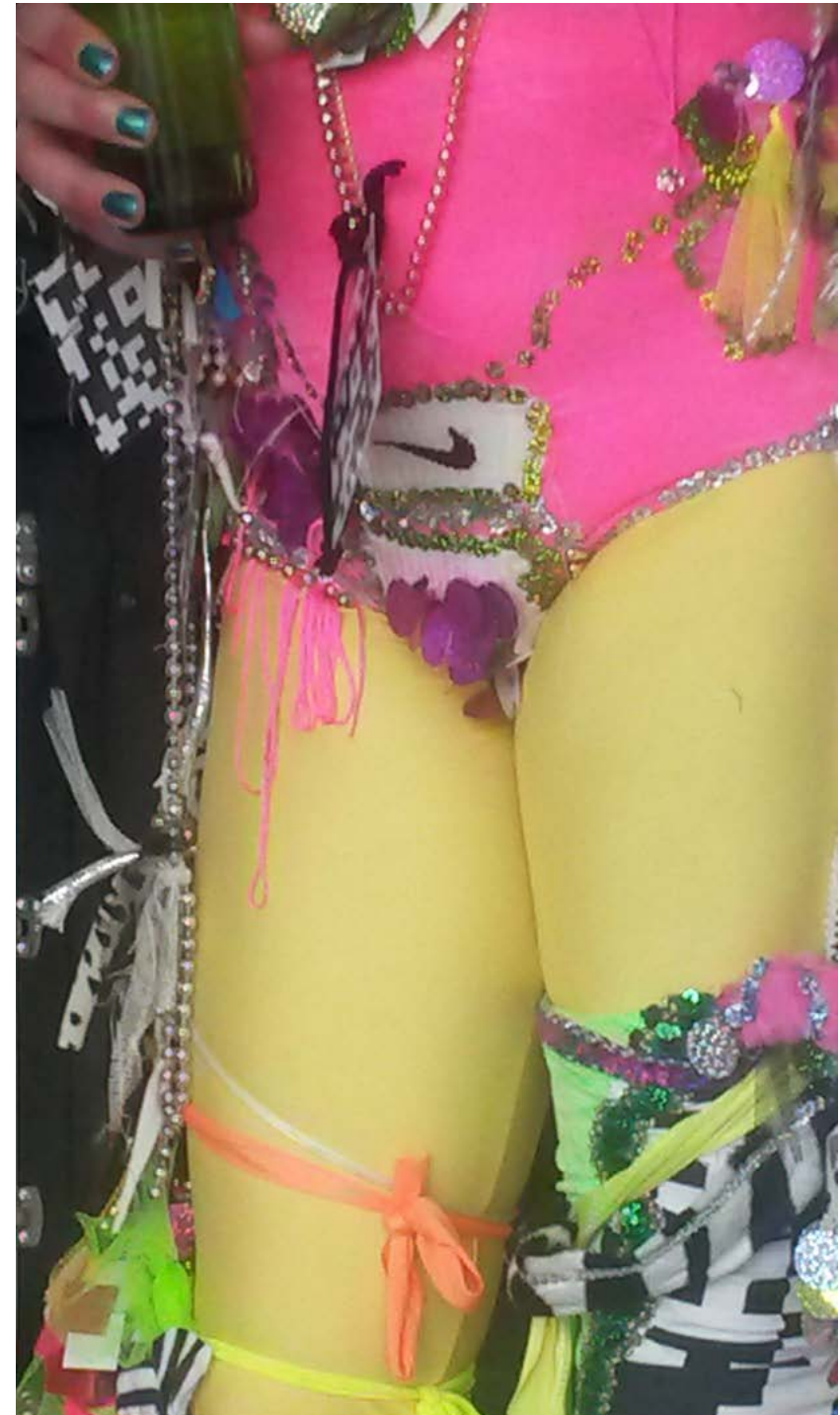
Fig. 9 Quilla Constance, Celsnakar Performance, Transcending the Signified, 2017, MOCA London, 11 June.

In the single *Vjazzled* (2014), #QC appropriates the design of the Coca-Cola logo as a humorously illicit brand mash-up (fig. 8). Quilla Constance as Coca-Cola forces a daringly ambitious association in the self-branding stakes. The title *Vjazzled*, condenses references to jazz, vajazzling, namely, as the Collins English Dictionary has it, 'the practice of decorating the region around the female genital organs with jewellery', while also mobilising the associations of the capital 'V' in British popular culture. V is for 'victory', as in Winston Churchill's famous photographs celebrating the end of the Second World War; but its reverse, with the back of the hand facing outwards, forms the British equivalent of the raised middle finger, a typically punk gesture of contemptuous exasperation and dismissal. In *Vjazzled*, this keen attention to how things signify and how malleable and unreliable such processes might be, is turned to the famous Burberry plaid, to foreground an edgier kind of appropriation. The iconic Burberry plaid design had so successfully and for so long been a purely visual signifier for the brand and all it stood for (sober fitness for purpose, outdoorsiness, a timeless and uniquely British understated luxury), until it became a symbol of misappropriation, thanks to its embrace by nouveaux riche working-class celebrities and, subsequently, the readers of the gossip magazines in which they featured (Sauers 2009).

Logos and trademarks are found in high circulation in #QC's work, for similar reasons as QR codes: as privileged hyper-signifiers of denotation, dragging with them complex chains of connotation. #QC's latest vajazzling involved a flipped Nike swish in crochet (fig. 9), resonating with Rosemarie Trockel's machine-knitted Playboy bunnies and other logos, commercial and political. The flipped swish may be decoded as a deliberate subversion of a hugely successful logo: it appears backwards; it is knitted in sweaty yarn, rather than appearing in a high-tech, sport-friendly smart textile. Succumbing to the temptation to follow the logo, I discovered that this Nike swish is the exact negative of the one worn by #QC's seething (and/or turned on) father in *Happy Christmas Mom & Dad* (fig. 10). The undoing of the family romance is woven through #QC's entire oeuvre, signalling the radical ambition of her project: if 'the Oedipal complex is a machine which fashions the appropriate forms of sexual individuals' (Rubin 1997, p. 51), #QC's breach of the incest taboo sabotages patriarchal social reproduction by interrupting both structures of kinship and of language, as Claude Lévi-Strauss outlined and Jacques Lacan elaborated.

'Plurisignation', meaning, literally, signs or marks in great number, was originally 'used by [American philosopher Phillip Ellis] Wheelwright in *The Burning Fountain* (1954) to indicate that a word, a passage or a whole work may have various levels and meanings of what is described as "semantic thrust"' (Cuddon 2013). Rather than polysemy or ambiguity of meaning, 'plurisignation' suggests an uncomfortable crowding of potential threads of interpretation demanding to be picked up and sometimes leading in radically different directions. The term has been redeployed by Karla Holloway in reference to African-American women's fiction, where it marks a kind of 'internal displacement' or 'dissonance' (Ahern, 2014). In #QC, internal displacements are multiplied and externalised, worn literally on her sleeve; dissonance is performed loud if not clear, in an 'impure' voice of 'strident insistency', as in the first generation of punk women (Frith & McRobbie 1990; Nehring 1997, p. 158). As well as being proudly unladylike, screaming and 'cacophony in music' has been interpreted as 'an attempt to get a grip on the way the whole culture sounds' (Nehring 1997, p. 155).

To return to Joan Copjec, a key psychoanalytic cultural project has been to dismantle the pervasive romantic notion of the inscrutable – unreadable – subject, by demonstrating instead that the subject holds no

unfathomable secret. More accurately, 'the subject is subject to the equivocations of the signifier' (1994, p. 68). #QC performs herself into an unruly and disruptive subjectivity by subjecting herself to a deluge of the most polluted, ambiguous, contested and controversial forces of signifying equivocation. She falters and stammers, she stumbles and hesitates, but weathers the waves of plurisignation by shouting out and thrusting back.

REFERENCES

Ahern, M. K. 2014, 'Creative Multivalence: Social Engagement beyond Naturalism in Gwendolyn Brooks's Maud Martha', *African American Review*, vol. 47, no. 2, pp. 313–26.

Bann, Stephen. 1999, 'Introduction', in L. Camnitzer, J. Farver and R. Weiss (eds), *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exhibition catalogue, 28 April–29 August, Queens Museum of Art, New York, pp. 3–13.

Constance, Q. 2016, #QC: *Quilla Constance_aka_ Jennifer Allen*, viewed 7 November 2019, http://www.quillaconstance.com/hashtagqc/.

Copjec, J. 1994, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Cuddon, J. A. 2013, 'Plurisignation', in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Frith, S. and McRobbie, A. 1990, 'Rock and sexuality', in S. Frith and A. Goodwin (eds), *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, Routledge, London, pp. 317–32.

Glissant, É. 1997, 'For Opacity', in trans. B. Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, pp. 189–94.

Heiser, J. 2007, 'A Romantic Measure', in C. Kintisch and E. Seifermann (eds), *Romantischer Konzeptualismus/ Romantic Conceptualism*, Kunsthalle Nürnberg and BAWAG Foundation, Nuremburg and Vienna, pp. 134–49.

----. 2011, 'Moscow, Romantic, Conceptualism, and After', *e-flux journal*, no. 29, pp. 1–14, viewed 17 October 2018, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/29/68122/moscow-romantic-conceptualism-and-after/.

Kelly, M. 1999, *Post-Partum Document*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Kokoli, A. 2016, *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice*, Bloomsbury, London.

Malevich, K. 2003, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*, Dover Publications, Mineola, New York.

Nehring, N. 1997, *Popular Music, Gender, and Post-modernism*, Sage, London.

Newman, M. 2017, 'Equality, Resistance, Hospitality: Abstraction and Universality in the Work of Rasheed Araeen', in N. Aikens (ed.), *Rasheed Araeen: A Retrospective*, ed. JRP|Ringier, Zurich, pp. 65–74.

Pilgrim, D. 2000, 'The Golliwog Caricature', *The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*, viewed 17 October 2018, https://ferris.edu/jimcrow/golliwog/.

Rubin, G. 1997, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex', in L. Nicholson (ed.), *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Routledge, New York, pp. 27–62.

Sauers, J. 2009, 'Burberry Stays on Top by Keeping Soap Opera Stars Away from its Styles', *Jezebel*, 8 September, viewed 17 October 2018, https://jezebel.com/5354730/burberry-stays-on-top-by-keeping-soap-opera-stars-away-from-its-styles.

The Death of the Author in the Age of the Death of the Authors

Elisabeth Lebovici

I for my part venerate the inventor of Indexes, and I know not to whom to yield the preference, either to Hippocrates, who was the first great anatomiser of the human body, or to that unknown labourer in literature who first laid open the nerves and arteries of a book.
– Isaac Disraeli, 1879

Book indexes are useful and they are attractive. Perhaps you as reader, will go there first to nibble through the names, those you find relevant – or irrelevant – to your interests. Indexes establish a bond between the book and the reader, a pact of trust, of confidence. They belong to systems well-known by readers: the nomenclature of names in alphabetical order. Perhaps because of the bureaucratic anonymity of their 'unknown laborer', they pertain to the formats used and misused by Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language's *Index* series. The first, *Index 01* (1972) consisted of a set of filing cabinets that stored their entire textual output, with printed indexes indicating the compatibility of such writing with each other in the collective's discourse placed on a wall. One might also recall, the use of loose index cards by 'compiler' Lucy R. Lippard (2009) – a word she preferred to 'curator' – in her number exhibitions (1969–73) in which artists' instructions replaced the artists themselves. Or the organisation of Seth Siegelaub's catalogues, simply publishing lists of chosen works as exhibitions. In this space of the index a fundamental proposal by artist Philippe Thomas (1951–95) also finds its relevance, and releases a 'Pleasure of the Text', which I aim here to make clearer.

Claire Burrus, *Sujet à discrétion (Subject to discretion)*, 1985, 3 framed colour photographs (65 x 80 cm each) and 3 title cards (4 x 12 cm each) with text 'ANONYME la mer en méditerranée (vue générale) multiple', 'PHILIPPE THOMAS autoportrait (vue de l'esprit) multiple', 'CLAIRE BURRUS autoportrait (vue de l'esprit) pièce unique'. Courtesy the artist.

Philippe Thomas, *Hommage à Philippe Thomas. Autoportrait en groupe*, 1985, colour photograph (153 x 200 cm) and title card (4 x 10 cm). Collection of Daniel Bosser, Paris.

What is – and was – Thomas's fundamental proposal? It is – and was – to disseminate the author's name. In offering at the address of each and every collector to endorse the signature of the work – that is, to sign it with their own name – such work would then bear the addressee's name and represent him or her. As authors, they become what has been called, in the literary case of Fernando Pessoa, heteronyms: fully fledged characters endowed with their own biographies, genders, race, sexualities and voices. They may also encounter each other and engage in a conversation, facilitated by the creation of Thomas's agency, readymades belong to everyone® (operating from 1987–93), which advertised: 'Art history in search of characters' (les ready-mades appartiennent à tout le monde® *Publicité, publicité*, 1988) or 'You can change it all by saying yes' (ready-mades belong to everyone® *You can change it all by saying yes*, 1988). Their names figure on the covers of books: Daniel Bosser, *Philippe Thomas Declines His Identity* (Paris: Galerie Claire Burrus/Editions Yellow Now, 1987) and Laura Carpenter, *Insights* (New York: Curt Marcus Gallery, 1989). They are declined on each label: Claire Burrus, *Sujet à discrétion* (1985), Jacques Salomon, *Etude de Cartel n°6* (1990), Alain Clairet, *By the Same Token* (1992). They even 'sign' an exhibition: capc-Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, *Feux pâles*, with the assistance of the agency les ready-made appartiennent à tout le monde®, 7 December 1990–3 March 1991. They may also figure in the back matter of a book, as indexed names mingling with others. This is where Thomas's fundamental proposal finds its most immediate effect: the dissemination of the author's name into a number of authors, becomes most relevant in a list.

The readily performative aspect of the index may be in fact jubilatory. Such 'Pleasure of the Text' struck, for instance, when the index of my book was composed (Lebovici 2017). Like any list in which Thomas's work is recorded, 'my' index crafts a space where the

readymades belong to everyone®, *La pétition de principe (The petition of principle)*, 1988, black and white photograph (173 x 123 cm), palm tree, pedestal table (50 x 60 x 60 cm), visitor's book, pen and penholder, display stand for calling cards bearing the name of the agency les readymade appartiennent à tout le monde, 32 rue de Lappe, 75011 Paris, (01) 43 55 36 90 / (01) 48 06 15 76; title card with text (4.9 x 11 cm): 'La pétition de principe 1988'. Collection M.J.S., Paris, long-term loan, collection of Mudam Luxembourg, Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean.

heteronyms are fully endowed with ambiguity: the proper names become a place of confusion. A trouble is at work, breaking the separation that identifies an author and a work. Who are the 'characters' and where do they belong? The confusion eventually contaminates the whole index from A to Z. It is also carving a space where knowledge is put into question; not only because you happen to know or not know where or when to attribute authorship or objecthood to the proper names listed, but because you are questioning the relation between what is known and unknown. In order to fully perform the aesthetic challenge, you have to know what type of machinery is at work but at the same time, you must undo this knowledge, in order to appreciate the fiction at play, the performance of the works and characters displayed.

*

'Obituary: Philippe Thomas', *The Independent*, Friday 29 September 1995. By Adrian Dannatt.

Philippe Thomas ceased to exist long before he died. Before vanishing physically, at the age of 44, he had already disappeared altogether from the art world, not through neglect but rather as a deliberate strategy.

Pessoa is the Portuguese word for 'person', and there is nothing he less wanted to be. Again and again, in both poetry and prose, Pessoa denied that he existed as any kind of distinctive individual. 'I'm beginning to know myself. I don't exist', he writes in one poem. 'I'm the gap between what I'd like to be and what others have made of me. … That's me. Period' (Kirsch 2017).

While withdrawing the privilege of authorship regulated through the authority of a proper name – Fernando Pessoa, Philippe Thomas – something about the death of the author is performed.

Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story (...)? Is it (...) the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it (...) the author, professing certain literary ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neuter, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing (Barthes 2002, p. 221).

Whether one follows Roland Barthes, professing that the death of the author is conveyed by the birth of the reader, or Michel Foucault, understanding the text as 'an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears' (1977, p. 116), what can one make of such disappearance at a time of the deaths of the authors, that is, the time of AIDS? What can one make of the speculative moment when 'the printed word, necessarily anachronistic, is where the writer confronts her status as a dead author' (Gallop 2011, p. 114) at the time of dying? How can a literary theoretical concept and the literal drama that affects a number of bodily existences be thought together?

This is where Thomas's work (departing from first-person narratives on AIDS that mostly call attention to loss and mourning) corners a conceptual aesthetic strategy that appeals to a number of responses — from denial to anticipation — which touch and alter one's desire to acquire knowledge (Chambers 1988). For a moment, let's call this aesthetic strategy an artistic will, and in all senses of the term, 'will'.

I wish to associate this word with one of the first moves in alternate, queer kinship within the Western modern age, which can be found in the will of Rosa Bonheur (1822–99). A non-heterosexual, French painter, Bonheur is known for depicting farm oxen or horses in the grand scale of history painting, for having known Buffalo Bill, and also for being the first woman to be granted authorisation to wear pants in order to conduct her painting activity.

In the will she writes in 1898 (Bonheur 2012), she discards links to biological family, to request that her second partner, Anna Klumpke, a female painter with whom she lives and partakes in the collective activity of the studio, be given the role of her heir. She also wishes that both women, Rosa herself and her partner, should be buried with Rosa's first partner, Nathalie Micas, and the latter's mother, in the Micas family tomb in the Père Lachaise Cemetery, thus inscribing a solely matriarchal kinship in her will. Fuck the biological family!

In a way, Thomas's work discards biological family as well: or rather, it discards any claims to the 'natural' from the nature of agency itself. By endowing exterior gazes with the power to act, literally, within the limits of the work, becoming authors who are works, too, the paratext of production becomes a scene for 'a drama divided into people instead of into acts' (Zenith 2006). Thomas's work corroborates the actor-network theory promoted by Bruno Latour (2005), where what is human and non-human (e.g., artefacts, organisation structures) should be integrated into the same conceptual framework and assigned equal amounts of agency.

In an era of AIDS before the availability of multiple therapies, the anticipation of death is inscribed into Thomas's practice: as an act of disappearance, as an art of dissemination that will eventually find its performativity within a list of relevant names: the index of a book, a collection's catalogue, a museum registry, in the grey matters of art history and their institutional frameworks. Since the mid-1960s, much Conceptual art has been haunted by the 'desire to make art disappear — into architecture, into text, magazine articles, posters, into the land, into public urban functions, into
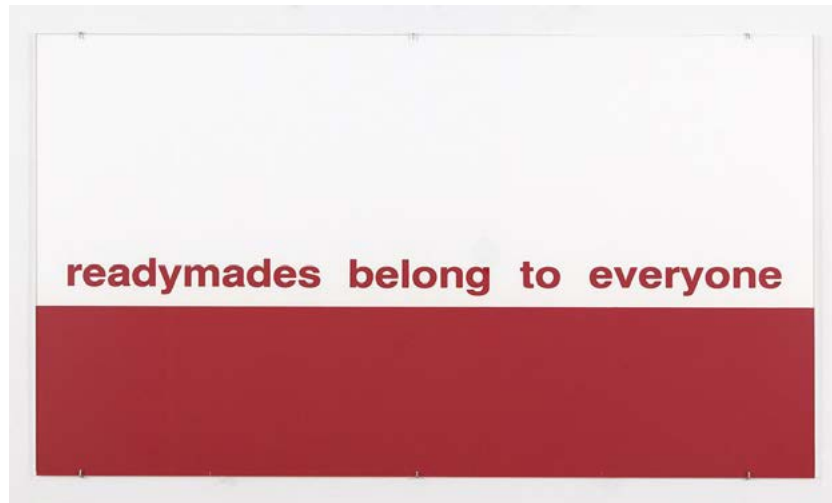
Alain Clairet, *Untitled*, 1987, screen print on paper and title card, 79.4 x 141 cm.

Edouard Merino, *Insight*, 1989, cibachrome print on aluminium (120 x 180 cm), title card with text (4.5 x 11 cm): 'EDOUARD MERINO Insight 1989'.

air — while at the same time depending upon precisely the conditions which prevent its disappearance', writes art historian Michael Newman (1999, p. 218). Indeed, the dematerialisation of art occurs precisely through its inversion, a movement of vast materialisation. But there is more to that here, which to my mind refers to the abovementioned tradition of the 'will' and its queer subversion. There is a mystery and a turn of a screw: a conceptual transition into the world, where disappearance is not synonymous with death, but with survival too. The mystery in Thomas's work progresses what literary critic D. A. Miller has called an 'open secret', which operates as 'the double bind of a secrecy that must always be rigorously maintained in the face of a secret that everybody already knows' (1998, p. 195).

Such an open secret is inscribed in a history of sexuality. Foucault has detailed the manifold ways in which sexuality has become the confessional 'truth' of a person, a truth that is made to speak the binary language of hetero- or homo-normativity. Thus reciprocally, the medium of speech is the medium for deciphering sexuality, conceived as a concealed meaning that can be made transparent to scrutiny. This disclosure is at once 'compulsory and forbidden', as described in *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick coins the closet as an operation that makes sexuality into a secret that can be known, privileging certain kinds of knowingness to circulate. *Epistemology of the Closet* addresses a structure of knowledge, which we call Western thought, and which is embedded in a structurally homophobic regime. 'This book', writes Sedgwick, 'will argue that an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that is does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition'. The pleasure of Sedgwick's texts pulls the reader into the project of investigating the social meanings and violent force-fields generated by the
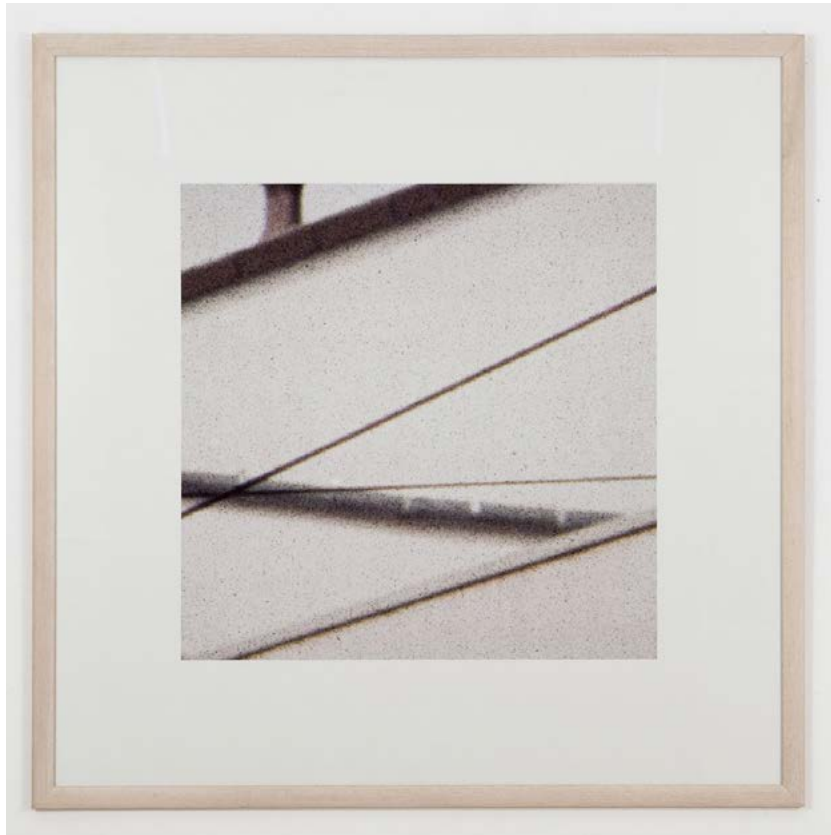
Eva Felten, *untitled*, 1992, photograph, 124.1 x 124.1 cm.

Installation of the agency readymades belong to everyone® and its showroom, Museé d'art moderne et contemporain, Geneva, 1995.

crisis of homosexual/heterosexual definition, tracing the connections between definitions and other universal modern categorisations, such as secrecy and disclosure, private and public, knowledge and ignorance, masculine and feminine, to name only a few of the over twenty binary definitions discussed (Sedgwick 1993, p 48).

In the preface to the 2008 edition of *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick notes that the book was written in light of the 1986 Bowers v. Hardwick Supreme Court decision, which upheld a Georgia sodomy law (subsequently overturned by the Supreme Court in 2003 by Lawrence v. Texas). She also notes that it is hard to convey now the emergency of the late 1980s for the AIDS crisis, to which *Epistemology* was also a response:

> The history is important… for understanding some of the tonalities and cognitive structures of *Epistemology of the Closet*: how the punishing stress of loss, incomplete mourning, chronic dread, and social fracture, and the need for mobilizing powerful resources of resistance in the face of such horror, imprinted a characteristic stamp on much of the theory and activism of that time (Sedgwick 2008, p. xv).

In the age of AIDS, concealment and disclosure continue to be matters of life and death. The motto of ACT UP and, eventually, of all AIDS activism is 'Silence equals Death' (since 1987, when six gay activists in New York formed the Silence = Death Project and began plastering posters around the city featuring a pink triangle on a black background stating SILENCE = DEATH). But the practical matter of disclosing one's HIV status often involves dealing with the decision to allow access to this information to some and at the same time to denying access to others.

> People are social beings with needs to connect as well as needs to separate from others. In many ways, this is the paradox of the HIV dilemma. There are

conditions that justify withholding information about a person's HIV status from others... Yet, to obtain the much needed social support or because others may be affected, disclosure is necessary. The key to navigating the markers between private lives and shared ones is people's decisions to open up completely, partially, or keep their privacy boundaries closed (Green & Yep 2003, p. 17)

Knowing and not-knowing, knowledge and ignorance, speaking and non-speaking are hardly opposed in this complex setting, but overlap and inform each other in all sorts of formative and de-formative ways. In the parallel case that occupies us here, Thomas's aesthetic strategies also describe this interminable, formative and deformative process of revelation and occultation, by which each work produces its visibility, and its process of self-representation.

Let's then call the museum, the gallery, the catalogue's index, the art institution a closet, to name the process by which visibility negotiates itself, in a series of trans-formations opening up a private space to the public gaze, and devising techniques that theatricalise (make visible, or invisible) a secret in public space. The closet is a signifier for queerness in a heteronormative context, a queerness of which both open-ness and secrecy enable the paradoxical condition of being marginalised, while also being the focus of an intense secrecy. In the time of AIDS, Thomas's aesthetic strategies could well be carving a queer space in the art institution, a space continually in the process of constructing and deconstructing its heteronormative, prescriptive norms.

REFERENCES

Barthes, R. 2002, 'The Death of The Author' (1967–8), in A. McCleary and D. Finkelstein (eds), *The Book History Reader*, Routledge, New York.

Bonheur, R. 2012, *Ceci est mon testament* (1898), S. Robichon (ed.), iXe, Paris.

Chambers, R. 1998, *Facing It: AIDS Diaries and the Death of the Author*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

Disraeli, I. 1879, *'Literary Miscellanie'*, cited in H. B. Wheatley, *What is an Index? A Few Notes on Indexes and Indexers*, Longmans, Green and C°, London, viewed 26 March 2018, http://scans.library.utoronto.ca/pdf/5/5/listofbibliograp00johnuoft/listofbibliograp00johnuoft.pdf.

Foucault, M. 1977, 'What is an author', in D. F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Cornell University Press, New York.

Gallop, J. 2011, *The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Green, D. and Yep, P. 2003, *Privacy and disclosure of HIV in Interpersonal Relationships: A Sourcebook for Researchers and Practitioners*, Lawrence Erlbaum, London.

Kirsch, A. 2017, 'Fernando Pessoa's Disappearing Act', *New Yorker*, 4 September, viewed 31 December 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/09/04/fernando-pessoas-disappearing-act.

Latour, B. 2005, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Lebovici, E. 2017, *Ce que le sida m'a fait. Art et activisme à la fin du 20è siècle*, JRP|Ringier, Zurich.

Lippard, L. R. 2009, 'Curating by Numbers', *Tate Papers*, no. 12, viewed 26 March 2018, http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/7268.

Miller, D. A. 1988, *The Novel and the Police*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Newman, M. 1999, 'After Conceptual Art: Joe Scanlan's Nesting Bookcases, Duchamp, Design and the Impossibility of Disappearing', in M. Newman and J. Bird (eds), *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, Reaktion Books, London.

Sedgwick, E. K. 2008, Epistemology of the Closet, University of California Press, Berkeley.

----. 1993, *'Epistemology of the Closet'*, in H. Abelove, M. A. Barale and D. M. Halperin (eds), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Routledge, New York.

Zenith, R. 2006, 'Pessoa's Heteronyms', *Poetry International Web*, 1 July, viewed 31 December 2017, http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/cou_article/item/7096/Pessoas-Heteronyms.

Found and Lost: A Genealogy of Waste?

susan pui san lok

1 Some of the images that follow are really rubbish. Rubbish slides — images of rubbish, trash and rubbish or 'poor images' (Steyerl 2009). Bad in quality, low in resolution, diminished and deteriorated — closing in on the reproduced remains of the artwork accelerated towards dissolution — how does the work of art appear, or disappear?

2 The Van Abbemuseum was founded in 1936 by the tobacco industrialist Henri van Abbe. Joseph Amato writes, 'An average puff of a cigarette is estimated to contain 4 billion particles of dust' (2000, p. 3). Where there's tobacco, there's smoke; where there's smoke, there's usually fire and ash; and where there's art, I would say, there's also waste and dust.

INTRODUCING THREE OR FIVE SCENES

In 1989, Kumiko Shimizu adorned the exterior of the Hayward Gallery with *Painted Objects* — a wheel, wheelbarrow, typewriter, toilet and pram — curious jewels of salvaged goods, strung and hung from the rooftop, the concrete façade popping with colourful urban barnacles.

From the late 1990s, over a 10-year period, Tomoko Takahashi filled various London galleries and museums (as well as a tennis court and an abandoned office space), with their own discarded and neighbouring junk — from defunct computers to broken furniture, circuitries of desks, chairs and cables.

Between 1997 and 2005, Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier create *Atopia*, a divided and double installation between Berlin's DAAD offices and galleries. Outside, anti-pigeon devices cover a rooftop, an

Kumiko Shimizu, *Painted Objects*, 1989, found objects installed on exterior of the Hayward Gallery, London. Images courtesy the artist.

orderly and insistent deterrent. Inside, rubber oozes through galvanised steel shelving, slowly giving up its solidity. Across external and internal sites, imaginary bodies — avian and synthetic — are repelled and divided, expelled and dissolved. Later, an eponymous artists' book inscribes their transitional encounters in/between Berlin during a year away, abroad and adrift.[1] From the scant traces of Shimizu's and Takahashi's works, to the tactical 'absencing' of Phaophanit/Oboussier's practice, I take a cue from the tangles of rope, cable and string, to cast my own lines out: words and sentences to gnarl up the linear, to tamper with narratives, to reimagine and connect forgotten or unseen scenes, and venture a tentative constellation of waste and dust.[2]

SCENE ONE: LONDON, SOUTH

Shimizu's *Painted Objects* were created for the landmark 1989 exhibition, 'The Other Story', curated by Rasheed Araeen. Subtitled 'Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain' (the 'Afro-Asian' a contraction of African, Asian and Caribbean), the show was met with widely scathing, dismissive and at times vitriolic critical response, with little attention paid to the actual works, except to illustrate an assertion of inferiority or mimicry. A rare mention of Shimizu can be found in the Hayward exhibition archive, in one of the few defences mounted of 'The Other Story'. In a letter to the editor of the *Sunday Times*, Martin Russell writes to correct both Araeen and his most vehement critic, Brian Sewell, pointing astutely to the market interests in which criticism and art history are imbricated, and the economic as well as aesthetic stakes in play:

> The reason why the Afro-Asian artists have failed to achieve critical notice and establish a London market for their work is not what Rasheed Araeen or Brian Sewell assert. Araeen thinks the explanation lies in the prejudice of Europeans against other civilisations, the remnants of colonial and racial feelings, and the rise

of United States influence. Sewell states 'they are not good enough. They borrow all and contribute nothing'. The real reason is that English and American painting is mediocre... [and] Western art dealers have filled their store rooms with work produced by their chums and the chums of chums. They would be ruined if it were now recognized that they have missed the really inspired artists whose work is now on view at the Hayward.[3]

A second document responds to Sewell's specific attack on Shimizu:
Mr Sewell is of course right that the Hayward is an ugly building externally... [but] probably mentions [it] only to give himself an opportunity of disparaging the Japanese artist Kumiko Shimuzu [*sic*], who with humorous intent has hung sundry objects on it, 'all crudely painted in bright colours' as Mr Sewell puts it, though he admits all this 'may seem a witty criticism of the architecture'.[4]

I want to note the prospect of 'ruin' (the loss of wealth and reputation) and the hint at institutional critique, in order to move towards ruins or remains.

Meanwhile, Araeen (1989a, p. 95). introduces Shimizu as 'an artist who turns rubbish into art'. Describing her 'early environmental works' as influenced by Richard Long and Christo, and later projects in often derelict sites as 'critique[s] of the urban environment', he situates her in relation to two traditions: 'the use of found material, which goes back to Duchamp; and the relationship between art and building or architecture.'

Twenty years later, Jean Fisher touches briefly on Shimizu in her essay, 'The Other Story and the Past Imperfect', referring to her as 'an indirect heir to [an] historical strand' of practice represented by David Medalla and Li Yuan-chia. If Medalla was 'instrumental in introducing to London audiences avant-garde Fluxus-

like events, environments and installations from both Europe and Latin America', and Li is 'now credited as the "father" of Chinese abstraction', then Fisher's assertion may be read as a statement of Shimizu's affinity with everyday practices, participation and play as process, as well as art's relation to and as environment. One might then find connections between Li's *Hanging Disc Toys* (c.1980) or Medalla's ongoing *A Stitch in Time* (since 1967), in terms of the medium of suspension and the use of rudimentary weaving processes – one could see the building as the fabric on which Shimizu sews the detritus of the street; one could also then read Takahashi's arrangements as tapestries threaded through with leads and cables; or consider the literal tensions between string, rubber and steel in the work of Phaophanit/Oboussier.

However, I find the idea of 'inheritance' itself a little troubling, for the intimation of patrilinear descent or bequest. It is worth noting that in terms of age, there is at most a half-generation between Li and Shimizu, and only six years between Shimizu and Medalla. Moreover, as artists moving in the same circles, Medalla and Li might be understood less as Shimizu's 'elders' or benefactors, than as her contemporaries and peers.

The scant documentation available of Shimizu's work, her occlusion from art historical narratives and absence from public collections, and her later moves towards collaborative urban design projects, are all likely contributory factors to her being overlooked as an artist. But it is not my aim to piece together the few traces of her practice, nor argue for what Araeen describes as the 'true significance' of her work, which 'has not yet been understood'. If Shimizu is an 'indirect heir', I want to dwell less on narratives of influence, lineage and legacy, and more on indirect relations. The indirect is suggestive of tangents, mediations, separations and removes; thus, I turn from separating to sorting, from removes to removals, and so, to the managing of waste.

Kumiko Shimizu, *Painted Object*s, 1989, found objects installed on exterior of the Hayward Gallery, London. Images courtesy the artist.

Kumiko Shimizu, *Painted Object*s, 1989, found objects installed on exterior of the Hayward Gallery, London. Images courtesy the artist.

A wheel, liberated from some unknown vehicle, possibly a bicycle, going nowhere; a wheelbarrow, lifted far above the displaced earth it might once have transported; a typewriter, old tech replaced by new; a pram, outgrown; and, speaking of waste management, a loo. As Araeen (1989a, p. 97) suggests, the 'transformations' effected by the painted objects are 'chaotic', for they 'also point to their demise'. 'Chaotic' is a word frequently used to describe Takahashi's work too, and is worth stressing here, less in terms of the formal sense of 'designed disorder', and more in terms of its unsettling affect.

Debunking the bunker-like building with a touch of toilet humour, the painted objects may invoke other artists' responses to the call of nature, through acts of recontextualisation. Martha Buskirk (2005, p. 63) notes that Duchamp's 'thorough assimilation into museum collections and art historical discourse has insured that any use of such objects as a bicycle wheel, snow shovel, and especially a urinal will be read as a reference to Duchamp, and not just a use of the object itself'. She goes on to discuss Robert Gober's handmade *Three Urinals* (1988), David Hammons's *Public Toilets* (1990), in which he 'affixed a series of urinals to trees', and Sherrie Levine's cast bronze *Fountain (After Marcel Duchamp)* (1991), in terms of discourses of authorship and originality. Interestingly, there is no mention of the argument that 'has been swooshing around the cistern of contemporary art criticism since the 1980s...' (as one writer puts it), namely 'that Duchamp's famous... pissoir laid on its side – was actually the creation of the poet, artist and wearer of tin cans, Baroness Elsa von Freying-Loringhoven' (Frizzell 2014). As John Higgs (2015) has written:

On 11 April 1917 Duchamp wrote to his sister Suzanne and said that, 'One of my female friends who had adopted the pseudonym Richard Mutt sent me a porcelain urinal as a sculpture; since there was nothing indecent about it, there was no reason to

reject it.' As he was already submitting the urinal under an assumed name, there does not seem to be a reason why he would lie to his sister about a 'female friend'. The strongest candidate to be this friend was Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. She was in Philadelphia at the time, and contemporary newspaper reports claimed that 'Richard Mutt' was from Philadelphia.

This 'long-forgotten pioneering feminist' may be the 'strongest candidate' for the 'female friend' that Duchamp mentioned in his letter to his sister Suzanne. Freytag-Loringhoven was in Philadelphia at the same time as contemporary newspaper reports claimed that 'Richard Mutt' was from Philadelphia.

The temptation and allure of lineage, again...

Of course, Shimizu's loo is not a pristine, manufactured object. It could be considered a 'ready-made' in that it 'derives from a multiple gesture involving the act of selection... designation... and recontextualisation' (Buskirk 2005, p. 10). However, as a despoiled and discarded object, its function is cancelled long before its conceptual re-designation. As repurposed scrap, it may be better thought of as ready-used – the work an impermanent assemblage of modified found objects, temporarily rehabilitated before returning to junk status – predisposed to disposal, if you will.

Moreover, Shimizu's loo is a lavatory, not a urinal. As an everyday object, 'a lavatory is not simply a technological response to a physical need but' as architectural historian Barbara Penner (2009, p. 372) argues, 'a cultural product shaped by complex and often competing discourses on the body, sexuality, morality and hygiene' – discourses, we might add, that are also already gendered, classed and raced.

A loo on the side of a London building may read as absurd or facetious (etymologically unrelated to

faeces), given that 120 years ago, public lavatories in the capital – for women, that is – were a scarcity. The LSA or Ladies' Sanitary Association had actively campaigned since 1870s for provision of women's conveniences. In 1879:

> While... women's conveniences were already established in Glasgow, Nottingham, Paris and other continental cities, the first permanent women's conveniences in London were reportedly built only in 1893 in the Strand opposite the Royal Courts of Justice... there existed a fair degree of public awareness, and sympathy for, the need for female conveniences by 1900. However... not everyone was so eager for women's lavatories to adorn London's streets and the expression of disapproval took many forms (Penner 2009, p. 375).

Euphemistically referred to as 'women's conveniences', their lack was no laughing matter for those caught short in the street, only to be met with such unsympathetic signs as, 'Commit No Nuisance' or 'Decency Forbids'. Loos are objects and spaces that hint at defecation, urination and menstruation – bodily hence also sexual functions. As such, wide opposition to the construction of visible public conveniences for women reflected prevailing Victorian values and 'increasingly strict prohibitions on bodily display and the emergence of a rigid ideology of gender' (Penner 2009, p. 373 and p. 370).

Effectively delimiting women's mobility and policing their morality and sexuality, the gendered demarcation of private and public spheres, also sought to demarcate class. Penner writes, 'It is misleading... to speak of "women's needs" as a unified entity, as it is evident that the needs of working-class women and "ladies who shop" were not considered to be the same' (2009, p. 377). 'The fear of a potential "promiscuous" mixing of working- and middle-class female bodies... indicates that decency and femininity were defined primarily as

susan pui san lok, *Commit No Nuisance*, 2019, digital photograph.

middle-class attributes… [and] threatened the moral contagion of the "ladies" by the factory and flower girls' (2009, p. 382).

With Shimizu's *Painted Objects*, the revered or reviled monumental is mocked, marred or improved (depending on your view), by processed plastic, metal and porcelain junk, as if hosting an up-turned, gravity-defying backyard sale. Araeen likened Shimizu's earlier 1985 *Roadworks* piece to 'knick-knacks hanging from the wall as if she was selling them' (1989a, p. 95). The work relies on skips and fly-tippers to perform a kind of reverse fly-tipping — legitimately depositing waste on a designated site, at least for a limited time. The bright Warholian colours and patterns of the salvaged objects mask a contagion of the raw with the cooked, to invert the anthropological metaphor.[5] Here the raw concrete infers rarefied high culture and institutional power, while the cooked implies mass-manufactured products turned commodities, popularly consumed, discarded and salvaged, as well as the social relations within which all such objects are bound — the loo being just one example.

One does not have to look too closely to surmise that the aesthetic has been 'contaminated', as Félix González-Torres (1993, p. 21) might say, 'with something social'. As such, the metaphorical and physical elevation of waste objects, on the elevation of a space of cultural elevation, may be taken as less — or more — than 'a witty criticism of the architecture' per se. Rather, their incongruity serves as a decorative indict-ment of London's disparities of wealth and power, adorning the building's façade with pretty, or pretty ugly (*jolie-laide*) banners of ruin.

SCENES TWO, THREE AND FOUR: LONDON (SOUTH, EAST AND CENTRAL)

With Shimizu's typewriter hanging off the Hayward, I want to segue into Takahashi's tangled installations, before ending with Phaophanit/Oboussier's *Atopia*. In 1997, at the artist-run Beaconsfield Gallery Vauxhall, south London, Takahashi created an installation with materials from her own 'vast personal collection, objects borrowed from [the gallery, and] contributions gleaned from her friends' storage areas… a wide variety of electrical products… extension wires, a slide machine, TVs, computers, an amplifier, and an open reel tape deck — … taken apart and plugged in. Amidst other "junk", a slide machine on a timer clicked blindly away and a blank videotape played on a TV screen' (Preece, 1997). Her later collaboration, *Word Perhect* (2000),[6] offered a sparse counterpart to the cluttered dystopian landscape of defunct and dying technology. In *Word Perhect*, automated functions are decidedly dysfunc-tional, continually interrupted by virtual junk; the promise of time-saving technological innovation, undone by time-wasting human behaviour. While Takahashi invites questions of value, use, functionality, technology, productivity and waste, the very presence of trash in the utopic virtual domain is arguably what makes it real. Julian Stallabrass opens his 1996 essay, 'Trash' by citing William Gibson's *Count Zero* (1986, p. 26), where a character observes the 'amazing detailed' rendering of the 'useless and neglected'; it is the meti-culous representation of rubbish that distinguishes the most exclusive terrain of conspicuous consumption (1996, pp. 171–88).

Claudine Isé (2002) fleetingly aligns Takahashi's installations with Robert Rauschenberg's early 'combines' as both attract, 'One of the clichés often used to describe modern and contemporary art [namely] that it "looks like a pile of junk".' Takahashi declares, 'I don't really read articles because they don't

Kumiko Shimizu, *Painted Objects*, 1989, found objects installed on exterior of the Hayward Gallery, London. Images courtesy the artist.

really say anything. It's always, "Pile of rubbish! Pile of rubbish!"' (cited in Fortnum, 2006, p. 149).

Usually working with the architecture and objects of a given place, be that a gallery, office space, school, tennis court or unfinished auditorium, Takahashi transforms the waste produced by people's work into 'frenetic three-dimensional collages' (Stallabrass 1999, p. 76). The comparison to 'junk' may be both a red flag and a red herring – a dismissal designed to rile; or relation designed to revalidate by association with Dada or Arte Povera traditions, for example.

While Rauschenberg's free-standing or wall-hung combines of painting and sculpture and everyday objects achieve a fixity and retain a pictorial quality, Takahashi's installations are durational, site-specific assemblages and participatory environments, of comparatively significant scale, immersive spectacles to be navigated. And yet... let me note here Helen Molesworth's discussion of 'the polarized discourse of essentialism versus theory' in feminism, and the 'tenacity of [Heinrich] Wölfflin's model' within art historical discourse, which initiated 'the structural logic of compare and contrast' – a progressive stylistic model whose 'methodological, discursive and technological' binarism continues to underpin both dominant narratives and critical counter-narratives of art practice (in this very sentence, for example), and indeed, drive its generational and geographical divisions. Molesworth (1999) goes on to triangulate such divides through the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, to which I shall return at the end of this paper. At this point, suffice to say that compare and contrast remains a hard habit to kick. Might an alternative model or connection be made in 'indirect' relation to the Gutai group, whose 1956 manifesto refuses the West's derivative designation as 'neo-Dada'? 'But we think differently, in contrast to Dadaism, our work is the result of investigating the possibilities of calling the material to life' (Yoshihara

1956). Is it helpful to think about Takahashi's installations as somehow 'calling the material to life'? Her more positive critics tend precisely towards such metaphors of reanimation: Takahashi 'imbue[s] ordinary objects with renewed life' (Isé 2002); Takahashi '[brings] discarded objects back to life' (Fortnum 2006, p. 146). Perhaps instead of merely reversing or halting the processes of decay and death, the objects here might be thought of more as matter twice displaced: first as waste, then as art. This is Julian Stallabrass, talking trash:

> Objects gain and lose something when they are abandoned as rubbish. What they lose is…: newness, utility, wholeness, a distinction from other objects… In becoming rubbish the object, stripped of this mystification, gains a doleful truthfulness, as though confessing: it becomes a reminder that commodities, despite all their tricks, are just stuff; little combinations of plastics or metal or paper.
>
> (…)
>
> [Trash] is of course a powerful reminder of the West's profligacy in consumption, of the extraordinary engines of waste that are our economies, sacrificing vast quantities of matter and human labour on rubbish dumps…
> When the commodity form is stripped away, something may be revealed of the social relations which are immanent in the objects and which bind people and their fates. (1996 cited in Candlin & Guins 2009, pp. 416–19)

Or as Isé (2002) puts it:

> … why [do] we give such tremendous value to certain kinds of objects while discarding others without a second thought, how [do] we make distinctions between what is useful and what isn't, and what [are] the consequences of those decisions?

Some of Takahashi's installations have suggested the melancholic vistas of buildings in ruins to be contemplated,[7] while others have demanded the awkward navigation of narrowed spaces, as dangerous looking towers of stuff appear to be on the verge of toppling, or water threatens to boil over, and objects literally crash down. On several occasions, her installations have been disassembled by audiences, and salvaged objects returned not to the scrapheap, but granted other futures – as mementoes, souvenirs or art relics. 'Sold off' for nothing in a car-boot sale, or given away via a free raffle,[8] the raffle is a particularly unsettling strategy – randomising and levelling the value of things, while the element of chance heightens the recurring dimensions of play and precarity.

Takahashi's description of her art school experience might also serve for her work: 'Here you can delve around, breaking everything down' (Fortnum 2006, p. 145). Her words also remind me of the 2001 work, *Break Down*, by Takahashi's contemporary, Michael Landy, in which he systematically destroyed the entirety of his 7,227 possessions, over a 2-week period, in a former C&A department store. Landy's heroic or anti-heroic act of destruction, or self-destruction (if the self is defined by stuff and we are what we own) drastically accelerated – or short-circuited – the cycle of consumption to waste, leaving him with nothing. One might argue that Takahashi, however, decelerates the breakdown – diverting the cycle, stalling the progression towards destruction and opening up other circuits of exchange.

SCENE FIVE: BERLIN (EAST, WEST AND NOWHERE)

With precarity, circulation and movement in mind, I want to end with the divided and double image of Phaophanit/Oboussier's *Atopia*, an installation first created in 1997, occupying twin sites 'separated by
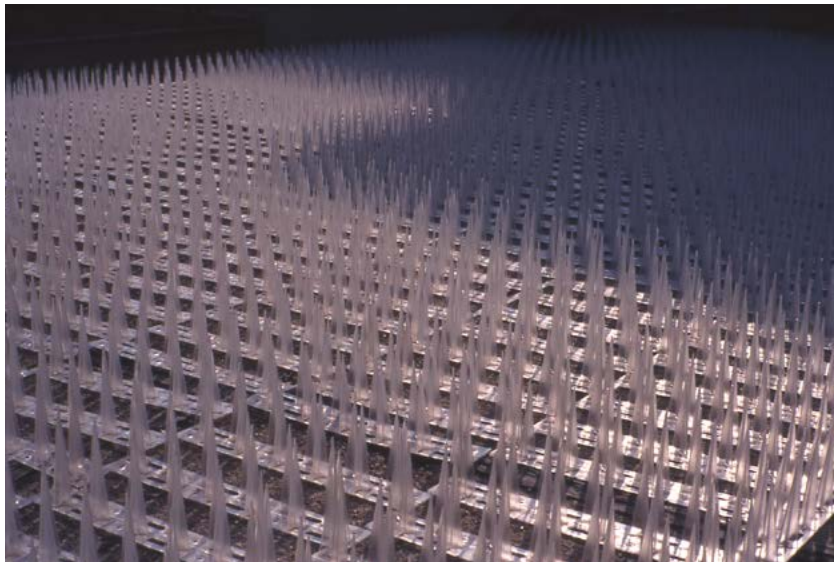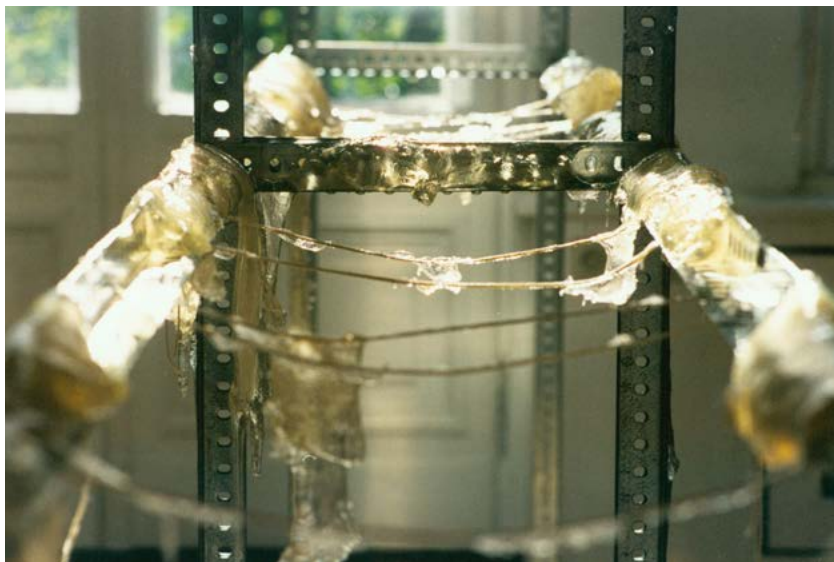
several miles' (Oboussier 1998). On the roof of an old government administration building in the former Eastern bloc, now housing the DAAD offices, anti-pigeon devices line up in rows, forming an orderly and insistent deterrent, an uninhabitable field within a 360 degree view of the city. Across town in the old West, inside the DAAD gallery, bales of synthetic rubber ooze through galvanised steel frames, the shelving replaced by hand-tied lengths of domestic string – 'feeble filaments' (in the artist's words) that nevertheless cut through the collapsing mass.

According to Buskirk's terms, the work has 'qualities identified with minimalism: industrial materials, simple, geometric forms, the repetition of identical units, and the activation of the surrounding or contained space' (2005, p. 3). Yet it also brings these values into tension through its own division, doubling and collapse. Straddling former geographical, social and political divides, the work splits and spills – the exterior work demands distance, warding off any movement across its terrain; while the interior demands intimacy and caution, careful manoeuvres around the steel and rubber obstructing the galleries and doorways.

Static geometries are countered by the discordant 'arrhythmia' (Glueck 2006) of sinewy strings looping, clinging and slicing through mounds of melting rubber – that may recall Eva Hesse's works with latex and rope, in terms of the anxiety provoked by materials prone to change and alteration over time. With Hesse, the 'brittle discoloration or complete decay' of latex are 'subjected to the forces of gravity' over decades (Buskirk 2005, p. 25 and p. 134). With Phaophanit/ Oboussier, the physical instability of the material

Vong Phaophanit, *Atopia*, 1997, installation in two parts: polybutadiene rubber, galvanised steel shelving, string; anti-pigeon devices on a roof-top. Commissioned by DAAD, Berlin. Images courtesy the artist and Oboussier Studio.

To look – from the middle high German *luogen* – to mark, behold – originally "to look through a hole" – *loch* – a hole or dungeon, *lochern* – to pierce, to lock.

To see – from the base of Latin *sequi* – to follow, to follow with the eye.

Berlin is the most unlikely Atopia, weighed down as it is by the poisonous lead of its history, inexorably determined in so many hearts. But perhaps it is precisely this surfeit of meaning, the festering wound of its real events that, paradoxically, makes Berlin open to Atopia. Its chaos of unresolved narratives, its sites of unspeakable truths – perhaps Atopia requires a backdrop such as this.

Lift (with sellotape), Helmstedterstrasse

Atopia – displaced, without anchor, adrift.

Tierpark

underlines the site-specific conditions and limited duration of the work, as heat combines with gravity to disintegrate the rubber in a matter of hours.

Anti-pigeon devices – a ubiquitous mechanism designed to deter creatures sometimes referred to as 'winged rats' – connote pestilence and dirt withheld. These devices are deployed to mark boundaries, extend territories, maintain the cleanliness of a given building and its peripheral spaces, to deny occupation, resist contagion and delimit pollution, waste. Reading across the divided and doubled *Atopia*, the familiar, seemingly innocuous attempts to inoculate or keep the environment clean, suddenly converge acts of cleaning and cleansing. If Hesse's latex suggests skin sagging and peeling, then Phaophanit/Oboussier's rubber may suggest bodies collapsing – submitting to or evading – the systematic removal elsewhere, of unwanted, objectified 'others'.

SCENES UNSEEN

By reading Shimizu, Takahashi and Phaophanit/Oboussier in tandem, I mean to sidestep the restorative counter-narrative of the forgotten or marginalised artist, lost or found by this or that neglectful or remorseful institution, seeking to expand but essentially leave intact an unchanged, unchallenged canon.

Across these three dissipated moments and disparate practices, salvaged ready-used objects and industrial materials are appropriated, not to evacuate their function and examine their objecthood, but to question their presumed redundancy and reassert their immanent socioeconomic, technological and political relations.

Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier, *Atopia*, 2000, limited edition artist book, selected pages. Images courtesy Phaophanit and Oboussier Studio.

In the process, rubbish, junk, waste and its management, are momentarily raised to the status of that most rarefied of commodities (and for some, the most useless of objects) – art. Between them, the realms of the aesthetic, economic and political are more intimately linked than some might prefer to admit.

Phaophanit/Oboussier's *Atopia* works to foreground the practice and politics of occupation, and re-territorialisation, enacting the policing – and perforation – of institutional spaces and borders, haunted by divisions. Shimizu's transformation of the Hayward, from cultural haven to trash magnet, draws attention to immediate local economic and social schisms. At the same time, her adornments anticipate the 'becoming generic' of the museum, as a vernacular, spectacular site of distraction. While Michael Newman discusses the impulse towards 'the generic object' and 'becoming generic' as a 'problem of modernity', with post-conceptualist practices distinguished both by the 'desire to disappear' and its impossibility (Newman 1999, pp. 206–21), such contradictory desire arguably remains the privileged domain of those who already inhabit the visible. Who or what disappears with the spectacular turn? This development in museum culture is amplified in Takahashi's galleries-turned-gaming-spaces, with circuitries of junk and precipitous ruins: art as increasingly reckless and hazardous entertainment. Moreover, the intimate and precarious relation between aesthetic and economic labour as structural to the gallery or museum and its maintenance, is embodied in Takahashi's hazardous occupational history (McCorquodale, Siderfin & Stallabrass 1998), and with the particular space of Beaconsfield: 'I used to work here, as a cleaner, a long time ago. I was cleaner, invigilator and painter and decorator, putting things in envelopes and everything... I really wanted to do something about me working here' (Fortnum 2006, p. 146).

Here, we might remember Mierle Laderman Ukeles's 1969 *Maintenance Art Manifesto*, in which she divides labour into two categories, "development" and 'maintenance'. As Molesworth explains:

Development corresponds largely with Modernist notions of progress and individuality, while maintenance, on the other hand, is the realm of human activities that keep things going – cooking, cleaning, shopping, child-rearing and so forth (...) when Ukeles renames domestic labour 'maintenance' she underscores the public sphere's structural reliance on private/domestic labour (1999, pp. 114–15 and p. 117).

If it is 'absolutely structural... to patriarchy and capitalism that the labour of maintenance should remain *invisible*', then the making visible of waste and its management is potentially chaotic in affect. To expose 'the hidden and devalued labor of daily maintenance and upkeep' (Kwon 2004, p. 19), is to '[stymie] the very labour it is designed to maintain' (Molesworth 1999, p. 120).

'Waste' invokes both material and dematerialising substances, both devastating and dissipating action, and a sense of the careless, extravagant and purposeless, the unwanted, unoccupied and uncultivated, the weakening, passing and eliminated. Carolyn Steedman argues that 'Dust – speaks of the opposite of waste and dispersal; of a grand circularity, of nothing ever, ever going away' (2001, p. 166). The works of Shimizu, Takahashi and Phaophanit/Oboussier, however (not to mention the growing evidence of plastics in our oceans), suggest that waste is not opposed but intrinsic to that circularity, 'of nothing ever, ever going away' – a mere stage in what Amato describes as 'the ceaseless tides of the becoming and dissolution of things'. He writes,

Dust is a result of the divisibility of matter... Unnoticed, it is associated with the lowliest of things, with what is broken, discarded, formless... Out of [dust] things are made; into it they dissolve.

So constant, so pervasive, dust, aggregating and disintegrating, gauges matter on its way to and from being. (Amato 2000, pp. 3–5)

A 'genealogy of waste' may draw attention to 'what we tend to feel is without history' (Foucault 1977, pp. 139–40) – and without place – yet also infer the 'entangled and confused', the plural and contradictory pasts and displacements that may reveal relations of power in the present. Waste implicates the museum, not only in terms of its refuse and refusals, but also in terms of its imperative – to collect and conserve. An enduring question for the modern and contemporary museum is: who, what, how and why collect? Most art will not be collected, and so, like most things, is destined to become matter displaced, as waste, and eventually dust.

A genealogy of waste may point us to untold and unexpected histories of the present, to the museum's reinvention, or indeed to its own ruin.

A constellation of dust may take us back to the archive and the studio, and all that hovers between visibility and obscurity and possibility – unsettled and unseen, until we look between things.

Last words to Takahashi (Fortnum 2006, p. 150): 'Yes. It's all gone, great! The end is great'.

REFERENCES

Araeen, R. 1989a, 'Conversation with Kumiko Shimizu', *Third Text*, vol. 3, no. 8–9, pp. 183–90.

----. 1989b, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, Southbank Centre, London.

Buskirk, M. 2005, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Camnitzer, L., Farver, J. and Weiss, R. eds. 1999, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exhibition catalogue, 28 April–29 August, Queens Museum of Art, New York.

Candlin, F. and Guins, R. eds. 2009, *The Object Reader*, Routledge, London.

Chisenhale archive, 'Tomoko Takahashi', viewed 30 May 2017, http://chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/index.php?id=48.

Fisher, J. 2009, 'The Other Story and the Past Imperfect', *Tate Papers*, no. 12, viewed 24 October 2018, http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/no-12/the-other-story-and-the-past-imperfect.

Fortnum, R. 2006, *Contemporary British Women Artists: In Their Own Words*, I. B. Tauris, London.

Foucault, M. 1977, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in D. F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.

Gibson, W. 1986, *Count Zero*, Victor Gollancz, London.

Glueck, G. 2006, 'Bringing the Soul into Minimalism: Eva Hesse', *New York Times*, 12 May, viewed 4 December 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/12/arts/design/12hess.html.

González-Torres, F. 1993, interview by Rollins, T., in Bartman, W. S. (ed.), *Felix González-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles.

Hawkins, H. 2010a, 'Collection as Artistic Practice: The Geographies of Collection and Politics of Display in the Installations of Tomoko Takahashi and the Geographies and Politics of Display', *Women's Studies*, vol. 39, no. 6, pp. 647–72.

----. 2010, '"The argument of the eye"? The cultural geographies of installation art', *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 321–40.

Higgs, J. 2015, 'Was Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" actually created by a long-forgotten pioneering feminist?', *Independent*, 8 September, viewed 2 December 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/was-marcel-duchamps-fountain-actually-created-by-a-long-forgotten-pioneering-feminist-104lesworth91953.html.

Isé, C. 2002, 'Tomoko Takahashi', *Hammer Museum*, website, 6 October, viewed 4 July 2017, https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2002/tomoko-takahashi/.

Jones, J. 2005, 'Tomoko Takahashi', *Guardian*, 28 February, viewed 28 November 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2005/feb/28/1.

Kwon, M. 2004, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

McCorquodale, D., Siderfin, N. and Stallabrass, J. eds. 1998, *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writing on Recent British Art*, Black Dog Publishing, London.

Molesworth, H. 1999, 'Cleaning up the 1970s: The Work of Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly and Mierle Laderman Ukeles', in M. Newman and J. Bird (eds), *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, pp. 107–122.

Newman, M. and Bird, J. eds. 1999, Rewriting Conceptual Art, Reaktion Books, London.

Oboussier, C. 1998, *Atopia*, Royal Festival Hall exhibition catalogue essay, South Bank, London, viewed 1 November 2018, https://www.atopia.org.uk/collaborative-work/publications/catalogue-essays/atopia/.

Penner, B. 2001, 'A World of Unmentionable Suffering: Women's Public Conveniences in Victorian London', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 35–51, reprinted in F. Candlin and R. Guins (eds), 2009, *The Object Reader*, Routledge, London, pp. 369–90.

Phaophanit, V. and Oboussier, C. 2003, *Atopia*, DAAD, Berlin.

Preece, R. 1998, review, 'Tomoko Takahashi at Beaconsfield, London (1997)', *World Sculpture News*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 52, viewed 21 August 2017, https://www.artdesigncafe.com/tomoko-takahashi-art-1998.

Stallabrass, J. 1996, *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture*, Verso, London.

----. 1999, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s*, Verso, London.

Steyerl, H. 2009, 'In Defence of the Poor Image', *e-flux journal*, no. 10.

Whybrow, N. 2007, 'One Thing and Another: Tomoko Takahashi's Crash Course@The University of Warwick', *Body, Space and Technology*, vol. 6, no. 2, viewed 4 July 2017, https://www.bstjournal.com/articles/164/.

Yoshihara, J. 1956, *The Gutai Manifesto*, viewed 8 November 2019, https://www.csus.edu/indiv/o/obriene/art112/Readings/Yoshiharo_GutaiManifesto.pdf.

NOTES

1   Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier's
    collaborative relationship (hereafter, Phaophanit/
    Oboussier) has evolved over thirty-two years. In an
    e-mail to me on 24 April 2018, they wrote that at the
    time of their year-long DAAD residency, their
    collaboration 'was unspoken... still in many ways an
    "undeclared", tacit one and certainly subterranean in
    terms of the art world's narratives'.
2   This paper incorporates some revisions made for a
    keynote presented at 'Tampered Emotions – Lust for
    Dust', a public programme curated by Lotte Arndt for
    Triangle France – Astérides, Friche la Belle de Mai,
    Marseilles to coincide with the opening of the
    exhibition at the same venue, 'Vos Desirs Sont Les
    Notres', curated by Marie de Gaulejac and Celine
    Kopp, 29 June–21 October 2018.
3   Hayward Gallery Library and Archive collections,
    London, 'The Other Story' exhibition archive,
    uncatalogued letters, viewed 14 December 2015,
    https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/about/what-we-
    do/archives-collections/hayward-gallery-archive.
4   Ibid.
5   And invoke, perhaps, the Fine Young Cannibals'
    album of 1989.
6   See http://www.e-2.org/commissions/wordperhect.
    html, viewed 1 November 2018.
7   'At Beaconsfield, the work stretched across the floor
    had a melancholy air: if seen as buildings, the junk
    became ruins; if as circuitry, it was obsolete'
    Stallabrass 1999, p. 77.
8   The raffle was part of the close of Takahashi's show,
    'The Rules of the Game', Serpentine Gallery, London,
    2005 while the car-boot sale took place at the close
    of her residency, 'Crash Course @The University of
    Warwick', University of Warwick, Coventry, 2006.

II
NIL YALTER

II
Introduction
Nil Yalter

Sarah Wilson

Nil Yalter, with her mysterious name, an homage to the river Nile, remained as opaque to me as, decades ago, Claude Cahun once was – an 'unknown surrealist' now justly world famous. As I write, Yalter's piece, *Le Chevalier d'Eon* (1978), acquires a contemporary, trans-gender resonance in the 2018 Art Basel.[1] Yalter is no discovery but a rediscovery, like so many women to whom the young curator Suzanne Pagé offered retro-spectives at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in the 1970s, alternating with male Conceptual artists.[2] Yalter's *Noisy-le-grand* project of 1975 (documenting the lives of Portuguese and French workers with Pola-roids, fragments of wallpaper, nails and broken glass) was recently exhibited in the 1968 commemorative show, 'IMAGES EN LUTTE, la culture visuelle de l'extrême gauche en France (1968–1974)' at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Paris, 21 February–20 May 2018. It demonstrates the impact of Conceptual art on a prac-tice close to ethnography that had evolved in France with figures such as Christian Boltanski whose *Vitrine de réference* (1971) deliberately parodied displays in Paris's anthropology museum, the Musée de l'Homme.

1971 marked a paradigm shift in Yalter's practice, coinciding with the military intervention in Turkey. For her 1973 show, her round tent, *Topak Ev*, was accompanied by a professional ethnographic description.[3] Her work illustrates the intersection of militant communist/neo-Marxist politics, sociology, ethnography and feminism, challenging dominant institutional practices. Following the mine and the factory (subject matter for communist artists in the 1950s), prisons, hospitals and psychiatric institutions (under the aegis of Michel Foucault), together with the places of everyday work or exploitation became sites of artistic research in a context of de-industrialisation, worker unrest and female militancy. Yalter describes

founding the militant magazine *Femmes en lutte* with Dorothée Selz and Isabelle Champion-Métadier in 1975 (Pedrosa 2013, p. 265). Jean-Pierre Raynaud's 'psycho-object' installations of the 1960s, Conceptual artist Seth Siegelaub's Marxist research centre established in the suburb of Bagnolet in 1973 or Sheila Hicks's 'string festival' *(Fête de fil)* created for the communist suburb of Montreuil in 1979 provide a comparative frame and timespan within which to contextualise Yalter's own projects (Raynaud 1966; Fabre 1979).

The retrospective term 'ethnographic conceptualism' (Ssorin-Chaikov 2013) is useful here. The climate was changing: the utopianism of imported Pop clashing with Vietnam, May '68 and later the M. L. F. (Women's Liberation Movement) protests. New disciplines and tools affected themes and techniques such as 'anti-psychiatry', or the impact of hand-held cameras on documentary and *auteur* films, plus the introduction of video.[4]

Yalter's work expresses a paradox. There is a long artistic relationship between Turkey and Paris, with many Turkish art exhibitions in post-war Paris (Wilson 2017); Yalter's precursor, painter Fahrelnissa Zeid, engaged with various Parisian art scenes. Yüksel Arslan, in the orbit of Surrealism, published *'Le Capital': Artures; 30 tableaux d'après Karl Marx* in 1975, a novice's obsessively imagined images of a 'living' Marxism. It resonates with Yalter's investigative relationship with Turkish political activism in Paris (Croiset, Petek, Salom & Yalter 1977; Ertul 1978 & 2009). Her compatriot, Sarkis, has had high visibility since he arrived in Paris in 1964; she mentions only Füsun Onur as her female contemporary (Pedrosa 2013, p. 264). An extraordinary mix of nationalities – Algeria, Belgium, France, Holland, Japan, Poland, Switzerland and the United States – constituted what was only sometimes called a 'new School of Paris' (Juin 1956). It was the American post-Pop and Conceptual American scene, which corroborated her new practice,

however. She met all the artists who showed in Ileana Sonnabend's gallery with its hotline to Leo Castelli in New York: Robert Morris, Lee Bontecou, etc. (Pedrosa 2013, p. 265).

In the intellectual Parisian world of the 1960s and 1970s, Yalter's self-perception was surely far from a notion of 'black modernity' or 'black conceptualism'. Just as Sumesh Sharma here defines Modernism as an essentially Western, Latin concept via its very name, and contrasts it with two separate concepts in Urdu, 'progressive thought' and the 'modernism of form in many senses', so the contrasting Turkish concepts *çağdaş* and *güncel* may be applied to Yalter's 'modernism': *çağdas* as a progressive concept that may be related to her elevated class origins and education or *güncel*, where her self-contained artistic strategies directly addressed their time and political climate (Ozbeck 2017). Yet Yalter's commitment to the under-privileged, particularly women, along with fellow artists, constituted a specific field of action: it demonstrates how a glamorous Parisian cosmopolitanism was class-based in its ambiguous relationship to immigrant workers.

When Sharma talks of India's untouchables and the militant Dalit Panther Movement formed in 1972, one should remember the tragic aftermath of the Algerian War in Paris, and a 'black' consciousness, exemplified by Frantz Fanon, Patrice Lumumba, and Malcolm X, the celebrity of Angela Davis, black jazz and soul.[5] Jean Genet's own Black Panther affiliations of the early 1970s chimed with the writings of his admirer, Tahar Ben Jelloun, whose concern with the psychic and social alienation of immigrant Arab workers crystallised with his 1984 indictment of 'French hospitality' (Jelloun 1999).

'Exile is a hard job' indeed. Sharma's exposé of Yalter's life in India is a revelation; his insistence on Yalter's collaborative practice with Canadian artist Nicole

Croiset or with Judy Reddy Blum and Krishna Reddy is also crucial. It leads to his compelling description of the 'failed art history', where racial or identity parameters exclude 'connections... built on emotions, on family, on friendships, on love life'.[6] His BAM conference talk in December 2017 was positioned between those of Fabienne Dumont and Laura Castagnini. Dumont analysed works in the FRAC Lorraine collection: the *Topak Ev*-related panels on the life of nomads; *Women at Home, Women at Work* (1981) from the group show, 'Art Socio-critique', Festival de La Rochelle, 1982; and the *Exile is a hard job* (1976/2012–17) posters (acquired as the right to reproduce and fly-post), works from the *Turkish Workers in Paris* (shown at the 10th Biennale de Paris in 1977 and with Pagé again in 1983). Castagnini offered, at last, close sociopolitical readings of *Temporary Dwellings* (1974), and *Women at Work, Women at Home*. She sharpens our understanding of Yalter through telling contrasts with the London and New York feminist art scenes: both welcomed Yalter, thanks to her friendship with critic Lucy R. Lippard. She is differentiated from her peers, in Lippard's words, via a her 'poetic abstraction', her recognition of the 'imaginary potential of women's labour', but also the sensuality of lush colour and introduction of symbols into her work – such as, unforgettably, the token of exile: 'a red apple that has been pierced by a shard of mirror'. Yalter has waited long, and in exile, for this new moment of recognition.

REFERENCES

Croiset, N., Petek, G., Salom, J. and Yalter, N. 1977, 'Travail collectif sur les immigrés turcs à Paris', in *Nil Yalter*, exhibition catalogue, 23 September–30 October, Maison de la Culture de Grenoble, Grenoble.

Ertul, S. 1978, 'Problèmes d'intégration et d'acculturation des immigrés turcs en Loire-Atlantique', master's thesis, sociology department, Nantes University.

----. 2009, 'Culture immigrée/emmigrée: l'example de la migration turc vers la France', *Migrations Société*, vol. 3, no. 123–34, pp. 127–40.

Fabre, M. 1979, *Sheila Hicks, Daniel Graffin, John Melin*, 10 December 1978–10 February, Centre des expositions, Montreuil.

Ben Jelloun, T. 1999, *French Hospitality, Racism and North African Immigrants*, Columbia University Press, New York, original work published 1984.

Juin, H. 1956, *Seize Peintres de la jeune école de Paris*, Georges Fall, Paris.

Ozbeck, C. Z., 2017, 'A temporary dweller among synonyms. Nil Yalter within the concurrent multi-plicities of contemporary art in Turkey', MA dissertation, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, pp. 2–9.

Pedrosa, A. 2013, 'Nil Yalter Studio Visit', in D. Yücel (ed.), *Nil Yalter*, Galerist and Revolver, Istanbul and Berlin.

Raynaud, J.-P. 1966, *Psycho-objet*, Galerie Mathias Fels & Cie, Paris.

Ssorin-Chaikov, N. 2013, 'Ethnographic conceptualism, an introduction', *Laboratorium*, vol. 5, no . 2, pp. 5–18.

Wilson, S. 2017, 'Extravagant reinventions, Fahrelnissa Zeid in Paris', Fahrelnissa Zeid, exhibition catalogue, 13 June – 8 October 2017, Tate Publishing, London, pp. 89–103.

NOTES

1. See https://www.artbasel.com/news/how-turkish-artist-nil-yalter-s-work-pioneered-non-binary-representation, accessed 28 November 2019. With Monique Frydman, Yalter is the only female artist to have spoken in national commemorations of 1968 (at INHA, the National Institute of Art History, Paris, 16 May 2018).

2. From 1971–5, Pagé showed Ruth Francken, Alina Szapocznikow, Tania Mouraud (with Yalter and film-maker Mythia Kolesar), Hessie, Titiana Maselli, Jacqueline Dauriac and more in conjunction with Panamarenko, Joseph Kosuth, Fluxus, Jochen Gerz, etc.

3. See ethnologist Bernard Dupaigne's typescript for *Topak Ev*, Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1973; see also *Utopie: revue de sociologie de l'urbain* (1967–77), the Collectif d'Art Sociologique (from 1974) or Pierre Bourdieu's *Actes de recherches en Science Sociales*, whose articles from 1975, sketch the socio-logical/ethnographic context and methodological tools of the times, involving Luc Boltanski, Christian's brother.

4. Yalter showed *La Femme sans tête (Belly dance)* (1974) in Pagé's 'Art/vidéo confrontation 74', 1974; the *La Roquette, Prison des Femmes* collaboration was shown in 'Vidéo: La région centrale', Ministère des Affaires etrangères, 1980. Yalter's video production was donated to the audio-visual department of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, from 2011–12.

5. For example, French painter Bernard Rancillac specifically addressed all these personalities and issues from 1966–74.

6. The 5th Biennale Contemporain de Lyon, 27 June–24 September 2000, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin with artistic directorship by Thierry Prat and Thierry Raspail deserves recognition for confronting surprising interracial artistic relationships.

Is Nil Yalter's Work Compatible with Black Conceptualism?
An Analysis Based on the FRAC Lorraine Collection

Fabienne Dumont

This paper focuses on three works: four panels from *Collages of Topak Ev* (1974), photographs from *Women at Home, Women at Work* (1981) and posters from *Exile is a hard job* (1976/2012–17). They were bought by the FRAC Lorraine in 2016, a contemporary art centre located in Metz and directed by Béatrice Josse. When I was asked for this project to present the work of a woman artist who lives in France, who has links with the concept of Black Conceptualism and whose works belonged to a public collection, I suggested the multimedia work of Nil Yalter, who is interested in feminism, immigration, social class and myths. At the time, the FRAC's purchase of her work was not publicly known.

The term Black Conceptualism is understood here as a work and an artist position that aims to explore visual representations of racialised experience in a conceptual way. As these concepts were thought outside of France and Turkey, were Nil Yalter lived, I argue that her Black Conceptual work was her own, mixing the definition of Luis Camnitzer or Lucy R. Lippard with race issues as thought in France at that time and a specific immigration history. For Luis Camnitzer, Conceptual artists in a broad sense, reduced the role of the art object and reimagined the possibilities of art vis-à-vis the social, political and economic realities (Camnitzer, Farver & Weiss 1999, p. viii). The identification with blackness shows a concern for racial politics, here understood

Is Nil Yalter's Work Compatible with Black Conceptualism?
An Analysis Based on the FRAC Lorraine Collection - Fabienne Dumont

105

as migrant politics — argued as backgrounded by a social construction (Cassell Oliver 2005, p. 17). Elvan Zabunyan (2014, p. 14) points out that the notion of blackness is a form of recognition for an uprooted and stigmatised population as an antidote against racial segregation. But Nil Yalter's work addresses this class relations. Immigrants hold particularly difficult jobs and racial discrimination is deeply linked to class discrimination.
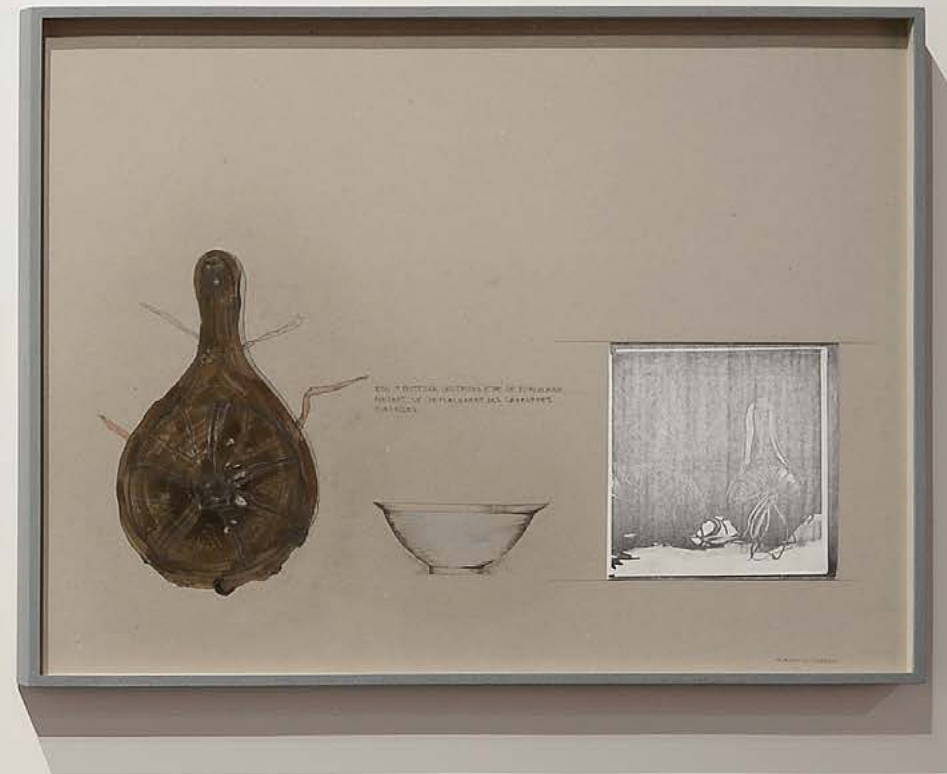
To understand the importance of these purchases, one must look at the history of the art establishment's recognition in France and abroad of Nil Yalter's work. Working since 1958, the first institution to present her work was Animation/Research/Confrontation (ARC), the contemporary department at Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, under the direction of Suzanne Pagé. However, the museum did not buy her pieces. The first purchase was only made in 1976 by the Fonds national d'art contemporain, which acquired *La Roquette, a prison for women* (1974–5), a collective project realised with Judy Blum, Nicole Croiset and Mimi.

For a long time, after the 1980s, her work was not very visible, regaining notoriety around 2010 (Dumont 2016) when she allowed it to be displayed in galleries — first in Vienna, in 2011 at Galerie Hubert Winter. Nil Yalter's refusal to be represented by a gallery up until then and her desire to show her work in alternative or avant-garde places, echoes the definition given by the curators of 'Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s' in their introduction. Nil Yalter belongs to the second wave of this movement, which covers the period from 1973 to the end of the 1980s and questions the conception of contemporary art and its institutions. I have been working with the artist for twenty years, as an art historian, a position that allows me to engage in a long-term analysis of the process of her rediscovery.

This late recognition is linked to the fact that it takes time for the correctives of a feminist perspective enacted within art history to be effective. Nil Yalter became better known during the 1970s, mentioned in Lucy R. Lippard's article — among others — about socio-political art made by women in the exhibition 'Issue' in 1980; Frank Popper used the term 'socio-critical art' to describe the exhibition in La Rochelle in 1982 during a festival — a term Nil Yalter and the show's curator Joël Boutteville claim to have forged (Popper 1982, p. 1; Lippard 1980). After some renewed appreciation for her feminist work at the end of the 2000s (for example, 'WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution', Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007 or 'elles@centre-pompidou', musée national d'Art moderne, Paris, 2009), her involvement with migrant populations was discovered as the issue of postcolonialism and migration were discussed around 2005. I look into the underlying French context in a book I edited with Emmanuelle Chérel, *L'histoire n'est pas donnée—Art contemporain et postcolonialité en France* (2016). In fact, Nil Yalter's work on the subject of immigration was re-exhibited after this period of discussion around postcolonialism in France and some panels of *Temporary Dwellings* were purchased by the Tate Modern in 2012. Her foreign origin was another reason for her being overlooked in French art history, along with the fact that she worked with and studied immigrant Turkish communities. As the contemporary art scene in Turkey grew, she became known as a pioneer of the avant-garde of contemporary art in Turkey, despite the fact that she had been living in France since 1965 (Atagök 1997, pp. 20–5).

Finally, the socio-critical aesthetic produced by Nil Yalter is similar to that of Mary Kelly or Mierle Laderman Ukeles, artists she knows through feminist networks (Dumont 2018, pp. 19–46; Dumont 2014). She was involved in two groups of women artists in Paris in the 1970s, Femmes en lutte and the Collectif Femmes/art through which she exhibited in New York. Beyond being

Is Nil Yalter's Work Compatible with Black Conceptualism?
An Analysis Based on the FRAC Lorraine Collection - Fabienne Dumont

107

Nil Yalter, *Collages of Topak Ev*, 1974, Collection of 49 Nord 6 Est -
Frac Lorraine, Metz, © Nil Yalter.

women, these artists all had difficulty gaining recognition given the low value attributed to the material and subject matter with which they worked: buyers and curators were largely not interested in socio-critical art, which was hardly understood as art or as artistic practice. Nil Yalter's feminist work that questioned immigration in an undervalued aesthetic, coupled with her interest in social class relations, also prevented her from being recognised.

In the self-portrait *Les rites circulaires* (1992), Nil Yalter rightfully defined herself as a multiplicity of real, fictional and borrowed affiliations, first declaimed aloud, then inscribed on the wall, in different languages at the same time (only the English version is quoted here):

I am an artist, I am a Muslim from Bosnia Herzego-vina, I am a Jew from Salonika, I am a Circassian from Russia, I am an Abaza, I am a female Janizary, a Greek Orthodox, I come from Turkey, I am from France, I come from Byzantium, I am from Asia Minor, I am a Mongolian, nomadic, an immigrant worker, exiled, I am the message.

She plays with the proliferation of identities to counter discrimination and identifies herself with disadvantaged or persecuted people. As she was privileged compared to the immigrant workers she interviewed for her videos, her position can be best understood from the point of view of migration and geographical displacement. This enables her to take an accurate and original look at migrant workers in the 1970s and 1980s, both men and women, most of whom were of Turkish origin. To my mind one objective of the 'Global Conceptualism' curators reflects the situation in France and what needs to be put back into the art scene: 'We mean to denote a multicentred map with various points of origin in which local events are crucial determinants' (Camnitzer, Farver & Weiss 1999, p. vii). In these local and multicentred places, art becomes the messenger of forbidden words and experiences. Nil Yalter does

exactly that: she gives a voice to people we never listen to and tries to identify other locations in order to make art visible for a different public, reinventing the aesthetics as much as the art networks themselves.

THE THREE PIECES
IN THE FRAC LORRAINE COLLECTION

However, in 2016, the FRAC collection in Metz benefited from Béatrice Josse's investment in favour of women: the number of women artists in the collection tripled between 1993 and 2016.[1] Béatrice Josse is known for her commitment to feminism, and more broadly, for her desire to embed art within a broader social, cultural and political fabric. In this regard, she dedicated the first French retrospective to Nil Yalter in 2016, forty years after the work was first purchased by a French national collection.

Now, let's take a look at the three pieces from the FRAC Lorraine collection. *Topak Ev* (a tent) is the oldest, designed in 1973. As I already recounted its history in a text available online (Dumont 2015a, pp. 8–17), I limit my explanation here to the materiality of the panels purchased. The yurt is a house traditionally made by Bektik women, nomads in the Anatolian steppes. The tent entered the Turkish SantralIstanbul collection in 2007, but Nil Yalter kept the dozen accompanying panels that illustrate the nomads' living conditions. They include drawings and collages made of different materials and images. Coincidentally, Anatolian women also, in 2016, participated in fly-posting *Exile is a hard job* in the streets of Metz, a work I detail later. Nil Yalter's work is forged by the links between the past and present and their symbolic echoes.

Four of these panels, dated from 1974, measuring 80 by 60 centimetres each, are now part of the FRAC Lorraine collection. She realised them in her studio, to show in

Is Nil Yalter's Work Compatible with Black Conceptualism?
An Analysis Based on the FRAC Lorraine Collection - Fabienne Dumont

111

the second exhibition of the yurt in Le Mans. They depict objects used by the nomads who lived in the tents: a water bottle, small bowl, carpets and a curved knife used for cutting felt. Nil Yalter juxtaposes coloured pencil drawings, copies of photographs and texts – for example, the motif of a carpet is accompanied by the words 'detail of the pattern of a Kurdish felt carpet'. The others not in the FRAC collection also contain collages of various material.

The lead pencil insets define a space for each object or symbol. The line frames or receives the photographs. Nil Yalter voluntarily leaves the lines that emphasise the place where the text should be. They evoke anthropological records, but perverted into an artistic form. In these panels, the artist systematically associates photographs, brightly coloured drawings and short texts that function as legends. These sentences inform the viewer about the activity represented. Photocopies of ethnographic photographs by Bernard Dupaigne, who gave her the right to use his photographs in her work, creates a detachment from reality and from the ethnographic activity. Nil Yalter reflects on her position as an artist compared with the ethnologist's activity, as Bernard Dupaigne taught her the basics of the discipline. This shift is also present in the association of coloured drawings of scenes or objects with more scientific drawings. Photocopies are of a poorer quality than photographs, and respond well to the use of coloured pencils or lead pencils on brown cardboard. These poor quality materials give the panel an unfinished look, like an enlarged travel diary that creates an aesthetic proximity to everyday life, close to the people and places surrounding them.

The materials, textures, samples and colours evoke the practices of anthropology and its will to rationalise the analysis of non-European ways of living. This rationalisation is thwarted by the rough and enigmatic aspect of the artist's associations. The strict rules of

anthropology are therefore diverted through Nil Yalter's personal gaze and way of reclaiming the images. Similarly, when she erases the faces of the immigrants in her project on exile, we feel her human touch, subjective point of view and way of letting an image communicate more than what a simple photograph would say (Dumont 2015b, pp. 8–11). Thus, if Nil Yalter takes the means of ethnology, even as its basic level, she uses them for another purpose. She reinserts other narratives that echo what she knows about migration and exile.

The combination of different fragments and temporalities breaks the classic narrative. The times and places telescope as they do in a tormented memory. At the same time Nil Yalter proposes a form of realism, of 'socio-critical art', she develops an intimate sphere, where emotions circulate. She also makes reference to other forms of intelligence in the world, such as the rituals or legends that structure the beliefs of the nomads or the migrants she interviewed in her videos. The longer texts of the other eight panels express these rituals and beliefs. Nil Yalter combines the fragments of various realities, which represent the experiences of migrant populations. This combination brings the daily experience of immigration into the art world.

The second acquisition concerns photographs from *Women at Home, Women at Work*, a project conducted with Nicole Croiset and presented at the Festival de La Rochelle-Rencontres internationales d'art contemporain in 1981. Their interest in articulating women's work in urban spaces and homes corresponds with Lucy R. Lippard's description of women artists in her 1973 exhibition 'c. 7,500':

> An international women's Conceptual show that began at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California. ... With the public introduction of younger women's artists into Conceptual art, a number of new subjects and approaches appeared: narrative,
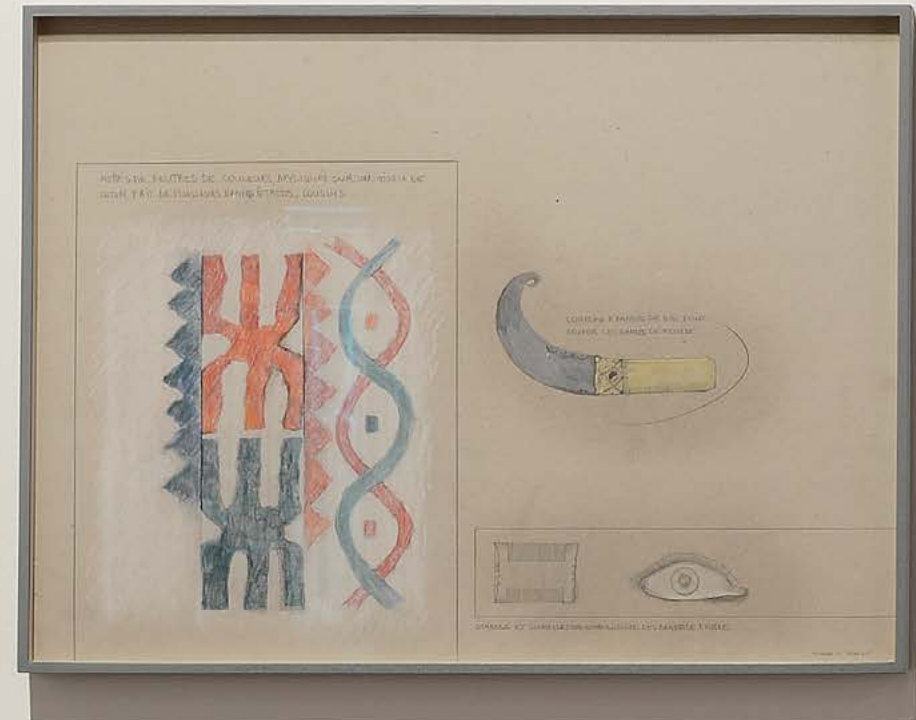
Is Nil Yalter's Work Compatible with Black Conceptualism?
An Analysis Based on the FRAC Lorraine Collection - Fabienne Dumont

113

Nil Yalter, *Collages of Topak Ev*, 1974, Collection of 49 Nord 6 Est -
FRAC Lorraine, Metz, © Nil Yalter.

Is Nil Yalter's Work Compatible with Black Conceptualism?
An Analysis Based on the FRAC Lorraine Collection - Fabienne Dumont

115

role-playing, guise and disguise, body and beauty issues; a focus on fragmentation, interrelationships, autobiography, performance, daily life, and, of course, on feminist politics (Lippard 1995, pp. 17–38 and p. 23).

The links between the artists and the interviewees were close because the project was prepared in meetings with them during the year before the exhibition. For all her projects, Nil Yalter met people she filmed and photographed through cultural or political associations, including communist ones, and through workers' unions. This network created close relations with the local population, as in the third and last project of Nil Yalter's works retained by the FRAC Lorraine (for the projects in full, see Dumont 2010, pp. 52–8).

RE-ACTUALISATION OF *EXILE IS A HARD JOB*

Exile is a hard job (1976/2012–17) comprises a series of black and white posters with the title written across them in red. The images show Turkish workers explaining their living and working conditions in three rows: in the centre is a realistic photographic representation, underneath are drawings that reproduce the people and patterns of the photographs with some parts of their bodies deleted, and in the drawings, which she puts in the last row, the faces have been removed completely. Only the clothes and the diagonal of the arm remain visible. The other series shows four Turkish girls who lived in a suburb of Paris. The clothes have also been erased from the drawings and in the last row the faces have disappeared. Over time, people fade away, time passes and people forget, new habits replace old ones.

This series evokes the feeling of loss of identity peculiar to exiled people, the paradox of identity. The photographs of the Turks in their familiar environment are associated with drawings in which the faces have been removed, where the artist insists on attending to details

of the clothes, everyday objects, all the elements that have come to individualise these people. This loss of identity echoes the narratives of the protagonists in the videos. The addition of red text across the black and white images, which evoke photos of ancient memories, imposes a visual shock that expresses the difficulty of the exiled Turks to integrate across the generation.

This poster is rooted in two of Nil Yalter's older projects that she has mixed and updated. First, the photographs come from the project *The Community of Turkish Workers in Paris* (1976–7) undertaken by Nicole Croiset and sociologists Gaye Petek-Salom and Jack Salom. They did a series of interviews with the workers who lived in Corbeil-Essonnes and Goussainville, suburbs of Paris. The videos, drawings and photographs were exhibited in 1977 at the 10th Biennale de Paris. The display was basic, with wooden panels that housed photographs or documents and monitors that broadcasted videos.

Second, in 1983, the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris offered Nil Yalter a solo show that she called 'Exile is a hard job', the title borrowed from the translation of the poem *C'est un dur métier que l'exil* (Hikmet 1999) by Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet (1902–63). She met with the clandestine Turkish and Kurdish tailors of the Faubourg Saint-Denis quarter in Paris, whose destitution and misery was far removed from their initial fascination with the West. She seeks to confront the reality of immigrant workers, their poverty and loneliness with their culture of origin, ethnology and myths, poetry and popular beliefs. The poems from Turkish and Kurdish popular culture evoke exile and travel with immigrants, as they give them dignity. She realised other installations on immigration issues in a multimedia version in Istanbul at the Institut français in 2006 and at the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration (now the Musée national de l'histoire

Is Nil Yalter's Work Compatible with Black Conceptualism?
An Analysis Based on the FRAC Lorraine Collection - Fabienne Dumont

117

Nil Yalter, *C'est un dur métier que l'exil/Exile is a hard job*, Metz, 2016,
Collection 49 Nord 6 Est - FRAC Lorraine, Metz, © Nil Yalter.

118

119

Is Nil Yalter's Work Compatible with Black Conceptualism?
An Analysis Based on the FRAC Lorraine Collection - Fabienne Dumont

de l'immigration) in 2009 (videos, drawings, collages, photographs). These projects bring together in one place experiences from different backgrounds in order to enlighten the viewer's awareness of the proximity of migrant experiences.

Since 2012, Nil Yalter has mixed images from the 1976 project and a title borrowed from the exhibition held in 1983. The poster is a combination of photographs and drawings reworked on a computer to create fly-poster displays. In a solo show at the Hermès Foundation in Brussels in 2015, Nil Yalter made a version of the poster printed on canvas, accompanied for the first time by a neon light that forms the words of the sentence. This reuse is typical of the updating of multimedia projects Nil Yalter made around 2010.

What the FRAC Lorraine chose to purchase is peculiar: the right to display the images on the city's walls. With their highly charged slogans, the posters denounce accusations that immigrants take advantage of welfare systems in Europe and elsewhere. The FRAC did not buy an object, but the right to perform an action (fly-posting in the streets), a purchase process that Béatrice Josse calls 'protocol works'. This protocol includes using at least two posters from both sets of photographs and writing 'Exile is a hard job' across them in red. The sentence can be translated into any language, and the red text can be written using various materials such as acrylic or spray paint. The material elements are simple: printed paper, glue, bucket, brush and red paint. It is simple and effective like the May '68 political and social posters or feminist posters from the 1970s. The user must also document the display at different stages of degradation.

This type of conceptual purchase is one of the specificities of Béatrice Josse's commitments. It also reflects what Lucy R. Lippard considered Conceptual art: 'Conceptual art, for me, means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious, and/or *dematerialized*' (1995, p. 17). The first time Nil Yalter exhibited her posters was in 2012 in the streets of Valencia. Since 2016, the FRAC has organised other fly-postings in Metz and Brussels and more recently in the Vosges region. In the meantime, unauthorised displays were held in Mumbai, Vienna and Istanbul.

The places chosen to display the posters have particular significance. Metz is a northern city that is severely affected by the closure of factories and mines and in a region with a high unemployment rate. In April 2017, during the exhibition 'The Missing Museum' at Wiels, a new display took place around the district of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, in Brussels. This area, with a population of largely Moroccan origin, made newspaper headlines during the terrorist attacks in 2015 and 2016 in Paris and Brussels respectively, because the terrorists had found refuge there. Given the tension, the locations of the display need to be carefully chosen and the artist is not always present. The reception shifts from positive attention to pressure from extremists' militants to forcing a gallery to have them removed. At other times, posters were lacerated. In Metz, women who frequent the Anatolian cultural centre helped the organisers, as they were affected by the fact that Nil Yalter evokes nomads from the Anatolian steppes in *Topak Ev* (the yurt made in 1973 that was exhibited in the FRAC Lorraine in Metz in 2016, at the same time as these posters were displayed in the streets).

Can we say, by looking at Nil Yalter's works, that she enters the field of conceptualism and Black Conceptualism? In the sense given by Luis Camnitzer, then certainly yes for conceptualism, and in a broader sense to migrant populations for Black conceptualism, then yes certainly as well. On the other hand, it is absolutely necessary to take into account the French context in which she worked; in particular socio-critical art, her

Is Nil Yalter's Work Compatible with Black Conceptualism?
An Analysis Based on the FRAC Lorraine Collection - Fabienne Dumont

121

Turkish origins and her communist engagement. It is also important to bear in mind the support of personalities who seem to me key to this new definition, such as the socially engaged feminist Lucy R. Lippard or Suzanne Pagé, who exhibited her work in a highly visible place. We have to exercise a multifocal view of the works as and when they reappear.

In the words of Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss: 'Conceptualism was a broader attitudinal expression that summarised a wide array of works and practices which, in radically reducing the role of the art object, reimagined the possibilities of art vis-à-vis the social, political, and economic realities within which it was being made' (1999, p. viii). This allows artists to reinvest the meaning of pre-existing objects and to look at social facts. Nil Yalter, as a woman artist of Turkish origins living in France, broadens the scope of what can be thought as falling under this term. Through simple means (basic materials she associates with mythological, social and historical references) she reimagines art and opens up new possibilities linked to each specific sociopolitical context.

REFERENCE LIST

Atagök, T. 1997, 'A View of Contemporary Women Artists in Turkey', *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*, no. 2.

Camnitzer, L., Farver, J. and Weiss, R. 1999, 'Foreword', in L. Camnitzer, J. Farver and R. Weiss (eds), *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s,* exhibition catalogue, 28 April–29 August, Queens Museum of Art, New York.

Cassell Oliver, V. 2005, 'Through the Conceptual Lens: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of Blackness', in *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970*, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston.

Dumont, F. 2010, 'Nil Yalter: memory, migrants and workers in 1970s-1980s France', *n-paradoxa: international feminist art journal*, vol. 26.

----. 2014, *Des sorcières comme les autres—Artistes et féministes dans la France des années 1970,* Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes.

----. 2015a, 'Nil Yalter's nomads – From the Bektiks of the Anatolian Steppe to the Direct Orient Express', *Nil Yalter 1973/2015, Le Journal de La Verrière*, no. 9, viewed 9 November 2019, https://www.fondationdentreprisehermes.org/sites/default/files/pdf/DesGestesDeLaPensee_Journal9.pdf.

----. 2015b, 'Le dessin nomade de Nil Yalter', *Roven*, no. 11.

----. 2016, 'The cosmogony of Nil Yalter', Nil Yalter, FRAC Lorraine, Metz.

----. 2018, 'Women Artists' Collectives in France: A Multiplicity of Positions in a Turbulent Context', in K. Deepwell and A. Jakubowska (eds), *All-Women Art Spaces in Europe in the Long 1970s*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, pp. 19–46.

Hikmet, N. 1999, *C'est un dur métier que l'exil*, Le Temps des cerises, Pantin.

Lippard, L. R. 1980, 'Issue and Tabu', in *Issue—Social strategies by women artists*, exhibition catalogue, 14 November–21 December, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

----. 1995, 'Escape Attempts', in A. Goldstein and A. Rorimer (eds), *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975*, exhibition catalogue, 15 October 1995–4 February 1996, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art.

Popper, F. 1982, 'Introduction', *Cahiers arts plastiques n° 1–Art socio-critique*, Festival de La Rochelle.

Zabunyan, E. 2004, *Black is a Color–Une histoire de l'art africain-américain contemporain*, Dis Voir, Paris.

NOTES

1 According to figures provided by Margot Delalande, in charge of the collections, the collection went from 16 women out of 140 artists before 1993 (11.4%) to 145 women out of 415 artists (34.94%) in 2016.

122

123

Is Nil Yalter's Work Compatible with Black Conceptualism?
An Analysis Based on the FRAC Lorraine Collection - Fabienne Dumont

Speculations: A New Shopping List for Art History[1]

Sumesh Sharma

A few years ago, I met Pakistani artist and theorist Iftikhar Dadi, who turned my attention towards the idea of translation, because, at present, we're dealing with the etymology of modernism, with its origins in Latin. When you translate modernism into Urdu (I speak Urdu), understanding is limited to the context of words without understanding their etymological significance. In Urdu, there are two terms with which to define modernism. One is *taraqipasand*, which means 'progressive thought', and the other is *nai roshni*, which is the modernism of form in many senses. When I think of translation into South Asian languages, 'conceptualism' is easier because it deals with the mind and its etymology exists across tongues. We have to question timelines, and how these, along with the gender and origins of artists in terms of place, class and caste, engender how artists are seen.

In 1956, at age 18 while studying at Robert College in Istanbul, Nil Yalter met French mime artist Théo Lesoualc'h' who had come to the college. That same year they eloped, went to Tehran, and arrived in Bombay in 1957. She travelled around India, across 200 villages doing mime performances. Yalter claims that India was her art school, since she never had any kind of formal training as an artist. There are photographs of her as a

Nil Yalter in India, 1950s. Photographer unknown. Image courtesy the artist.

Polaroid photographs of Judy Blum Reddy by Nil Yalter, 1974. Mounted on canvas 6" x 12". Image courtesy the artist.

young tourist in a lodge. I don't know much about Théo Lesoualc'h' because she has nothing to do with him today, and all that it is possible to find out about him seems to be that he wrote a book about Japanese erotica... But I would rather discuss another close partnership that Yalter holds, with Judy Blum Reddy, an American artist of Austrian/Jewish heritage who grew up in New York and whose parents escaped the holocaust and Vienna.

As a very close friend of Yalter, Blum Reddy has also been her long-time collaborator. In 1974, they made *La Roquette, Prison des Femmes* which dealt with collaborations with female prisoners in France. That same year they made Paris Ville Lumière, a kind of gossip column that took the form of lists about the twenty districts of Paris. An extremely important work by Blum Reddy is India (1998), a list of all the country's train stations. Now, India itself is a conceptual idea in many senses (but my friends from Pakistan might not entirely agree with me, and I haven't always entirely agreed with them), because the gathering of this geography comes from train stations, from telegraph lines. When Blum Reddy came to India in the 1960s, she began noting all the train stations, because, before the British came and created this conglomeration of diverse cultures, languages and races, there was not an India that saw itself in homogeneity with other places. Trains changed this by bringing far away populaces together, creating a particular view and image of the nation.

Blum Reddy has always made lists of daily and artist actions, or that spell out patriarchy and forms of discrimination. She worked for two decades at the African American Hatch-Billops Collection in New York, transcribing interviews and making lists in this repository of African American visual culture. She has made lists of all the rivers in India. In India, an extremely patriarchal and misogynous society, we name all our rivers after
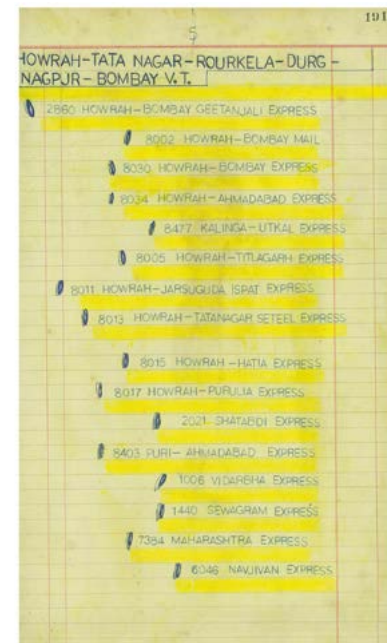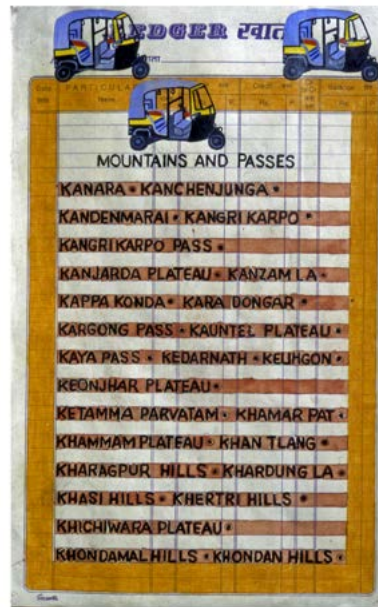
Judy Blum Reddy, *India Tourism*, 1998. 62 units each measuring 12.75" x 8 ".
Ink on paper. Image courtesy the artist.

Judy Blum Reddy, *Timetables*, 1997. 57 units each measuring
9 1/2" x 14 1/2". Colour pencil on paper. Image courtesy the artist.

Judy Blum Reddy, *108 Names of the Ganges*, 1997. 7 units each measuring 12 3/4" x 16 1/4". Ink on paper. Image courtesy the artist.

women, we give women the role of goddesses. But we also pollute those rivers — most have been violently destroyed, including the Ganges. Registering the names of the Ganges on an accounting ledger allows more mindful meanings to open up in the heads of those who simply hear them as mindless chants. Mythical representations of women in society stem from structural discrimination and the suppression of resistance; a celebration of women in religion and tradition masks constant violence and inequality. Blum Reddy's collection of bizarre names and translations is important here, because when you translate them, they eulogise the river, they're very beautiful names. But, that beauty disappears when you actually come to the river; you cannot drink potable water from any river in India.

I'm not an academic, but I feel that blackness is not something that we can define or reflect upon as a way to contest the people who have asserted themselves with this identity — those who identify with blackness in India. The architect of India's constitution and the founder of the Dalit Solidarity movement, Dr. Bhimrao Babasaheb Ambedkar, wrote a letter in July 1946 to W. E. B. Du Bois, affirming support for and camaraderie with the Black people in the Americas in the struggle against slavery. Du Bois acknowledged the letter and said he was aware of the ostracising of India's untouchables. In 1972 on 15 August, the Dalit Panther Movement was formed with a manifesto and the declaration 'Kala Swatantra Din', or Black Freedom Day, declaring their fight alongside their brothers and sisters in Africa and America and the indigenous people around the world. Various Dalit scholars have reaffirmed this connection over the decades. Pan-Africanist polymath, Cheikh Anta Diop, was a proponent of the theory that India's Dravidian civilisation was born in Western Africa, travelling outwards through migration. I don't come from them, so I don't speak for them, but I speak with them — because they are my friends and they are my family. There's a large group of diverse people who, in

the years of the nationalist movement, and particularly, after the independence of India, decided to associate themselves with the term Dalit.

The Dalit means 'oppressed and scattered'; these were the erstwhile untouchables of India who, not for 200 years, nor 400 years, nor 1,000 years, but almost 5,000 years, were oppressed and exploited in the cruellest way, whose mere touch was considered socially annihilating for someone who came from an upper caste. Obviously, the British along with a cheering section of privileged educated Indians, decided to create a kind of mythical origin narrative of Indian culture and its connections to Central Europe and Asia. An anthology that was entirely spearheaded by largely German scholars, who unfortunately defined the first Aryan in anthropological form. For example, Max Müller is still credited for his studies of Indian philosophy, religious scriptures and secular treatises, along with other colleagues. Aryanism found its birth in these studies, especially when colonial scholars crafted links between India's classical civilisations and Greece.

And, in India, in the years when Yalter was proposing the project *Paris Ville Lumière*, we had the Dalit Panther Movement, which asserted itself as a black conscious-ness movement in Bombay, contesting twenty-five years of India's independence and calling itself a black organisation. These are the people in the margins — not in the sense of demographic margins, they are the absolute majority in India — but marginalised socially and economically. In recent years, they have also named themselves as the Bahujan, or simply the 'Majority'. Now, why would I speak of Yalter and Blum Reddy to define this movement presently contesting power in India? This may seem kind of preposterous in many senses, since most art historians cannot even name Judy Blum Reddy, even though she has been really important in actively supporting the careers of lots of

Indian women and men as artists, in Paris and in New York. I propose this because there's an ancient Indian saying, where 'women, Dalits and land should always be beneath your feet', and by association with Dalits, women and land are also somehow free from morality.

Nil Yalter and Theo Lesoualch, Mime Programme from Paris to Istanbul to Tehran to Bombay 1956–9. The image on the right is taken outside the former opera hall near Clark House, which will become the National Gallery of Modern Art. Image courtesy Nil Yalter.

Again, this is Yalter in India, walking around, photo-graphing as she did her mime performances. In 2014, in collaboration with the Kadist Foundation, Clark House Initiative did an exhibition in Bombay called, 'And I laid traps for the Troubadours who get killed before they reach Bombay'. The exhibition was about cross-geographic connections and Yalter had been introduced to us two years before by Blum Reddy. She asked us to paste posters of a Turkish immigrant family from the 1970s in Paris across the streets of Bombay, on which we wrote 'Exile is a Hard Job', in various Indian languages. When we actually proposed these unauthorised posters around the city of Bombay to shopkeepers, roadside cafés, stores and empty walls, we were able to do so along with public support, and through a definite break with the colonial penal code. Posters, public art and even public assembly in contemporary India (which is a republic that guarantees freedoms of a democracy), are

guided and regulated by British penal codes, colonial laws retained by the post-independent state similar to Hong Kong or Singapore, while various cities had their own police laws. We installed the posters at a tea stall that is presently positioned exactly opposite the National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay. In fact, Lesoualc'h' and Yalter had actually performed there in 1959, when it was a town hall, before it was converted and reopened as the National Gallery of Modern Art in 1996. The Clark House is a few steps away from both these locations.

When you come to India, you can see we've learnt really well from the British to create these extramural bureaucratic departments, such as the Department of Vedic Astrology, the Department of Poverty Alleviation, etc. These great names never translate into any great change. Blum Reddy created an amazing list, enumerating them from a phone book of government guest houses and hotels: the Agriculture and Cooperative Corporation, Administration and Coordination, Agricultural Census Division, Commissioner for Departmental Enquiries, International Zoology Department, Working Girls Hostel – names that don't really mean anything but are all part of the phone book in any international government guest house, so that when you come as a visitor to India, you might be impressed enough to want to speak to them.

In 1968, Blum Reddy's partner, Krishna Reddy, made the bronze work *Protestor*, after participating in the Paris protests of May 1968. In the 1970s, the regeneration of their neighbourhood, which saw their house torn down, led them to migrate to Blum Reddy's hometown of New York. Reddy became the head of the printmaking department of New York University, while Blum Reddy began working to archive the talks and interviews of the Hatch-Billops Collection. Although she participated in many exhibitions, none foregrounded her identity and practice, and as such, she was not

Judy Blum Reddy, *Delhi Phone Book*, 1999. 63 units each measuring 9 1/2' x 12 1/2". Ink on paper. Image courtesy the artist.
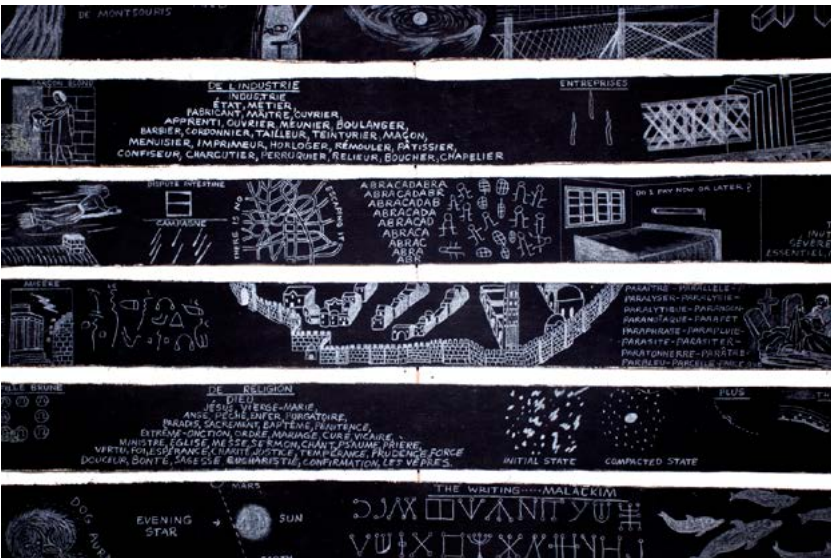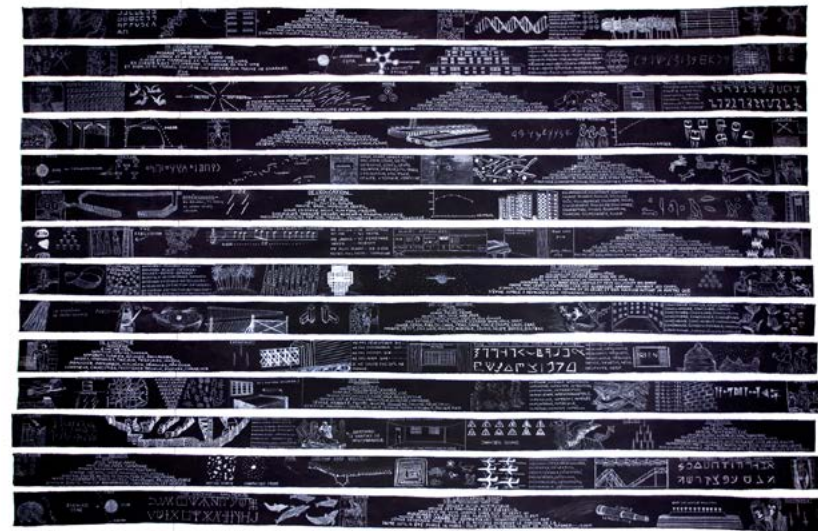
Judy Blum Reddy, *The Big Nightmare*, 1978. 14 canvas strips each measuring 3 1/2" x 79". White pencil on canvas. Image courtesy the artist.

visible in any kind of mainstream American feminist or women's art arena during that time. By contrast, in recent years, she has been invited to many exhibitions, while hers and Yalter's work, *Paris Ville Lumière*, has been acquisitioned by the Musée Carnavalet in Paris.

Artists at Clark House such as Prabhakar Pachpute (who made his international debut at the Van Abbe-museum), come from a context outside the history of Indian exhibition-making — that is, he comes from a caste and class that were never allowed conceptual existence; they were not a part of Modernism or con-temporary art practices because they didn't speak English, came from rural backgrounds, from a kind of class consciousness that never allowed them to be a part of this narrative. For me, what is important is that the kind friendship Clark House holds with Yalter and Blum Reddy has helped to instil perspectives that have created connections outside our immediate context (of Bombay and Delhi), and that diversity has done well. Each time we are in Paris, we drink two or three bottles of wine in Yalter's studio, where she talks about her life and her time in India. People take these conversations into their practices, these young Indian artists, and these conversations are replicated by questioning the very arguments for the nation itself.

In 2017, an Italian curator, Niccolò Moscatelli, colla-borated with Clark House and over 20 artists from diverse backgrounds, to create an extremely success-ful public art project called, 'Take / The / City', with protest posters, actions and interventions all over the city. As for me, I refused to be a part of this project, because I come from privilege, the fact that I write in lucid English illustrates my position. Even though I am invested and politically very interested in the idea of black consciousness, I cannot claim the space of being black because to do so would deny other people's experience, which is not only political ideology, not only something that they associate or have solidarity

with, but their actual lived experience.

Indian or South Asian historians do not see the role of people like Blum Reddy or Yalter in their writing of art histories, and thus script a failed narrative that does not actually take into account connections built on emotions, family, friendships, love lives and death. Such intersectionalities are human and essential to under-standing the complexities of that period and also, to countering the kind of narratives that are being forced into our common memory and knowledge.

Feminist and/or Conceptual? Reading the Sociopolitical in Nil Yalter's *Temporary Dwellings* (1974–7) and *Women at Work, Women at Home* (1981)

Laura Castagnini

When we showed *[La Roquette, Prison des Femmes]* to feminist groups (not feminist artists but feminist activists as a whole), they claimed it was too artistic and asked us why we didn't go inside the prison and hold a demonstration. When we tried to show it to art circles, they told me in 1974 that this wasn't a work of art but rather a sociological work. They claimed that it was a 'political' piece'. – Nil Yalter cited in Özcan Kaya 2009, p. 91.

In the 1970s, the sociopolitical elements of Nil Yalter's artistic practice were difficult to place. She engaged with political issues, documenting the living conditions of immigrant workers and collaborating with low-income working women. However, Yalter's insistence on infusing these testimonials with poetic and decorative elements was seen as an obstacle to their use in advocating for social change. In this paper I articulate the elements of Yalter's work that were considered 'too artistic' for politics, and 'too political' for art. Using the term 'sociopolitical' as a shorthand, I explore the terrain between art and politics occupied by two of her early artworks, *Temporary Dwellings* (1974–7) and *Women at Work, Women at Home* (1981). I conclude with a discussion of Yalter's dialogue with the American feminist art critic Lucy R. Lippard, which culminated in Yalter's participation in 'Issue: Social Strategies for Women Artists' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in 1980.

Nil Yalter, *Temporary Dwellings*, 1974–7 (detail), 7 works on board and video, 6 flat screens or monitors, black and white and colour, and sound, overall display dimensions variable. Tate Collection © the artist.
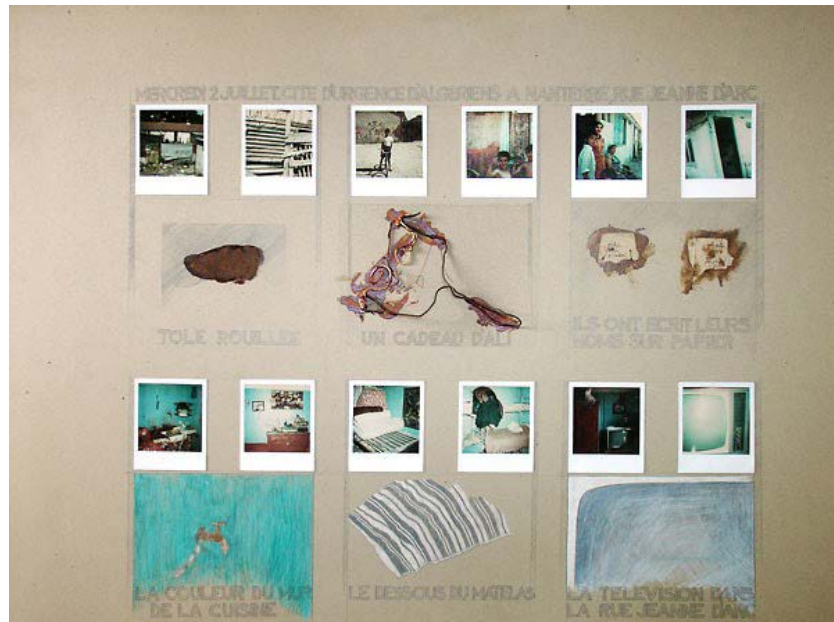
TEMPORARY DWELLINGS: 'TOO ARTISTIC'

Temporary Dwellings is a multi-part video installation dated 1974–7. Acquired by Tate in 2012, *Temporary Dwellings* comprises seven archival board panels displayed alongside six moving-image works that were made over a longer period from 1976 to 2005. Each of the seven boards is devoted to a different neighbourhood with a marked density of immigrant workers in Istanbul, Paris and New York. At the top of each board, the work states the date and precise location of Yalter's visit. The text is all uppercase, and in French, scrawled in pencil in a style reminiscent of signwriting. Below this information are four more rows of information: alternating Polaroids and collaged or hand-drawn elements. Placed in a basic grid structure, these textual and pictorial elements serve as evidence for Yalter's sociological study of each site. For example, in the study taken on Monday 17 August 1976, the first row of Polaroids represents different views of the neighbourhood, from the street to a close-up of a child's ball in a puddle. Below this, three patches of red adhesive contain tattered objects found at the site: these include a piece of rope, a pile of rocks, a piece of fabric and scattering of sticks. The second row of Polaroids zooms in closer than the first, as three pairs of images focus on three neighbouring dwellings: house 35, 37 and 39. Below each pair of images, a pair of objects found at each house is displayed alongside a textual description, which reads from left to right: 'Wood taken from the front of house no. 35; Pieces of wall from house no. 37; A piece of broken glass and a piece of wire netting (window of house no. 39).'[1] The facts are laid out to appear objective and clinical: the interplay between photographs, text and the physical objects serve to corroborate Yalter's story.

At the same time, however, Yalter's perspective is anything but factual. The hand-drawn elements pick up on odd details — a tap against a bright blue wall, a striped
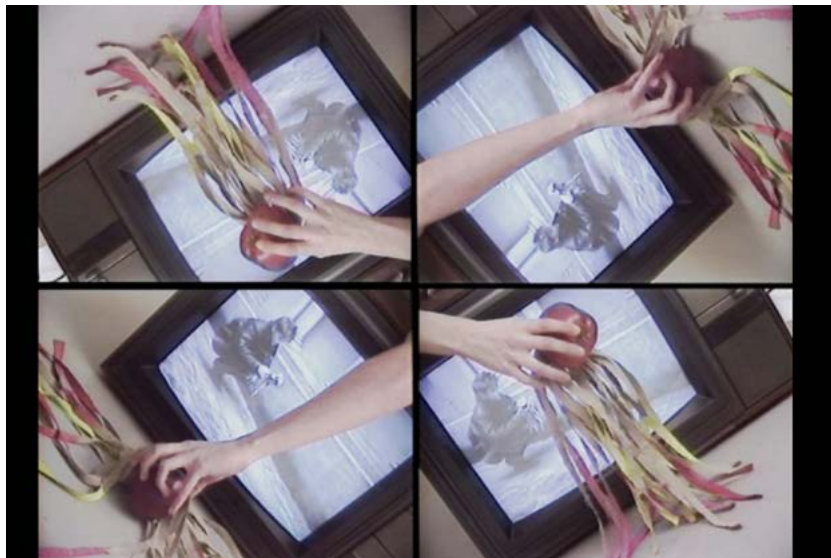
Nil Yalter, *Clandestine workers in Paris*, 1983, video, 6 min.
From *Temporary Dwellings*, 1974–7. Tate Collection © the artist.

Nil Yalter, *Clandestine workers in Paris*, 1983, video, 6 min.
From *Temporary Dwellings*, 1974–7. Tate Collection © the artist.

blanket laid upon a bed, the corner edge of a television monitor – that echo poetically details of the photograph displayed above. The viewer becomes aware of Yalter's subjectivity in her scrutiny of the room, honing in on aspects that interest her, then rendering them with tenderness and care. As Eda Berkman suggests: 'Habitually but intensely Yalter observes the things around her, trying to understand the mechanics of the world she inhabits' (Yalter 2016, p. 41). This method lies in direct opposition to the neutrality of the pseudo-scientific strategies she is using.

There are six videos displayed on monitors alongside the archival boards. Four of these videos were filmed with a black and white Portapak in the late 1970s, the latter two from 1983 and 2005 are in colour. There are no headphones, so the videos create a cacophony of noise through the speakers. Although filmed in a documentary style, the camera's gaze is sensual, even distracted: at times, it zooms in on a detail of the worker's body or wanders down their limbs while they are giving their testimony. While the archival boards mostly present the outside of the immigrant workers' houses and their neighbourhoods, the videos show us who lives inside. The circumstances of these people vary: Turkish workers in Paris (1976–7 and 1983), Lyon (1977) and Ghent (1978), as well as Portuguese workers in suburban Paris (1979) and a final scene filmed in Diyarbakir, in south-eastern Turkey (2005). Despite differences, many workers report similar problems throughout the interviews, such as unsafe conditions, cramped living quarters and language difficulties.

The workers speak in French, Turkish and Portuguese, which have been translated by the artist into English captions for exhibition. However, as the artist has said: 'I don't like subtitles, so if I have to do it then I'll do it a different way. I translate only the important sentences and sometimes they appear in different places' (Yalter 2017). Yalter's method disrupts the supposed neutrality

of subtitles while also treating them as a medium with which to heighten emotion. For example, in the video *Turkish immigrant workers in Paris* (1976–7), the camera focuses on a woman talking about her expectations of life in France, and the reality of her living conditions, cramped and confined to small room. Towards the end of her testimony, the subtitles — previously in black font and presented at the bottom of the screen — escape their traditional position and appear in white on the lower middle-right of the screen. The text reads: 'We are disappointed.' This subtle shift adds an element of textual poetry to the sequence while also emphasising the emotional weight of the final phrase.

Furthermore, Yalter literally abstracts the testimonies of her subjects by using a four-way split-screen, repeating and mirroring her subjects among themselves. In *Clandestine workers in Paris* (1983), the use of mirrors has a direct and symbolic relationship to the narrative of confinement and dislocation experienced by her subjects:

> I use repetition, the so-called mirror effect, depending on where I do the video-taping. For example, the Turkish immigrants that work in the factory on the rue St Denis in Paris live and work in a very small area, and they're always looking at the wall of the window in front of them. You get the feeling that they're always looking at a mirror which throws their own reflections back at them... They never go out. They work, live and sleep in the same space (cited in Ferrer 1989, p. 32).

Yalter's use of symbology is part of her refusal to depict her subjects through traditional ethnographic methods. This strategy peaks in a non-representational sequence included within this film, in which the camera cuts to a staged scene of an apple with tassels, laid on the floor in front of a television monitor. Next, a hand reaches down into the frame to pick up the apple-turned-

sculpture. Meanwhile, the television monitor shows a woman finding the same object on the street. The apple, as Yalter has explained, is a familiar symbol of exile for Turkish people. Elsewhere in the same film, a red apple that has been pierced by a shard of mirror is laid out on a sewing table in front of an immigrant worker narrating his story. Yalter's use of symbols, decoration and abstraction in this video is an example of what her contemporaries deem made her work 'too artistic' to be used for political means. However, as this paper argues, it is precisely the decorative and personalised or subjective elements of Yalter's work that articulate an intersectional feminist aesthetic in its addressing of issues of class, race and immigration status.

WOMEN AT WORK, WOMEN AT HOME: 'TOO DECORATIVE'

> At the beginning they used to tell me that I mixed too many things in my work, or that I used to [*sic*] many colours, that the effect was to [*sic*] decorative compared to the seriousness of the theme, which was always of a socio-political nature (Yalter cited in 1989, p. 33).

Yalter's insistence on decoration sets her work apart from contemporaneous feminist sociopolitical artworks, whose aesthetics were considered more suitable for 'the seriousness of the theme'. Across the English Channel, two collaborative artworks that coincidentally share similar titles – Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt and Mary Kelly's *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labor in Industry 1973-75* (1973–5) and the Hackney Flashers's exhibition 'Women and Work' (1975) – sought to give visibility to the daily lives of working women while reflecting on the implementation of the Equal Pay Act in 1975. The coincidental titling suggests the transnational urgency of these issues.[2] Harrison,

Nil Yalter, *Women at Work, Women at Home*, 1981. Courtesy the artist.

Nil Yalter, *Women at Work, Women at Home*, 1981. Courtesy the artist.

Hunt and Kelly's project, in particular, has come to be seen as emblematic of British post-conceptualism in its use of recognisable conceptual art forms and languages to advocate an overtly (Marxist feminist) political agenda. Acquired by Tate in 2001, the installation comprises typewritten text, black and white photographs, statistical tables, legal extracts, and video and sound recordings. It presents the results of a two-year study of unequal labour conditions in a South London metal box factory, in which 150 women participated.

In comparison, the Hackney Flashers project aimed to create a large-scale photographic record of various types of women's work in Hackney. Photographer Michael Ann Mullen commented in a recent interview: 'I think that some people were more aware or pissed off about the way women were portrayed in the media, and I was, too... but I was more motivated by the fact that they were hardly portrayed at all' (cited in Stacey 2013, p. 48). Over 250 photographs were displayed on bulletin boards with hand-written texts about women's labour, and exhibited in Hackney Town Hall alongside train union memorabilia and banners as part of the 75th anniversary of Hackney Trades Council.

Harrison, Hunt and Kelly's activism focused on visualising structural gender inequalities between workers, while the Hackney Flashers's interest was in visualising labour as an essential part of women's identity. The visual presentation is what divides the two projects most distinctly, the former adopting a conceptual aesthetic, while the latter's was 'uncomfortably amateurish', according to Siona Wilson, with deliberately socially orientated aims (2015, p. 139).

Yalter's *Women at Work, Women at Home* similarly produces imagery of the working woman that integrates labour into its subject position, also oscillating between rejection and adoption of a conceptual aesthetic.

Women at Work was a four-part public artwork that recorded the daily experiences of ten women who lived in a social housing project on the outskirts of La Rochelle in France. In contrast to the British projects, however, Yalter's *Women at Work* imbued the narrative of working women with colour and poetry, utilising their image for political purposes but also reimagining and abstracting the daily grind to create new forms. In doing so, it merged the expected languages of conceptual art and feminist political practice. Further, the women's testimonies were not placed in a gallery but reimagined in four different ways that focused on the original participants as their primary audience. That is, the project is created *for* and *with* its subjects, not about them.

The first two components of *Women at Work, Women at Home* focused on the bus line that connected the housing estate to the city centre. The public placement of the work in this way was initially practical, as Yalter has explained: 'The passengers were all women, for if there was a car in the family, the husband was the one who used it to drive to work etc. So we came up with the idea of hanging up big signs at each bus stop that said "Women at Work, Women at Home". We put up smaller signs with the same slogan inside the buses' (cited in Ferrer 1989, p. 39).

The large commercial billboard bus stop posters present a chorus of women's voices reflecting on their condition working both inside and outside the home. Their first statement is expansive, articulating a link between work and identity formation, and calling for others' opinions: 'I don't know how someone can blossom staying between four walls. I want to know what other people think.' The poster thereafter opens out to more politicised statements, such as: 'It is not easy to find a job, once you've left. Some women asked for maternity leave but I don't think they will return to work.'[3]

The texts are encircled by visual imagery of different kinds of women's work, including a photograph of a woman operating factory machinery and another of a woman feeding a child beside an easel painting. Hand-drawn representations of working tools — kitchen appliances on the left, hand tools on the right — present a balanced view of women's work both inside and outside the home. At a time when many feminists were working to validate and politicise unpaid domestic labour through campaigns such as Wages for House-work, Yalter's equalising of childcare and cooking with factory work would have been considered a radically empowering image for the women of Rochelle. In this way, the poster functioned as a consciousness-raising exercise: as Fabienne Dumont has argued, it 'gave visibility to these women as well as a very rewarding sight of themselves' (2010, p. 57). At the same time, the posters were put out on the streets in a very public way, which politicised the image of the working women as a counterpoint to the sexualisation of women's bodies in the media.

The second element of *Women at Work* was the small advertising panels that were placed inside the bus itself; they occupy a similar political function to the poster but exclude the drawing elements. Further, the type-written texts were much more concise, isolating key words from the interviews and placing them below photographic imagery of women working. One panel, for example, reads: 'Maternity... Choice... Available... Couple... Confined... Future... Conscience... Go out...' While the sparse visual style may appear aligned with the aesthetic of conceptual art, it must be noted that the work operated outside an art context. There was no label or explanation to designate the project as 'art', and the artist did not mention anything of the sort when she approached the bus company (Yalter 2017). Unlike *Temporary Dwellings*, for example, the work was not displayed immediately within a gallery context. For both the poster and the panels, therefore, their original

Nil Yalter, *Women at Work, Women at Home*, 1981, public space project on a bus line in the town of La Rochelle. Courtesy the artist.

Nil Yalter, *Women at Work, Women at Home*, 1981, public space project on a bus line in the town of La Rochelle. Courtesy the artist.

audience was specifically designated as the women whose lives they represented.

These first two elements of *Women at Work* are held in FRAC Lorraine's collection. There were, however, two more rarely seen elements to the project. Yalter worked with the ten women from the housing estate to create a series of circular self-portraits whose form referenced the souvenir plates sold along the seashore of La Rochelle. Their layout is uniform: each is divided vertically and horizontally into thirds. A grid of nine Polaroid photographs is positioned at the centre, accompanied by reflections by each woman on her working life. The outer thirds of the composition are decorated differently with materials such as plastic flowers, coloured ribbon or autumn leaves repeated to create patterns. The similarity of the composition to central core imagery and the artist's insistence on craft techniques echoes the decorative elements of *Temporary Dwellings*, and Yalter's refusal to treat sociopolitical themes in a clinical way. Further, Yalter gifted the works to the original participants — and by doing so, echoing the original function of their formal inspiration — they become souvenirs of the experience.

Finally, the project also included a performance in which Yalter and her collaborator, Nicole Croiset, reimagined and re-performed actions from the women's daily routines in front of large-scale projections onto two screens. The forty-minute silent performance was held exclusively for the ten participating women, and held in a social space within their housing complex. The projected imagery included photographs of the women at work, some of which were used elsewhere in the project, as well as the artists' creative interpretations of the activities through photography. In one scene, for example, the photograph of a woman typing (also displayed on the bus) is shown alongside on-screen and live re-enactments by the artists. The on-screen re-enactment reveals what has been typed: a non-

sensical text featuring each letter of the top line of the French keyboard ('AZERTYUIOP') presented in a large, curved header font that would be technically impossible with a typewriter. The artists, wearing baggy white jumpsuits, stand in front of the projection holding up a banner featuring the same text.

These artistic re-enactments remove the original image further and further from reality, suggesting the imaginary potential of women's labour. This approach, which points to women's work as a medium for poetic abstraction, contrasts with the documentary approach taken by British feminist projects exploring women's labour during this period. Analysis of this work suggests the theoretical potential in expanding the dimensions of the international in Marxist feminist art practice.

INTERNATIONALISM AND 'ISSUE: SOCIAL STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN ARTISTS'

> Having watched so many politicized artists reach out, only to fall by the wayside or back into acceptable modernism with leftist rhetoric, I have the most heartfelt respect for those with the courage to persist in this nobody's land between aesthetics, political activism and populism (Lippard 1980, p. 4).

The American critic and curator Lucy R. Lippard was instrumental in developing a feminist transatlantic dialogue through an examination of the aspects of Yalter's practice that had been criticised by other contemporaries as 'too artistic' for politics, and 'too political' for art. In this final section, I trace their interaction in order to expand my analysis of Yalter's sociopolitical work of this period in terms of its internationalism.

Yalter first met Lippard in Paris in 1974, the same year she had commenced work on *Temporary Dwellings*.

She describes their meeting as fortuitous: Yalter was in the audience of a lecture by Lippard about feminist art, and was surprised to hear her own work *Topak Ev* (1973) mentioned as an example of socially engaged feminist practice occurring in Paris. She introduced herself thereafter, sparking a decade-long international exchange. After Lippard returned to New York, Yalter stayed in touch with her until they met again in 1976 when Yalter undertook a residency at A.I.R. Gallery in New York. Lippard visited Yalter's studio often, as she developed and then first exhibited the text-image work *La Roquette, Prison de Femmes* (1976) at A.I.R. Gallery (Yalter 2017). Thereafter, Lippard published the work's text in the first issue of New York-based *Heresies* magazine in 1977. Their working relationship peaked in 1980 when Lippard included Yalter in the ground-breaking group exhibition, 'Issue: Social Strategies for Women Artists' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London.

'Issue' explored 'issue-based' art, in particular the adoption of activist techniques by artists focused on social change. In the catalogue, Lippard describes the work as that which 'attempts to replace the illusion of neutral esthetic freedom with social responsibility by focusing – to a greater or lesser degree – on specific issues' (Lippard 1980, p. 1). *Issue* was co-organised with May Stevens and Margaret Harrison and, for Lippard, the exhibition was an opportunity to present feminist content in the British context, which she felt was more advanced in its theoretical understanding of issue-based art.[4] The twenty-one artists involved in 'Issue' were mostly based in United Kingdom and the United States, therefore the inclusion of Yalter (as well as Miriam Sharon based in Tel Aviv) creates a curious interruption to what is essentially a transatlantic dialogue. Yalter's outlier position is exacerbated not only by the subject of the work presented, but also its display. Her contribution to 'Issue' was a multipart video installation titled *Rahime, Kurdish Woman from Turkey*

Nicole Croiset and Nil Yalter, street poster at bus stops, exterior part of the multimedia installation *Women at Home, Women at Work*, in Mireuil, France, 1981. The work consisted of a portrait series from the lives of women living in the neighborhood where it was shown.

rich can't *do* anything—work in a factory or even fulfill their military service. Croiset and Yalter combine art, sympathetic anthropology and documentary approaches. As in their previous works on the city of Paris, a women's prison, and immigrant workers in France and Germany, they bring to rhythm and life the people who make up the statistics of Europe's new, reluctant melting-pot status.

Miriam Sharon is also involved in cross-cultural awareness. An Israeli, she has worked with the Bedouins in the Negev and Sinai deserts. Her earth-covered tents and costumes pay homage to their close relationship to nature. By performing rituals both in the desert and on the Tel Aviv waterfront (at Ashdod Harbor, appropriately named after an ancient goddess), Sharon uses her art as a vehicle of cultural exchange; she reminds the workers of the plight of the nomads who are being herded into cement villages and forced to abandon their traditional ways of life. She also shows her work in factories and has become a one-woman liaison organization between the "desert people" and their rulers.

Maria Karras also deals with dislocation in her phototext posters on the subject of "multicultural awareness." *Both Here and There* consists of fourteen posters in English and one of twelve different languages; each shows a relaxed portrait of a woman from a different ethnic origin and a statement excerpted from an interview about her experience as a woman and an immigrant in America. Conceived and marketed as teaching aids as well, the posters were seen by over a million people when they went up in Los Angeles public buses in 1979. They stem from Karras' earlier work on her own Greek heritage. What initially appears to be a bland, chamber-of-commerce format is ruffled by the casual poses and the controversial things some of her subjects have to say about women's roles in their communities. Each poster is a small and pointed political geography lesson. Karras offers positive images of women, new role models and new sources of confidence for women. She provides an exchange between Los Angeles' many and isolated ethnic communities, and makes connections between feminism and the anxiety, alienation and assimilation of the bi-cultural experience.

Lippard, L. R. 1984, *Get the Message: A Decade of Art for Social Change*, E.P. Dutton, New York, p. 129.

Karras, M. 1980, in *Issue: Social Strategies for Women Artists*, exhibition catalogue, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

(1979), which narrates the true story of a woman who moved from her village to a shanty town on the outskirts of Istanbul. She also contributed a text to the catalogue co-written with her collaborator Croiset, however it was submitted in French and not translated into English. Both contributions pose questions about the translatability (literally) of Yalter's work to a British context, but also suggest the influence of Yalter's work on the international scope of Lippard's thinking about political art.

The international dimensions of 'Issue' are also evident when tracing its influence upon Yalter herself. She travelled to London to install the work, and for the opening weekend conference (Yalter 1980), thereafter staying in contact with artists like Harrison and Kelly (Yalter 2017). Many of the artists in 'Issue' were also grappling with what Lippard called the 'taboos' of art at the time — subject matter deemed unsuitable for art, like immigrant workers, labour and domesticity — and subverting ideas of 'high art' by using craft techniques and making work for non-art audiences (1980) Yalter appears bolstered by this solidarity when she returns to France to make *Women at Work*, particularly when considering the clear aesthetic comparisons with work exhibited in 'Issue' by the artist Maria Karras. Karras's series *Both Here and There* (1979) was the result of her interviews with fourteen women of bi-cultural backgrounds living in Los Angeles, which were reproduced 'in poster form for exhibition on 1,000 Los Angeles city buses for six months' and later used as a multicultural teaching aide in Los Angeles's public schools (cited in Lippard 1980, p. 3).

Three years later, in 1984, when Lippard republished the 'Issue' catalogue essay with new images in her book, *Get the Message: A Decade of Art for Social Change*, she included Yalter's *Women at Work* (1984, p. 129). If we consider that Lippard had conceived 'Issue' as a touring show of transportable elements (Tobin 2017), it could be argued that the new images function as another iteration of the 'Issue' exhibition, which retroactively includes *Women at Work*.

CONCLUSION

In attempting to articulate the ways that Yalter's early work 'produces' rather than simply 'represents' identity politics, this paper has examined the elements that have been considered 'too political' for art and 'too artistic' for politics. I have suggested that Yalter's production of identity politics lies within her refusal of 'objectivity' when visualising the testimonies of her subjects. Her camera wanders, her pencil creates poetic associations and she interacts with her subjects as collaborators. Further, I have examined Yalter's insistence on the decorative within sociopolitical subject matter, particularly evident in her abstraction of source material — whether through drawing, mirroring, re-enactment, omission or repetition — that occurs across her film, performance and collage works. Rather than seeing these elements as conceptual deficiencies, I have argued for their use as feminist interventions that can help us to reassess the international and political dimensions of conceptual aesthetics. To quote Lippard once more — Yalter's work blossoms in the 'nobody's land between aesthetics, political activism and politics' (1980).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Crippa, E. 2016, '1970s: Out of Sculpture', *British Art Studies*, no. 3, https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/ecrippa.

Dumont, F. 2010, 'Nil Yalter: Memory, migrants and workers in 1970s–1980s France', *n.paradoxa*, vol. 26, pp. 52–8.

Ferrer, E. 1989, 'Frontier between Art and Reality', *LAPIZ. International Art Magazine*, no. 60, pp. 32–9.

Lippard, L. R. ed. 1980. *Issue: Social Strategies for Women Artists*, exhibition catalogue, 14 November–21 December, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

----. 1984, *Get the Message: A Decade of Art for Social Change*, E. P. Dutton, New York.

Özcan Kaya, Y. 2009, 'Men's Year Dog's Year', in A. Sönmez (ed.), *Haksiz Tahrik: Unjust Provocation*, Bir Sergi Kitabi, Istanbul, pp. 91–102.

Stacey, N. 2013, 'Noni Stacey on Women & Work, London, 1975', *Aperture*, no. 213, pp. 48–9.

Tobin, A. 2017, 'Working Apart: Feminism, Art, and Collaboration in Britain and the United States, 1970–81', PhD dissertation, University of York.

Yalter, N. 2016, *Off the Record*, S. Evren and I. Balic (eds), Arter, Istanbul.

----. 1980, letter to Lucy R. Lippard, 20 June. TGA955/7/5/50, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London Collection. Tate Library and Archives.

----. 2017, telephone interview with the author, November.

Wilson, S. 2015, *Art Labour, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

NOTES

1   Many thanks to Elsa Coustou for the translation of French text in *Temporary Dwellings*.
2   Another contemporaneous project of a similar title is 'Women and Work: A Week of Women's Performance' held at George Paton Galleries in Melbourne in 1980.
3   Many thanks to Margot Delalande and Elsa Coustou for the translation of French text in *Women at Work, Women at Home*.
4   She travelled to the UK often during this time, at one point, staying for a year on a farm in Devon from 1977–8 and later curating shows such as 'Art from the British Left' at Artists Space in New York in 1979 (Crippa 2016).

III
stanley brouwn
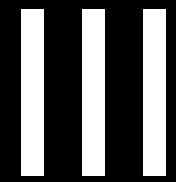
III
Introduction
stanley brouwn

Nick Aikens

The following section includes two contributions dedicated to the work of conceptual artist stanley brouwn. As part of the conference brouwn's *steps* (1989) was screened. The forty-minute work, which is in the Van Abbemuseum's collection, comprises footage of different European streets recorded with a handheld camera as brouwn walked down them counting his steps. The person holding the camera — presumably brouwn — is never seen on screen. Following the screening, E. C. Feiss, Charl Langdvreugd and Sophie Orlando engaged in a close reading of the work, chaired by David Dibosa, an edited transcript of which is included here. Central to the discussion, as the title suggests, was the fundamental question of 'how to talk about the work'. How, the panel attempted, can we begin from the work of art, without recourse to sociopolitical context, art historical narratives or biography? Such a proposition is both challenging and enticing with *steps*. Like many of brouwn's works, the piece both negates and insists on his presence. He is embodied within the work through the camera that bobs up and down, and remains forever out of view. The observations and discussions reveal the different interpretations and reactions to the very act of looking.

In preparing this volume — and to sit alongside the discussion — we invited E. C. Feiss to contribute an essay on brouwn. Feiss picks up the central question of the presence — or absence — of brouwn within his work, a conceptual contradiction that has defined the work's reception and interpretation. Feiss begins by quoting brouwn as referring to biography as 'deadwood' and subsequently sets out to explore how 'brouwn's theorisation of biography as "deadwood" — and its fuelling of an ongoing artistic practice of self-negation is critically overlooked, and must be considered in relation to the problems surrounding his historical

interpretation'. Viewed together, the two contributions reveal the importance of being aware of how artists themselves, as well as the criticism and art history through which their work comes to be understood, frame a practice – and the problematics and possibilities such framings afford.

How to Talk about the Work: Discussion on stanley brouwn

David Dibosa (chair)
E. C. Feiss
Charl Landvreugd
Sophie Orlando

David Dibosa: We're changing the format. We're not going to deliver papers, as one would conventionally do in an afternoon session at a conference. Instead, we're going to address one of the challenges at the heart of the Black Artists & Modernism (BAM) research project: how to speak directly from – and not about – the work. Instead of bringing forward well-rehearsed sociopolitical frameworks, we start from the work, with observations about it involving issues like materiality and considering formal approaches to looking.

When I saw *steps* (1989) by stanley brouwn, screened during the conference, the spaces like the *cours saint martin*, the 100 steps, really made me think about the flâneur – the wanderer through the city streets on this urban continent. I think that in the case of this work, it is flâneury, without flâneur. I constantly ask myself, where is this figure, do I see them, who are they? The whole sense of that wandering personality seems some-how absent or absented or evaporated from the work.

E. C. Feiss: The work of brouwn is the work of his self-negation, which began in the early 1970s, the time at which he began to refuse to give interviews and have his work reproduced. He was in six documentas. When you look at his page in the documenta catalogue there's nothing there, he's represented by a blank page. I think we have to read that as a theorisation of biography itself – that is the work from which all of his other works flow. What is really interesting about this film is his liminal material presence. In the first scene you can hear his breath; in one of the Paris street scenes we can see his shadow. Throughout his works, there is a persistent material presence of his specific body, but at the same time he is refusing a total image of himself – either as a discursive, biographical or literal figure.

How to Talk about the Work: Discussion on stanley brouwn - David Dibosa (chair), E. C. Feiss, Charl Landvreugd, Sophie Orlando

169

Sophie Orlando: When we look at this we see a trembling image. We hear the sound of the step, somebody breathing. We have the city but we are not this body. It is a subjective view. We visit some places but it's not about representation of a body walking. Rather, we see the view from this body. I struggled with that. I was thinking about Donna Haraway and situated practice here because this is about the technology of viewing; it is an image of somebody looking at the streets.

Charl Landvreugd: What I feel most strongly when we're talking about this film is that a space is left for the viewer to inhabit. I will talk from my personal position. I feel because I am of that age where I remember these streets in those days, and in a sense I'm reliving the space looking for signs that will trigger my memory. Strangely enough Amsterdam looks extremely clean, and I remember Amsterdam being a complete dirt hole in the 1990s. So it also challenges my memory. And of course now we have mobile phones, etcetera, so we are more used to this. Maybe we could talk about the difference in technology and how this difference in technology then basically constructs a new sort of subjectivity.

Feiss: One of the works I was going to speak about was *one step* from 1970, a black and white film with a street scene. It is still for several minutes, and then it moves forward. You feel this one step, but otherwise you think it is stationary. The authorial presence is consistent between these two films. In *steps* it is interesting to see a completely different filmic medium. It is colour and he is moving all the time.

Dibosa: It does raise questions. At a certain point, I started to think, 'Well, is this artist really playing a game with me? It might not be a human body, it might actually be a machine carrying a machine. So, there might be a kind of extension of a machinic presence.'

There is one shot where you see a shadow, just the outline of the top of the shadow and I thought, 'Well, that's been thrown in just to throw you off that presence.' I wasn't sure whether the artist themselves had thought about that. Charl, I know that you made a work some time ago…

Landvreugd: Yes, I believe my first year in undergraduate art school. I was living in London and I believe we were speaking about the flâneur back then. I made this work *Brick Lane*. I actually counted the 15,011 steps that I had to make towards the subway station. I recorded it, I played it for the tutors and they were like, 'Yeah, well. Whatever', and it went into the files. It's a CD. As I was watching this film, I was wondering about this idea of the flâneur, of course, but then again I was wondering how many people have actually counted their steps. This idea of counting your steps, before we had the counters, is different. You have an idea of distance, but you don't know how many steps you're actually taking. I wonder how many other artists have played with this idea and executed it in one way or another.

Dibosa: I think one of the things I was picking up on is, the point about the step as measurement, certainly in imperial standards, the sense of the hand as measurement, the step as a measure. And there are these other works that bring the step into a system of measuring. I know Sophie you were interested in the 1989 work *1 step, 1 ell, 1 feet on 1m², 1 ell, 1 foot on one step²*.

Orlando: It is a series of squares, aluminium squares of different sizes: a metre, a step, a foot and an ell. Usually this work is set out on a table with the same amount of millimetres in between the different pieces. I was very interested in this work, because it is not about an abstract relationship between a measurement and a distance, but it is a physical piece. Our body cannot reflect in these sheets of aluminium, so it isn't a mirror, but a blurring surface. Also there is a signature here in

How to Talk about the Work: Discussion on stanley brouwn - David Dibosa (chair), E. C. Feiss, Charl Landvreugd, Sophie Orlando

171

the sheets of paper, which is very confusing in being manual. We questioned why stanley brouwn signed the surface.

Feiss: I guess brouwn always displaced his authorship in a certain way. I'm thinking of the first work, where he put paper down on the street, and bicycles and cars made marks on it. This led into brouwn's participatory work, *this way brouwn* (1964), where he asked people to give him directions, and he would then stamp the paper. He is recording someone's personal experience of the city, or personal experience of memory of space. He is taking that away from them, claiming that it is his own authorship, but in a way it takes the space away from everyone. It is an authorial gesture that negates the possibility of authorship at all.

Dibosa: There are questions in relation to the nature of the artistic signature. I haven't seen the work that you're talking about, but, I'm not sure whether that in itself is part of it, part of the game. How does the museum relate to an artist whose work has worked against a signature? How can critics and criticism, and how can the art world itself respond to an artist's work who works against a signature? Can we actually imagine a strategy that has been quite effective, and for how long that might be able to last before the critics and the art historians and the journalists and the writers start to try to produce a different kind of thing or a different kind of image of the artist?

Landvreugd: As we were preparing for this conference, we had a seminar at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam where we looked at the work and tried to think through the work, rather than through stanley brouwn's auto-biography.[1] That put us in a bit of a pickle, because he passed last May. I felt a bit conflicted, if this was his strategy to not be discussed personally. I was sitting at my mum's and wondering, 'What am I supposed to do?' My mum answered: 'Well, at least be respectful and

take the mourning period of a year, respect at least the mourning period of a year before you even…' As an art historian, as a curator, as a thinker, you're trying to be respectful to the tradition that the artist is setting out.

I think he is setting out an extremely large challenge for all of us, which is also part of this BAM project. He's basically dictating the rules by which we could possibly work through this. Maybe it would be interesting to try and find out what the rules are that he's laying out, and use that as a methodology towards thinking about other art pieces.

Orlando: We know that stanley brouwn didn't want anybody to speak through his biography, but does it mean that he didn't want anybody to speak of his work at all? There are many frameworks to address his work. What are the other ways to address his work? During the seminar we tried some, we referred to a lot of male practitioners. It was also about situating the artist. We talked about ways to discuss the work through different existing frameworks. Even if we did not speak about the biography, we tried different angles. We also addressed the artist as a trickster. It was not about the biography. Are we allowed to do that?

Landvreugd: In our pre-talk we spoke about framework and that it seems inevitable. because the moment you start speaking you're already putting a framework on it. I'm still wondering, would it be worth it to actually examine the framework that stanley brouwn himself set out?

Feiss: I have this really great quote that I found from him – after a lot of looking for traces of his voice, it was connected to an exhibition at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona in 2005: 'Biography is deadwood, the work itself produces the interviews, writes the biographies. This attitude is material. Each millimetre, metre and distance has its own identity.' I was

How to Talk about the Work: Discussion on stanley brouwn - David Dibosa (chair), E. C. Feiss, Charl Landvreugd, Sophie Orlando

173

fascinated by that, because he was displacing or placing identity in these universal measurements he was using. He was falling into the work as he collapsed out of it.

I think there is definitely a deep theory of a biography, and of identity at play here. His terms, as stated, only talk about the increments that I've given you. Speaking within this frame, I think, would be my understanding of his project. He said: 'This is my identity, within these parameters, within the gestures that I've set out. That's it. That's all there is.'

We were also talking before about what we mean by formalism, which for me is something that this conference could potentially complicate. If we are trying to start from the work, what do we even mean by formalism? It seems to be an important task for this conference, but in this quote he's saying that his materials or the formal increments he's using are themselves identity.

Landvreugd: During our seminar, I tried to do a reading through Afro-Surinamese metaphysics. I speak about space as subjectivity, where the space itself is a subjectivity that you need to approach carefully. Once you approach it, you and the space go into an interaction, and this interaction produces something. This is the thread we tried to follow, but that also makes it problematic. Once you go into non-Western metaphysical frameworks, immediately you have to be extremely careful not to use the words magic or enchantment or anything, which is not what I was trying to look for. What I was trying to look for is a different way of understanding space or a different way of understanding when he says, 'Every millimetre has its own identity'. From an Afro-Surinamese perspective, I get that. So, how then do I explain a concept like that in a Western academic framework? That is extremely challenging.

Dibosa: Earlier we were talking about translation, the roughness of translation being lost but also gained in the translation of terms. I'm wondering about this piece of investigation that you've done in terms of locating that trace of the voice, and whether there is a parallel challenge or return to the work. Because in looking at the work, and the material, and the finitude, the measurements, there's a great deal there that is yet to be excavated. Perhaps we don't need to search for biographical detail, etc., if we spend that time investigating what is right in front of us, what's being presented. With that, I'm going to — hopefully, elegantly — segue into asking about what you actually saw, which was part of what we wanted to do here, not just to talk about what we saw and what we think, but what you saw.

Feiss: I just want to clarify one thing. I wasn't looking for biographical detail necessarily. I was trying to look for his statement of strategy about his negational programme. I was looking exactly for that statement around the 1970 work of removing himself, what that programme entailed for him and that was one of the only statements that I found about that. Now that I'm thinking about it, are we looking for a statement? What is the discursive? Am I overly discursively producing that work?

Sonia Boyce: Thank you for that discussion. I happened to be in here in the space while the entire film was playing and I've written about three pages worth of what I've seen and what sense I'm making of this particular piece of work. I just wondered whether it's possible to relay some of that?

Dibosa: Yes, please.

Boyce: The first thing I noticed was the way in which the camera is being used, making other kinds of associations. It spoke to a televisual language, which took me on another trail thinking about news reports, and

how when the camera moves that way it is often in the space of embattlement, which seemed to me at odds with the very mundane everydayness of the actual scenario. I wonder what that means to constantly have us adjusting our eyes.

Orlando: Just to add to that, at first it's a very European piece, because all the cities are based in Europe and also, if you have been here for 40 minutes, you can see how hard it is to look at it. You can look at it for a few minutes, but after a while it becomes very impossible, you have a headache. So, it means something not to be able to look at someone looking at something else. It means something, at least for me, to be unable to look for 20 minutes.

Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes: Thanks. I also really appreciated the challenge of speaking with the work and thinking with you about this. I realised what a pity it was that we didn't have the paper on the death of the author at the very beginning of the conference. The biography being deadwood corresponds, I suppose, to Roland Barthes' 1967 piece, which he wrote in response to Brian O'Doherty's commission. This brings up a few challenges for us. He enables all the people around him to see him when he films, but not us to see him, or to walk. We are stifled, not allowed to see the work in full colour, or to move around. We can't make as much sense of the world.

It might speak to the difficulties that the death of the author theory brought with it, say, for women and people of colour at that very time when they wanted to voice their biographies, their experiences and were being told: 'No, the biography is deadwood.' Yet, I think brouwn does another thing and spins it a little bit further beyond even us perceiving a generic universal human being. It's not very clearly identified. 100 steps or 1,000 steps give the impression of being very well measured, but he makes us see the failings. It's not just a generic

hobbling of the camera. In the last segment, I sensed he was limping. There was something more human going on; he's not titling it 100 Steps or 1,000 Steps, he's saying, 5,026 Steps to whatever, so you know what the time of day is. I think it even adds more detail that we can identify with without recourse to his biography.

Feiss: To respond to your comment, it is interesting to think about it in terms of what other vision of the personal is political. He has these other works that are one step equals his step, one step, his body equals this many millimetres. There's this insertion of a very individual body in relationship to metric systems. It's a very different vision of the personal is political.

Audience member 1: By quoting you, David, I wanted to speak directly from the work, taking the title, times, locations as anchors and the geography of steps between locations. The subtitles or gaps between the recorded videos and distortion from the handheld camera gives an arrhythmia to the steps. I wonder if referring to the steps as geographical signals the deliberate misplacement of the artist between locations.

Sandra Delacourt: You used the term of flâneur, which for me is a very male or dominant experience of public space where you're in the street, you're not necessarily in a safe space. I think it is maybe interesting for you to talk about the trembling image or what it is to count one step. For me, the image of what we see is much more talking about being vulnerable in public space. So, I was wondering why were you talking about flâneury?

Dibosa: I think that came partly from two things. First of all, I take on the point about the flâneur to be a dominant figure, this male occupation of urban space. I thought it was interesting that the work precisely worked against that, a kind of counter-flâneury. Just on that first viewing, these particular places in these urban settings would

How to Talk about the Work: Discussion on stanley brouwn - David Dibosa (chair), E. C. Feiss, Charl Landvreugd, Sophie Orlando

177

suggest that there is this male figure wandering the streets, etc. But there's a refusal of that. The only way in which there is a sense of the occupation is through a shadow and the sound of the steps. One of the things happening in the reading of the text is being forced away from this visual inhabitation of the space to listening. In a way, I got away from not being able to look at it for 40 minutes. I started to count the steps myself, wondering, 'Are there really 100 steps?' Eventually I wasn't really looking at it at all. I was listening to it. I thought that might be also part of the device, to force me away from this visual dominance of the space into all these understated ways in which one can get traces.

Orlando: I think what has been said here by several people is very interesting and it makes me think we can compare this very unsettled image with other works by brouwn. I'm thinking of all the very clean work, really white and black and really precise work he has done. I'm also thinking of his series of editions or artists' books that are ambiguous in the stages of the work, so we never know if they're artworks or books for sale. In some museums there is doubt as to where to situate his works and also about what represents a white space in those pages; is that a space we can invest in or are we not allowed to? There's this ambiguity in how we can situate or serve this work. Can we look at it or is it forbidden, or just not possible? I think looking at brouwn's work in general there's a question of opening, closing doors, and, as you were saying earlier, this relationship between universal and individual space.

Audience member 2: To pick up the thread on the flâneur in public space... I'm now being a boring art historian and thinking about art historical referencing and remembering quite vividly a wonderful feminist art historian colleague being insistent that women can't be flâneurs. She was a historian of nineteenth-century British art and women could not be flâneurs, because

they could not have that agency of moving in and out of the city space in France in the way that say Baudelaire's privilege, his class allowed him, and many men to have. This extends to that sense of what modernity is that you're inside or outside.

If we then extend that logic by feminists that women cannot be flâneurs, can black men be flâneurs? Is there the same kind of problem of a man of colour in a European city looking through it? I'm thinking also now of Lubaina Himid's very striking accounts of her experiences of being in Britain in the 1980s, she was very visible on the street and invisible in the media. I'm wondering whether, when you're walking a particular subject position, we're talking about walking through the streets, is that in fact being hyper visible? Can there be a flâneur — are they able to slip in and out of visibility? I'm suggesting a dialectical engagement with what's outside of the screen and what's inside of the screen.

Audience member 3: In terms of the questioning of art history, I wonder if brouwn's rejection of biography has anything to do with the founding moment of art history, which is, of course, the lives of artists. I don't know if the panel could speak to his specific rationale for rejecting biographism, but in Vasari, for example, there was a clear connection made between the value of the work and the biography of the artist, which was there as a pleasurable narrative to be shared and circulated among a very wide leadership.

Sarah Wilson: I think that's a very interesting point, but the minute someone tells me I can't do something, I want to do it, of course. For me, stanley brouwn was always a very intriguing name I'd never investigated. I didn't know that he was from Amsterdam. I didn't know he was black. The first minute I saw the film, I first of all thought: 'Well, this has got nothing to do with the experience of walking down a street if you're an ordinary person with binocular vision.' I wondered if the

camera was actually bouncing around on this chest. I also immediately thought, because it was on the French Boulevard de Sébastapol, that he's not using beautiful flâneury spaces, he's using very boring streets sometimes full of traffic. Also, I thought, at the time, I'm having my slow conversion and understanding, how much I preferred Eustache Kossakowski's Paris project, which seemed to me kind of sharper and more intelligent and more topographical and this, that and the other, but then when you talked about Afro-Surinamese metaphysics, then I began to realise that there was more in stanley brouwn.

In Art & Project when he showed in Amsterdam in 1969, he did say this very metaphysical thing, because I think that if he says something metaphysical, we don't need to be restrained to formalist responses: 'Walk during a few moments very consciously in a certain direction. Simultaneously, an infinite number of living creatures of the universe are moving in an infinite number of directions.' I just wanted him to be allowed to make his metaphysical comment.

Audience member 4: I'll make it very brief, because my point has already been mentioned, can a black man be a flâneur? I would just say that I'm glad that there was an anti-flâneur, because the point is that a flâneur would never and could never count his steps. That would be impossible for a flâneur.

Dibosa: Some points made here on the rejection of biographism specifically return us to the text of the moving image. This happens both in terms of what we see in the kinds of attention that the work demands or refuses, not enabling us to actually look, but forcing us to look in a particular way. There has been an interesting question around the flâneur and the politics, if you like, of flâneury, but also this question about the space within the text of the film, imagining or forcing us to think about how the work was actually made, because

obviously a figure walking down a street with a camera is going to be hyper visible and yet that is hidden.

Feiss: I get the point about the dialectical relation between what is inside and outside the frame, that somehow he puts something into place through his evacuation of self. An evacuation of self is, of course, also an insertion of self under his own terms. The point about Vasari is really interesting. I have been thinking about Lee Lozano's Boycott women piece, but also the *General Strike Piece* in 1969 and how in her terms that was really a rejection of, after dematerialisation, the commodification of the figure of the artist and the rejection of that commodification.

brouwn doesn't engage in the kind of terminology of revolution in the way that Lozano does, and he doesn't have an explicit market critique that he verbalises. It's not only interviews or biographical material that he disallows, he also refuses to have his CV printed anywhere, which very clearly rejects protocols of professionalisation and the commodification of the artist. I think he identifies that and refuses that system of values.

Landvreugd: This is exactly what my thesis works with, this paradox of trying to speak about artists of colour while not naming them artists of colour. How do you then speak about the work? How do you place the work in relationship to everything that is happening? It is a tricky question and you've kind of pinpointed it.

Orlando: Three really quick points. First, experiencing the work, as we did here, you can bridge it with the aesthetics of rejection: it's a way that we cannot look at. Second, I just want to come back to some point that in some of the artists' books, brouwn puts his name. There is a name in Helvetica and sometimes there is Suriname 1935, which is really located. If you don't want anybody to know about where you come from, why do you insert this? Charl, a thing you have said

that I found fascinating was about thinking about those artists' books as instruction pieces that we should practice. In another way, to open up our understanding of these practices, how this work crosses moments in art history of the same period: Fluxus, conceptual, performance, etc. There's so much in there.

Landvreugd: It's gone straight through all of it.

Dibosa: On that note, I think we'll bring this to a close. Thank you.

182

183

How to Talk about the Work: Discussion on stanley brouwn - David Dibosa (chair), E. C. Feiss, Charl Landvreugd, Sophie Orlando

Strategic Formalism: stanley brouwn's 'Identities'

E. C. Feiss

The Dutch Surinamese artist stanley brouwn, while infamous for his near total removal of self from the circulation and historicisation of his oeuvre, in fact explicitly characterised the meaning of 'biography' in relation to his work. The following is from a 2005 interview conducted on the occasion of his major retrospective at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), an exhibition that spanned 1960–2005.

Careful to counter this monographic moment, brouwn was explicit in his address of biography. Biography 'is deadwood,' the artist stated firmly. 'The work itself provides the interviews, writes the biography.' His interlocutor, the curator, interjects: 'brouwn has maintained this attitude since the beginning and for him [biography] constitutes a part of his work.' *'It is material'*, brouwn concludes.

This paper argues that brouwn's theorisation of biography as 'deadwood' — and its fuelling of an ongoing artistic practice of self-negation — is critically overlooked, and must be considered in relation to the problems surrounding his historical interpretation. As Sven Lütticken succinctly put it in his obituary for brouwn, there are two taboos with regard to assessing the artist's oeuvre. The first is the matter of the early work: brouwn has disallowed the exhibition of works from before the early 1970s, aside from *This Way Brouwn* (1964). The second 'taboo' is brouwn's relation to blackness or postcoloniality, which Lütticken notes 'he did nothing to explore or foreground in his work' (Lütticken 2018). I assert these two refusals as

co-constitutive, mobilised in relation to one another beginning in the early 1970s.

It is true that brouwn, like many other black artists in the twentieth century, such as Adrian Piper until the late 1960s or the complex relationship of painters Frank Bowling and Norman Lewis to 'black art' in the 1960s and '70s, rejected the identification, and did not feature the concept of race or the postcolonial directly in his work. I argue that it is precisely this removal of self that constitutes brouwn's statement on the intersection of blackness and postcolonial subjectivity. This statement asserts that black and postcolonial experience cannot be represented in the conditions of the present – that of ongoing white supremacy and colonisation. brouwn instead sought to invent methods of recording his own material presence 'as a man on earth' as he put it, if not to provide a larger historiographic remedy to the central problem of representing blackness and postcoloniality in the imperial centre (Amsterdam) at mid-century (Von Graevenitz 1977, p. 1). Operative in this paper is a crucial distinction between 'identity' as an innate or natural fact, used to demarcate subjects of difference from unmarked whiteness and maleness, and 'subjectivity' as indicating subject position as produced within relations of power: brouwn's statement on black and postcolonial subjectivity understood that position as produced in relations of power, and refused to participate in its given representational parameters.

brouwn's early 1970s inauguration of the strict censorship of his earliest works coincided with the initiation of this strategy of self-negation. This is the origin moment of his life-long refusal to appear in photographs, give all but a few interviews, reproduce images of his work, or provide bibliographic information, education history or any other adjacent identifying information – racial or professional. Establishing this work of self-negation as the foundation of his practice takes brouwn

at his word: in the early 1970s he tightly constructed his past (to exist solely in *This Way Brouwn*) and his negative profile – the conditioning of his future – as an artist. The ongoing maintenance of this negative personhood – the continuous refusal to appear, the blank pages where installation photographs or biographical information should be – literally structures every subsequent manifestation of his practice. In place of 'biography' as neutrally factual, which in the case of the artist of any identarian difference, has been historically interpreted as immediately co-extensive with their practice (English 2010, pp. 27–70), brouwn's practice of self-negation identifies the structural function of artistic biography as a delimiting device for the work of artists of colour in particular, although this was never stated explicitly.

So thoroughly did brouwn's practice of self-negation succeed – a successful work of art if there ever was one – it set off the mechanisms of artistic biography not around his race or national origin, but in relation to the vacuum he produced. At best, his refusal of self is situated as a choice, cited to explain the lack of information and reproduction of works in catalogues beginning around 1970. Critic Ludo van Halem remarks on the artist's refusal to provide biographical elaboration as a necessity for the 'anonymity that sustains [brouwn's] universal theme' considering his work 'the vestige of just a 'man walking on planet Earth'' (Van Halem 2013, p. 51). While identified as what makes the rest of brouwn's art possible, the maintenance of this anonymity is not understood as a work itself, but rather a choice in the service of his visible art.

Considering brouwn's refusal as a work itself, his ongoing artistic authorship from a vacated position critiques the possibility of an image of 'universal man' or that 'no man' walks in the footsteps of 'universal man' arguably identifies universal personhood as socially and politically malleable. In the space of a longer

paper, brouwn's deconstruction of 'universal man walking on earth' from a position of sheer negativity — as 'deadwood' — maps productively onto the critical project of Afro-pessimism. Where recent criticism has usefully posited brouwn's practice of refusal and its production of the 'blank white page' that characteristically populates his exhibition catalogues as a statement concerning whiteness, I would extend this argument to consider the critique of whiteness launched from a position of blackness as subjective negativity, or legal and symbolic social death, operative in the work of theorists such as Frank B. Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman and others (Moti 2017). More egregiously, brouwn's self-negation is often characterised in the literature as a predilection, or a personal characteristic, that the artist was 'reclusive' or 'ascetic', which, in fact, reproduces the function of biography (that an artists' works are coextensive of their selfhood) that brouwn's refusal of self sought to halt in entirety (Russeth 2017). Thus, brouwn succeeded in removing the possibility of attributing any aspect of his practice to his 'identity' as a black immigrant. Where the sheer biographical fact of his birthplace is mentioned, and sometimes the date of his arrival in Amsterdam from Suriname in the 1950s, readings of his work have remained confined to the formal poles of measurement and distance. While certainly measurement and distance have been abiding occupations of the artist, his work is deeply underserved by adherence to a framework unconcerned with the production of subjectivity within relations of power. Such a reading divorces Conceptual art, despite being a regime convened around the depiction of social systems, from the social production of material inequality, perpetuating the myth of the genre's founding universalisms. While accurately placing brouwn's oeuvre within the preoccupations and formal strategies of Western Conceptualism's first wave, measurement and distance can be reinterpreted as both formal and social — specifically with regard to subjectivity and colonisation.

Useful historical comparison can be located in Lee Lozano's *General Strike Piece* (1969) and *Drop Out Piece* (1970), which implemented a practice of self-erasure to highlight the role of artists' social circulation (going to openings, all of the art system's social requirements) as a presupposition of art's base appearance and valuation. It is no accident than neither Lozano nor brouwn are white cis-gendered men: their navigation of the art system, as well as everyday society, was structurally conditioned by their subjectivities, both in their moment and in the historicisation of their work. Each sought to halt or control the process of racialisation or gendering of their practices through form itself. Set against *Drop Out Piece* and *General Strike Piece*, which Lozano described as 'the hardest work I have ever done', brouwn's withdrawal becomes legible as a formal practice (Applin 2016, p. 77).

Also in the early 1970s, Lozano initiated a 'boycott of women' where, alongside her strikes against the art system, she refused to interact with other women. Art historian Jo Applin has argued that Lozano's trio of boycott works 'had no explicit political agenda... the boycott of women was the culmination of a deeply fraught relationship with the women's movement, making it difficult to reconcile her actions easily with a clear feminist position' (Applin 2016, p. 78). Similarly, brouwn's removal of self, carried no explicit message. Like Lozano's fraught feminism, we can read a worried relationship to the organised dissent of the Dutch Caribbean community in Amsterdam, which began around 1970 (Martina 2016). My comparison to Lozano, considering the well-known tensions between feminist and anti-racist movements throughout the twentieth century, concerns only the shared triangulation between the two artists of (1) a formal practice of self-negation, (2) its disavowal of marked subjectivity (as a white woman and man of colour) and (3) their shared refusal, as part of this disavowal, to directly engage with identity-based movements in the 1970s. Any

correspondence between the two social movements themselves exceeds the parameters of this paper, as does a discussion concerning the charge of 'political ambiguity' between the work of a white woman and a black man on different continents: I have no doubt of the problems that amass surrounding the comparison I make here. Rather, my point is that Lozano and brouwn reacted to both the reception and circulation of their own 'identities' in the art system and the correspondent identity-based movements arising in the 1970s using the shared language of conceptual negation.

To speculate on brouwn's specific correspondence with black militancy in Amsterdam in the early 1970s, I turn briefly to a recently resurrected episode in the history of Dutch Caribbean resistance in the Netherlands. Beginning around 1970, squatting actions were organised in the Bijlmermeer neighbourhood in Amsterdam to protest the extremely poor housing conditions for black families. The Bijlmer is a historically black neighbourhood, as it became (for a host of socio-political factors including housing discrimination as well as community building) the residential destination for the influx of immigrants to the Netherlands in the decades before Suriname's independence in 1975 (Martina 2016). In 1974, the Surinamese Action Committee organised what is termed the 'first organized act of resistance of Dutch Caribbean in the Netherlands' (Martina 2016). I earmark this episode briefly – without the space for extensive detail – as the speculative political backdrop for brouwn's turn to a practice of self-negation in this precise historical moment. As the writer Egbert Alejandro Martina has illustrated, the critique of the Dutch state and the implicit racism of its social care services (housing, employment) clearly voiced by these organised actions was effaced in popular media coverage at the time. For example, in response to governmental resistance to providing legal permits or housing alternatives to the Bijlmer squatters, Alphons Levens, coordinator of the

Surinamese foundation Best, remarked:
We acknowledge that the Dutch government is very much struggling with a large flow of immigrants from Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles, however, the government is also responsible for an unemployment rate in Suriname of 35 per cent, for the bad educational system, and lack of proper housing there: the causes of this exodus from Suriname to the Netherlands (Martina 2016).

The Bijlmer squatters not only organised for what Martina terms 'black liveability' in Amsterdam, the group identified the structural link between Suriname and the imperial centre as the basis for stark material inequality at the level of state provision of socially reproductive services. National media coverage at the time not only failed to acknowledge this critique, it depicted the squatters as a virulent and feminised aspect of Holland's 'Surinamese problem'. The feminisation of squatters – through the use of images of women and children occupying the squatted apartments – was a product of base Dutch xenophobia but also further illuminates the squatting actions as primarily concerned with the conditions of social reproduction. The squatters' project of 'liveability' was simultaneously the organisation for subsistence rights and a decolonial critique, and illustrates these entities as inseparable.

From the beginning of their organised action, the Bijlmer squatters encountered violent representational difficulties in the Dutch public sphere, followed by decades of erasure. The same problems of representation continue in the recounting of their history today due to Dutch colonial amnesia (Smallenburg 2017).[1] brouwn's work can be understood as responding precisely to this representational difficulty: the erasure of structural critique in the historical representation of organised black resistance. To provide a more fortified bridge between these historical practices, I note an

unfinished film listed in Harry Ruhé's catalogue *Stanley Brouwn: A Chronology* (2001) of brouwn's works titled *Biljmerrmeer* (1970). This unfulfilled hint of the Bijlmer nevertheless allows a formidable speculation that brouwn was ruminating, within his larger inquiry into distance and measurement, on the problems of representing this particular site during the squatting actions. I would put forward that brouwn's response to black militancy in Amsterdam in this moment was to develop a practice of self-negation, to refuse the possibility of representing the Bijlmer, the squatters or himself under the discursive conditions of post-war Amsterdam. To situate the stakes of representation with regard to this convergence, as the philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva (2015) has shown, representation is a site of violence for black life: it wields considerable material power. The possible meeting of brouwn and the Bijlmer squatters therefore, posits the artist's critique of representation against a political site wherein representation dictated the conditions of everyday life for black people in Amsterdam. Here, aesthetic representation circles the activity of political representation: the crisis of representation addressed by brouwn's artistic negation is structurally aligned with the squatters' predicament. Both — the removal of self and the insertion of selves — can be understood as formal strategies addressing the same problem.

To further link these formal strategies, I engage the art historian Darby English's notion of 'strategic formalism' to tease out the relationship between form and political action at issue between these actors, within a larger effort to offer new frameworks for the interpretation of brouwn's practice. Further, this comparison seeks to provide new methods for reading social movements in relation to artistic practice. 'Strategic formalism', as modified from English's original coining of the phrase, offers a method of formally comparing political and artistic strategy. What brouwn and the Bijlmer squatters offer each other conceptually is what the other

distinctly lacks: for the squatters, brouwn's work provides an authorial frame wherein the insertion of self controls its own representation and removes the image of blackness as determined by white supremacy in Europe at mid-century. For brouwn, the squatters offer an instance where the occupation of space in time (the inquiry of many of brouwn's works, from *This Way Brouwn* to *step x 4* [1971]) carries explicit political purpose.

brouwn's oeuvre anticipates the problem of biography that English identifies for the 'post black' cohort of artists working in the late '80s and '90s.[2] English's work has importantly insisted on widening the frame of interpretation for work by black artists beyond the narrow confines of representing that artist's relation to blackness, or the worldview of a 'unified' black American community. At the same time, English's analysis has not entailed the exclusion of race from the interpretive frame, as has been the case in much of the writing on brouwn's work. Rather, English illuminates processes of racialisation, rather than race as a static fundamental of experience, as the subject of consideration in the work of avant-garde black artists. Where the Bijlmer squatters and brouwn may share a history of immigration to the Netherlands from the Dutch colonial periphery, it is not 'experience' that unites them but rather their shared critique of space and time in the imperial centre, and their identification of distance as socially and politically constructed.

English's term 'strategic formalism' addresses how artworks intervene in processes 'dominated' by habits of normatively racialised identification (i.e., an artwork by a black artist is a work of black art and we can extend this to the racialisation, rather than identification of decolonial critique, of the collective direct action organised by the Surinamese Action Committee) and instead propose 'other types of identification'. brouwn's contention that 'each millimetre, metre and

distance has its own identity', namely the replacing of 'identity' with formal metrics, through a complex process of authorial presence and abdication, constitutes one such 'other type of identification' (English 2010, p. 32). This 'strategic formalism' was able to maintain both the reality of the impossibility of a politically viable representation of blackness in imperial space, and continue to author work that also featured his own body. In so doing, his work connects a practice of self-negation enabled by conceptual form to material presence, in a critique of the representation of all individual experience – or the presentation of the impossibility of representing individual experience. By connecting his practice to the Bijlmermeer, I argue that the root of this critique is based in black decolonial critique; or, namely, I extend English's emphasis on form through strategic linkage to the Bijlmer squatters. They identify the material dimension of his practice – the insertion of his body – as one located at a moment of decolonial resistance where other bodies were also occupying space. They offer a proximate relation to blackness not routed through his biography.

The 'strategic formalisms' shared between brouwn and the Bijlmer squatters then are 'measurement' and 'distance', articulated between inverse practices of the removal of self and the insertion of selves. They augment each other, illustrating negation and materialism (concern with the reproduction of life) as two possible ends of a shared political orientation. First, I'll consider measurement and I'll end with distance.

Consider the slew of footstep works made in the 1970s and after, such as *one step 4 x* (1971) in which a drawn line records the length of brouwn's step. The work meticulously documents the span of his 'living step', miming yet disfiguring a system of standardised measurement. The slight visible variation in line length is the only indication of brouwn's 'foot', rather than a typical foot of thirty centimetres. *one step 4 x* is one of many

works recording the artist's footsteps; as Van Halem (2013, p. 51) has noted, brouwn's 'remarkably consistent practice' after the early 1970s investigated the same themes and repeated similar gestures. Thus, brouwn invents a form of authorship that absents the depiction of representational personhood – traversing democratic or state-sanctioned and aesthetic representation – while including his actual body. The artist says it himself: identity is collapsed into 'each millimetre' (English 2010, p. 32). The line variation contains the material of brouwn's body while refusing a representation of his *identity*. Against the actions of the Bijlmer squatters, such works that substitute measurement for identity place a belief in individual material presence – the activity of squatting – while withholding the image of any identified subject. Further, the work posits individual material presence over and against a standardised system, akin to the Bijlmer squatters' trenchant critiques of Dutch housing bureaucracy. Reforming identity into material through formal means, the work posits materialism (if not historical materialism, at least structural critique) against representational identity. *steps 4 x* presents subjectivity as materially constituted, albeit individually determined, and absented of gender and race, those coordinates that plagued the reception of squatters on the Dutch national stage.

brouwn was also obsessed with measurement in space and time, which frequently took the form of works concerned with distance. Here the issue of territory – between imperial centre and colonial periphery – makes the comparison between the two actors more overt. Consider the work *from march 18 until april 18, 1971, i defined my total number of footsteps each day by means of a handcounter* (1971) also cohering around the artist's footstep, which proposes the nation-state as the explicit container of measured time and space. For the MACBA retrospective, the work was described as follows:
    Brouwn went to Morocco and Algeria via Belgium,

France and Spain. Each day he carefully noted the number of footsteps he took in each of the countries. The result is the work *from march 18 until april 18, 1971, i defined my total number of footsteps each day by means of a handcounter*. The total number of footsteps was recorded each day by means of a hand counter, comprising an inventory of steps on little cards. This project is the first in a series of works in which Brouwn notes the distances covered during a certain period in a certain country or city while the total amount of steps in a number of countries are recorded (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona).

Another work from the same year, *afghanistan—zambia* (1971) also included the Netherlands Antilles, the Dutch colony from which many Bijlmer residents migrated. By recording his steps on each day in a particular nation-state, brouwn mimes the strategic action of the squatters who occupied space and time for a quantified period, yet in order to make express demands of the state. The state is ambiguously located in Afghanistan, listed alphabetically by first letter; the power relation between the Netherlands and Netherlands Antilles, appearing next to each other, could be implied or decidedly neutral. Further, both politicise distance, albeit in brouwn's work this politicisation remains indirect. brouwn's recording of presence between these territories in 1971 both extends and collapses their physical distance: they appear closely together on a card, an identical process having been traced in each location. Yet brouwn also understands his work as where 'distances are recharged again. They regain meaning' (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona). Such a statement mirrors Alphons Levens's identification of conditions in Suriname as effecting material life in Amsterdam (Martina 2016). Here too, distance is both extended, collapsed and 'recharged again'.

By way of a brief conclusion, brouwn's conception of biography as 'deadwood' and its critique of political representation through aesthetic negation, is not a conceptual luxury possible within the Bijlmer squatters' direct action for subsistence need. However, the lyrical meeting of life and death – together completing a full life cycle – suggests how their speculative pairing might offer widened political possibilities or integral compliment to each.

REFERENCES

Applin, J. 2016, 'Hard Work: Lee Lozano's Dropouts', *October*, no. 156, pp. 75–99, https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00252.

English, D. 2010, 'Beyond Black Representational Space', in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, pp. 27–70.

Ferreira da Silva, D. 2015, 'Reflecting on Representation', in E. Pethick and W. v. Oldenborgh with D. Morris (eds), *Wendelien van Oldenborgh: Amateur,* Sternberg Press, Berlin, pp. 81–5.

Golden, T. 2001, 'Post...', in *Freestyle: The Studio Museum in Harlem*, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

Von Graevenitz, A. 1977, 'The Artist as Pedestrian: the Work of Stanley Brouwn', *Dutch Art + Architecture Today.*

Van Halem, L. 2013, 'Stanley Brouwn', in S. D. Muller (ed.), *Dutch Art: An Encyclopedia*, Routledge, New York.

Lütticken, S. 2018, 'The Distance Between stanley brouwn and Yourself', *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 109, viewed 1 May 2018, https://www.textezurkunst.de/109/.

Martina, E. A. 2016, 'Liveability and the Black Squat Movement', *Processed Life*, web log post, 12 October, viewed 18 October 2018, https://processedlives.wordpress.com/2016/10/12/liveability-and-the-black-squat-movement/.

Moti, M. 2017, 'Brouwn Is White, over Stanley Brouwn en Hans Faverey', *Metropolis M*, no. 6, viewed 18 October 2018, http://www.metropolism.com/nl/features/31688_brouwn_is_white.

Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 'Stanley Brouwn', viewed 18 October 2018, https://www.macba.cat/uploads/20050609/brouwn_eng.pdf.

Russeth, A. 2017, 'Stanley Brouwn, Whose Works Examine Measurement and Memory, Dies at 81', *ARTnews*, 22 May, viewed 18 October 2018, http://www.artnews.com/2017/05/22/stanley-brouwn-whose-works-examine-measurement-and-memory-dies-at-81/.

Smallenburg, S. 2017, '"Cinema Olanda" dreigt onder te sneeuwen', *NRC Handelsblad*, 10 May, viewed 18 October 2018, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/05/10/cinema-olanda-dreigt-onder-te-sneeuwen-8764505-a1557955.

NOTES

1 For example, Wendelien van Oldenborgh's work for the Netherlands pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017 contained the film *Prologue: Squat/Anti-Squat* (2016), which carefully plotted the story of the Bijlmer squatters, within a more complex history of Dutch Caribbean resistance and fragile solidarity with white Leftists in Amsterdam. The centrist, national reception of Van Oldenborgh's work for the Netherlands pavilion often questioned the 'relevance' of Dutch colonial history or whether the history of the Dutch Caribbean was too 'specific' for an international art audience, such as in Smallenburg's (2017) article.

2 This term refers to contemporary black artists whose works do not necessarily comment directly on blackness, after the more overt art about identity created during the 'multicultural' era (Golden 2001).

stanley brouwn and Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, Two Works: A Collective Intersectional Close Reading of Minimalist Gestures, Materials and Situated Bodies within a Museum Framework

Sophie Orlando

According to Lucy R. Lippard (1973), a large historiographical project on Conceptual art developed with its inception, embedding history within the movement. Researchers and artists — especially from Eastern Europe and North and South America — have since been researching conceptual practices associated with identity politics, race, class, gender and sexuality in tune with a much broader geopolitical scene in the 1990s.

This has led to the rewriting of methodologies, aims and canons of visual art within an internationalist frame. Artistic categories have been renewed, distinguishing Conceptual art from conceptualism. The latter is often situated within a social history framework as a site of contested ideologies in feminist, anti-racist and anti-capitalist social struggles of the late 1960s and into the 1970s (Camnitzer, Farver & Weiss 1999; Dressler & Christ 2010; Shaked 2017). These varying terminologies are often associated with a methodological rupture between biographical and contextual approaches, intertwined within the writing of a 'conceptual art history' (Campany 1999; Bailey 2018). My text seeks instead to investigate the practice of a close-reading methodology as an encounter with the artwork. Based on an intersectional epistemology, I look to develop an understand two artworks by the merge of voices in the act of looking. The paper will focus on *1 meter, 1 step, 1 foot, 1 ell* (1993) by stanley brouwn (1935–2017) and *Untitled (Bodies in a Pile)* — or in original French *Sans titre (des corps entassés)* (2012–present) by Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc (1977), both artists associated with Conceptual art at play with a Minimal art vocabulary.

'Intersectionality', now a critical tool, was first used as a social notion in activism (Combahee Rivers Collective 1977), justice and the social sciences (Crenshaw 1989) to acknowledge the experience of intersecting forms of asymmetrical power such as race, class, gender and sexuality. Within Black-feminist epistemology, bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins addressed the specificity of knowledge developed from this situated perspective. At the same time, Donna Haraway (1988) developed an analysis of the situatedness of all knowledge from a queer perspective. What I call intersectional reading and methodology in the field of art is also specifically affiliated with the New Art History. It looks at methods of interpretation used in artistic production. It then bridges them with feminist, radical and de/postcolonial theories. Starting with a situated knowledge applied to the artworks allows for a departure from a system of interpretation based on artist biographies. In the field of artwork, the location of intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality and other asymmetrical powers is set in the artistic production itself. It is made of the history of the materials used in the work, the condition of productions chosen, location and condition of display. Intersectional reading as a critical tool of art history is then developed from the observation of matter, gesture and condition of reception – in brief, a series of decisions in the making of the work, visible and experienced in the encounter of the artworks.

My approach results from practising close reading in front of the artworks, in art galleries, museum storage or galleries. In the context of the Arts and Human Rights Council (AHRC) research project Black Artists & Modernism (BAM), I have developed a series of private seminars gathering art historians, artists, and curators, heads of learning and acquisition services in museums, around specific artworks such as those by stanley brouwn and Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc. Elements of this paper come from these seminars under the title 'Pan European Seminar: Conceptualism'. Each focused on one artist: Nil Yalter at FRAC Lorraine, Metz, 10 February 2016; stanley brouwn at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (storage), 13 March 2017; David Medalla at Iniva, London, 19 April 2017; and Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc at Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne (MAC VAL), 9 May 2017.

I use a queer phenomenology to approach the collective discussion about the work (Ahmed 2006) in relation with a close-reading methodology developed within BAM defined by David Dibosa (2015) as follows:

> a mode of observation that premises the physical proximity of the artwork to the observer. The methods reject any representational modality, refusing the critical position awarded to photographic reproduction within the historiography of art, … in order to bracket out sociopolitical and other contextual framing, which could condition the viewer's response to the work, locating the entire encounter in a discourse other than the discourse of art.

Also, following Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, I assume we don't come to the work as an Abstract Universalist subject but as 'orientated'. We are orientated towards objects and things 'we do things' with. 'Bodies may become orientated in this responsiveness to the world around them, given this capacity to be affected'; and 'the spaces are not exterior to the bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin unfolds in the folds of the body' (2006, p. 9).

MINIMAL ART AS AN EMANCIPATORY PRACTICE AND… THE ARTIST'S SIGNATURE

1 meter, 1 step, 1 foot, 1 ell is the rhythmic title of an artwork composed of a series of thin square sheets of aluminium lying on a table, situated side by side at equal distance. At this session, the participants were curator Nick Aiken, BAM post-doctoral research fellow Anjalie Daylal-Clayton, curator and BAM senior researcher

Paul Goodwin, Royal College of Art PhD student Charl Landvreugd, head of collections at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam Bart Rutten and I. In the Stedelijk's storage area, our bodies watched the artworks from a respectful distance: *1 meter, 1 step, 1 foot, 1 ell* (1993) as well as three versions of *This Way Brouwn* (1962–4), *Passanten* (1960) and a series of artists' books, the last of which we were asked to handle with gloves. Landvreugd opened the discussion by addressing in the first work how the series of squares are a series of relations of measurement. The size of each square relates to the different standards used in juxtaposition to one another: one metre, one step, one foot and one ell.

The metre is a standard unit of length that is part of the International System of Units, five of which are based on a universal French system created in the 1790s. A report from 19 March 1791 led by a committee of French academics proposed 'the metre' be made equivalent to the 10 millionth part of one quarter of the terrestrial meridian, in terms of the distance between the north pole and the equator. The unit would be neither arbitrarily nor specifically related to any one place, making it a universal measure – even if the exact length of the meridian is uncertain. The ell, on the contrary is a gender-based unit of length: a man's arm from elbow to the tip of the middle finger, used in different parts of Europe including Flemish and Scottish regions. It is a spatial length, a body length and also references men as supposedly universal and neutral body units. A step and foot represent examples of in-use administrative standards – both based on the singularity, and so the variability, of the measurement of a body, based in the case of brouwn's work, the artist's body. The four squares mark several measurements and ideas about the body either situated within a universalist geography, or as a potential site for reference, gendered and fractioned or singularised.

The artist had specified the squares must be placed next to each other, as they were during the seminar in the Stedelijk's storage. Our team of six looked at the several sheets of aluminium from above. Bent over the squares, s/he/it saw a blurred but bright surface, reflecting the environment without mirroring it. This is an encounter with contemporary minimalism, in the form of industrial polished metal displayed as a volume in a gallery space. But it is also an 'emancipatory proposition' of Minimal art that allows the viewer to take into consideration the space around it, in a non-hierarchical format, with non-anthropocentric forms, in order to enhance a charged neutrality. In that practice of collective looking and sharing, the first names that came to mind were those of white male artists: namely Carl Andre, who situated matter in the field of phenomenology and spectator experience while thinking of material as a consciousness of a political position. He defined himself as a Marxist, referring to Herbert Marcuse, and later to a 'producer and a capitalist'. But Rutten denounced this affiliation pointing to the fragile display, preventing us from walking or touching the material. Andre's squares are rough, he noted, underscoring the comparative thinness of brouwn's aluminium squares that give them a delicate, precious aspect.

Examining the regular flat and smooth surface, some slight marks appeared: a manual signature could be discerned, the initials engraved on the aluminium surface. It could only be seen by bending over the sheets; each square was signed, a trace of the artist as author, the supposed singularity of the self, so much associated with the idea of the modern genius. The signature is associated with the 'heroisation' of the artist as creator from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, when artists liberated from mechanical art became associated with liberal art, symbolically freeing the artist. The signature also offers economic value based on the authenticity of this specific trace of the artist's body. Suddenly, then, the aluminium sheet became not only

a sculpture situated within (patrilineage) minimalism, but a two-dimensional work that had to be discussed as a visual surface welcoming the return of the romantic idea of the self. The minimal format of the series of aluminium square sheets reverses its genealogy and meets its supposed enemy, the potentiality of a strict optical format, creating an aesthetic of uncertainties of a blurred surface of representation.

What does this say about the opposition between a phenomenological minimalism that has a lot to do with structuralism as a generative system in which subject is not invited, as in the work of Donald Judd and Andre, and post-minimalism in which bodies, gender and sexuality is returned to, as in the work of Lynda Benglis, Robert Morris or what Lippard has called 'eccentric abstraction'? In that simple series of manual signatures, is there a return of the situated body or a joke about the return of the Modernist ego of the artist? In that sense, what does the artist sign: the industrial aluminium sheets cut and prepared by factory employees, or the whole ambivalent conceptual process?

CONCEPTUALISM AS A PRACTICE ABOUT THE SITUATEDNESS OF ALL KNOWLEDGE

In *Sans titre (des corps entassés)* (2012), three copper bars of 180 x .15 cm each lean against a wall. Two to one side, one to the other, the distance separating the bars opening up and partially framing a rectangular empty space on the wall. At the MAC VAL seminar in 2017, the museum's head of public programmes and cultural action Stéphanie Airaud and head of study and development of the collection Anne-Laure Facelière, critics Lotte Arndt and Sandra Delacourt, Goodwin, curator Frank Lamy and I attended the exhibition curated by Lamy and Julie Crenn, 'Nous sommes tous des sangs mêlés' (22 April–3 September). It considered cultural identity in reference to Lucien Febvre's book,

Nous sommes tous des sangs mêlés: Manuel d'histoire de la civilisation française (1950). Looking at Abonennc's piece in the space, the texture and colour of the bars revealed several layers – nuances and irregular surfaces making it clear they were handmade. The title and its height associated the abstract bars with the body, three bodies, or even several bodies in terms of layers in each copper bar. Airaud brought Marcel Duchamp's *The Three Standard Stoppages* (1913–14) in which three singular standards twist the universal and neutral measurement of 1 metre by chance. The height of the bars could be interpreted as that of bodies, beings, as Goodwin observed. In 1879, the discipline of anthropometry was set up by Alphonse Bertillon to enumerate the characteristics of the body to identify people through measurement.

From an abstract perspective, the three bars on the walls could also be identified with the textual signs that formed dark thick lines against the white wall. Looking for an inscription of the work in a genealogy of artistic practices, Lamy asked whether the bars could be interpreted as similar to André Cadere's regular use of sticks in his work, that pointed to the gallery space. Goodwin wondered whether, the layers of metal revealed by the corroded and sliced surface along with the imperfect copper was rather comparable to Agnes Martin's thick stripes in her drawings. We were mostly thinking about artists involved in 'Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors' (27 April–12 June 1966) at the Jewish Museum, New York curated by Kynaston McShine, so mostly white male Western artists. We could have thought of Lygia Clark's extensive use of aluminium sheets or David Lamelas's *Situation of Four Aluminium Plates* (1966). Isn't it significant that in 1968, Lamelas studied at the St Martins College of Art and Design where Anthony Caro suggested the artist work in aluminium in order to get his diploma. In response, Lamelas created *Señalamiento de tres objetos* (1968), situating his

legacy to Minimal art and a Western-specific location (UK). Our own systemic blindness to artists outside a white, Western frame reminds me also of Jens Hoffman and Joanna Montoya's proposal to make a revised version of this canonical exhibition at the Jewish Museum as 'Other Primary Structures' (1 March–18 May 2014), unable to avoid framing the newly added artists as other.

The highly visual title of Abonennc's work might be compared to Minimalist practices of un-naming, not-naming or re-naming. For instance, Judd and his untitled + (materials) works such as *untitled (galvanized iron wall)* (1974), written modestly in lowercase and doubling the presence of the work's material; or Sherrie Levine's *Untitled (After Edward Weston ca 1925)* (1981), quoting and repeating the title and its author's name; or Adrian Piper's specification of an artwork's intentions in *Untitled ('The time needed to read a line...')* (1968), *Untitled ('This piece stands in a ratio of 1:3...')* (1968) and *Untitled Performance for Max's Kansas City* (1970). Abonnenc, however, refuses to name in his title. Yet the commas denote the piling up of bodies, bringing to mind images of genocide and war, giving a sense of the historical circumstances in which bodies are situated in this work.

In the gallery space, Abonnenc's work was presented also by a caption that signals the provenance of the pieces of copper – the Katanga crosses, first used as precolonial currency in several African societies, and then becoming an extracted product of exploited labour in the copper mines of the Democratic Republic of the Congo from 1903. Previously copper was extracted by the bwanga society, a prestigious corporation also called 'copper eater' associated with traditional, rituals and sacred protocols of extractions. Theses crosses were used as means of payment from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century. Their use and the value changed during Belgian colonialism given shifting

interests in mining and on the part of ethnographic collections for supposedly scientific purposes. The irregular surface the three bars, assemblages of different pieces of copper, can be read as the formation of bodies on which colonisation produces capitalist economical value. The workers' bodies extracted or transformed copper to create its new use and value. At the site of exploitation, the weight of their bodies is equivalent to that of the copper brutally equated with their value under colonialism.

From a distanced perspective of 10 metres, as Delacourt noted, the empty space between the bars opened up a panoramic visual format, from which the whiteness of the wall revealed itself. This 'floating signifier' of three bars leaning against a wall in the gallery, allowed us to think of the empty space as a potential screen, a contextual element embedded in the work, and as a rectangular space in which our bodies were framed. What did that space contain? The video *An Italian Film (Africa Addio)* (2012) accompanying the sculpture shows white male workers at Sheffield Factory in Leeds transforming the Katanga crosses into the three bars. A voice-over discusses the Disappeared of Beach, when Congolese refugees in Kinshasa returned to Brazzaville in May 1999 following an agreement between the Congo and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) guaranteeing safe travel. Instead hundreds were arrested, interrogated and never reached their desti-nation. Rumours in the video's voice-over tell of people locked in metal boxes alive and sent down the river. A second anonymous voice-over intertwines the history of mining from a Belgian imperialist perspective and a study of 'child soldiers' in the Congo, orphans of war persecuted as culpable. Abonnenc stipulates the two works never be shown next to each other.[1] The video title refers to the colonial film *Africa Addio* (1964) directed by Gualtiero Jacopetti following independence movements in Africa. The most violent images

supposedly show the consequences of the revolt. The screen as a memory of other films, layers of images, dislodges or complicates Minimalist formal references of the work working in pairs with the film, opening up a space of projection associating with or confronting the history of domination and violence with that of emancipation.

As with brouwn's work, the use of metal invites ambiguous and contradictory readings, with an immanent volume of material referring to different bodies: not abstract universal bodies, but bodies situated within a history of labour production in (post)colonial history. The display in the Stedelijk presented *1 meter, 1 step, 1 foot, 1 ell* alongside artists' books, potentially emphasising the similarity of thinness, format and so visuality of both flat written surface of aluminium and paper. In both Abonnenc and brouwn's work, the suggestions of a flat screen, or of a squared paper-like surface, imply a double reading and dislodges the literal equivalency drawn between a piece of metal and a supposedly universal body. Abonnenc and brouwn combine the same range of symbolic meaning within a minimal art form activated both as a site of phenomenological encounter, and as a surface — a space of projected or implicit representations. In both cases, the act of production, physical encounter and the history of the material are tied to each other.

MATERIAL HISTORY, LOCATION AND BODIES

These works convey a conceptual gesture from, or with, a social history through the treatment of material. Both aluminium and copper are delicate, susceptible to human presence by touch or oxidation. Aluminium sheets cannot be touched, they are too fragile, while the copper bars are corrosive if not coated in paraffin for the purpose of conservation. The potential effect of the human body on the metal is two-fold: through light

touch impressing its prints on the aluminium or causing the copper to corrode.

Susceptible to oxidisation in white cube, the MAC VAL's head of study and development of the collection Anne-Laure Flacelière explained that the bars were covered with paraffin on acquisition. The institutional injunction to 'preserve' the work for security can be seen here as an act of maintaining, underlying the distinction or differing of the critical timescale of production from the timescale of encounter. The viewer's body is somehow prevented from the dirty history of intertwining geopolitical strategies in which it is situated. In several works Abonnenc plays with the toxicity of the material employed: in *Etudes pour la chamber de la rançon (Atahualpa) (1)* (2018), he uses copper frame and cinnabar, which is mercury sulphide. Now we can ask whether the copper should rather be freed of paraffin in order to oxidise, considering the effect of the body on the copper and of the copper on the body. How are institutions, value and materials linked to each other in a transhistorical approach? And how do these metals affect or produce effects on human bodies and minds today? Pieces of aluminium and copper in a museum collection and display can be seen then as both active and living substance (matter) and document (paper) of history. The matter identifies with a series of active questions rather than dead passive things (Witzgall & Stakemeier 2014). When considering these works, one can take the position of the *new materialism* advanced by Haraway or the post-humanist performative approach of 'intra-action' embraced by Karen Barad: how intra-action situates the subject and object in a co-constitutive agency, in which responsibility and accountability are bound.

While refusing to refer to his subjectivity and biography as an interpretive tool, Paramaribo is the city associated with stanley brouwn's name within his carefully written and controlled captions associated with his own work

(as his birthplace in 1935). This is then a textual element – akin to the choice of titles – as visual echo of the work itself. So this is a part of the work, given to interpretation (not a pre-knowledge we could use to interpret the work). This might be seen as an anchor of location within a circulation of material. The split and refracted image of the viewer on the surface, and the signature as common units of different lengths based on both abstract Universalist and individualised body measurements in brouwn's work, can then be understood in a new way. The surface is not addressing the self but a hand-written name: a space of enunciation clustering his citizen and artist name.

Aluminium has had a fundamental economic role in Surinamese history since the Second World War. Furthermore, a huge economical crisis resulted from the drop in its price in the 1990s, when brouwn produced this artwork. The sheets could then be seen as a series of values, body measurements, as workers' bodies extract the bauxite transformed from aluminium. The former French, English and German colony of Suriname ran an economy in large part reliant on bauxite, gold and petrol since its industrialisation (1870–1914).

How does this location orientate the viewer's encounter with the work? Associating brouwn's work with aluminium within a postcolonial history of material helps build another genealogy of practices linked to the history of capitalism developed on the backs of black male workers in South America, a place where the social body has long been associated with slavery and also its refusal by *marronage*, the running away from this state of being. I use the term 'genealogy' in a Foucauldian sense. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) he analyses the condition of development of a discursive object, from the emergence of the accidental event, within a non-chronological provenance in which the object is also embedded. The genealogy as an analysis of provenance is for Foucault an association

between the history and the body (1969). The aluminium squares are not presented as singular units, but as a series. Thus, all the squares have to be taken into account. There is not one form of body here or some body, but rather fragments defining several measures, juxtaposing universal and regional lengths with singular foot and elbow to hand measurements based on the artist's body. Metal production and circulation by and through workers' bodies bridge colonial art histories with contemporary workers' bodies in Europe, whether in terms of milieu or class solidarity or to point to the invisibility of situated black bodies, as Abonnenc's film does by making visible only those of white male bodies.

Neither the artwork nor caption offers a clue about the provenance of material brouwn used. How the body and artist's authorship are situated within the work remains ambiguous. Abonnenc, on the other hand, meticulously details the copper's provenance, circulation and transformation. The conjunction of Minimalist aesthetics with colonial history intertwines four experiences of the body in time: 1) the colonial time of workers, 2) the labour time at the Sheffield Factory in 2012, 3) the Minimalist time-space relationship in the gallery and the empty space within the bars – the screen between them that evokes a cinematic timeframe, the time of looking and 4) the time of remembering and experiencing in the gallery.

Gaps exist between brouwn's and Abonnenc's actions on the material and their own bodies: Rutten pointed to the Arte Povera impulse in brouwn's practice in using the simple, common industrial format of an aluminium sheet. His signing of the sheets admits and validates each relation between a subject and a form of measurement. Each are ideologies associated with this technology of viewing and situating, whether it is through abstract universalism, gendered location or artist-centred place of utterance. They open up complex meanings in which other bodies are embedded: each

square implies the worker body cutting the piece, the artist's body (hand) signing and the viewer's body. Abonnenc does not use raw copper, but asks a foundry to make minimal art out of the crosses bought on eBay through melting down the material. His sublime filming aesthetic with its wide, precise framing is considerate of proportion and distance. A task is performed by a white male team in a British foundry as an act of collective labour, resulting in the translation of an object from an ethnographical artefact, a currency, to a work of art, a minimalist shape. The material in brouwn's work has a metonymic relationship to the worker and the artist's body, while Abonnenc's has an allegorical relationship to the economic system of transformation of body into price. Abonnenc participates in that transformation as a buyer, pointing to the role of the artist in the capitalist economy.

In both artworks, Minimal art is formally quoted and conceptually twisted rather than appropriated or restaged. The supposedly non-subjective and neutral principles of Minimalism as an emancipatory artistic practice post-Greenberg time is put into question by reinvesting the symbolic location of the artist body and/or his authorship in the work in relation to other bodies within a chain of work production. If Minimalism is a quoted practice, there is a possible emancipation from rational, essentialist thought embedded in European abstraction through a very cautious use of distance and positions of bodies, from and within, above or inside the material looked at, felt, adjusted and determined by a museum space. The question of colonialism, labour and male bodies are then conveyed with and by these hierarchies of measurement and distance, in which the artist himself is situated.

For the art historian Luke Skrebowski (2009), Conceptual art can be classified in terms of three different forms: 'analytical conceptual art' associated with the linguistic turn of art, 'systematic conceptualism'

associated with mathematical and cybernetic artistic production and 'synthetic conceptualism' aligned with feminism, postcolonial studies and identity politics within the field of art. The physical encounter with *1 meter, 1 step, 1 foot, 1 ell* and *Untitled (des corps entassés)* makes it possible to see these works as analytical, embedded in the semiotics of conceptual art, dealing with forms and the floating signifier of a unit of measure. These works are also systematic in terms of mathematical units of the space, the abstraction of the measure. They are also synthetic, in their interdisciplinarity and refusal of a single narrative, speaking about matter as a surface (optical space of projection), volume (minimal art) and a potentially corrosive texture (as untouched and preserved).

Within the legacy of the situatedness of all knowledge (Haraway; Hill Collins; hooks) within the intersectional approach as two critical frameworks, it is fruitful to observe how these two examples of Conceptual art practice produce a site of encounter between counter-cultural positioning of the 1960–70s and the trajectory of emancipatory practices, confronting one's own position (as artist, subject, viewer, workers) and the legacy of art historical ideologies within the European museums that frame viewer experience. Both artworks consider administrative and phenomenological distance and measurement, creating a collective critical voice in a response enlivening critical thinking and interpretation. Adrian Piper defined the logic of modernism as: *'the appropriateness, formalism and self-consciousness of European art functions to cast its social content into a high relief'* (1993, p. 575). On the contrary, one could argue that the conceptualism of Abonnenc and brouwn made explicit in these two works use the social content of material to cast light on appropriateness (of material history), formalism (embedded in the Minimal art form) and critical consciousness by the use of technologies in viewing and situating bodies.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. 2006, *Queer Phenomenology*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC and London.

Bailey, R, 2018, 'Penser l'art:les historiens de l'art se tournent vers l'art conceptuel', *Marges*, no. 27, pp. 16–29.

Camnitzer, L., Farver, J. and Weiss, R. eds. 2010, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origins, 1950–1980s*, exhibition catalogue, 28 April–29 August, Queens Museum of Art, New York.

Christ, H. and Dressler, I. 2010, *Subversive Practices, Art Under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s–80s South America / Europe*, Hatje Cantz, Stuttgart.

Campany, D. 1999, 'Conceptual Art History or, A Homes for Homes for America', in J. Bird and M. Newman (eds), *Rewriting Conceptual Art,* Reaktion Books, London.

Combahee Rivers Collective. 1979, in Z. Eisenstein, *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case of Socialist Feminism*, Monthly Review Press, New York, pp. 362–72.

Crenshaw, K. 1989, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracists Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 140, pp. 139–67.

Dibosa, D. 2015, 'On Close Reading: Preliminary Discussion for a Methods Paper', unpublished paper, December, London.

Foster, F. 1995, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in *Traffic in Cultures*, G. E. Marcus and F. R. Myers (eds), University of California Press, Berkeley.

Foucault, M. 1972, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Tavistock Publication, London, original work published 1969.

Haraway, D. 1988, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 575–99.

Lippard, L. R. 2001, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California Press, Berkeley, original work published 1973.

----. 1966, 'Eccentric abstraction', *Art International*, vol. 10, no. 9.

Piper, A. 1993, 'The Logic of Modernism', *Callaloo*, vol. 16, no. 3.

Rahtz, D. 2012, 'Indifference of Material in the Work of Carl Andre and Robert Smithson', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 35, no. 1.

Shaked, N. 2017, *The Synthetic Proposition, Conceptualism and the Political Referent in Contemporary Art*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Skrebowski L. 2009, 'System, Contexts, Relations: An Alternative Genealogy of Conceptual Art', PhD dissertation, Middlesex University, London.

Witzgall, S. and Stakemeier, K. eds. 2014, *Power of Material/Politics of Materiality*, diaphanes, Zurich.

NOTES

1 A display structure was then created at the Biennale de Rennes (2012) in order to direct spectators' bodies around the two works. Also, both works were shown at the MAC VAL in the 6th museum collection hanging called 'l'Effet Vertigo', 24 October 2015–23 April 2017.

216

stanley brouwn and Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc Two Works: A Collective Intersectional Close Reading   217
of Minimalist Gestures, Materials and Situated Bodies within a Museum Framework - Sophie Orlando

Through the Conceptual Lens: The Rise, Fall and Resurrection of Blackness

Valerie Cassel Oliver

THE PARADOX

W. E. B. Du Bois's famous sociological treatise *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) spelled out the debilitating predicament of black folks in the aftermath of slavery, and anticipated the extended trauma that blacks would suffer as they asserted their humanity in the wake of centuries of negation. In the more than 100 years since Du Bois's prescient text, blacks have met with revelations of themselves that have alternated between the superficial and the profound. Ironically, the 'second sight' that Du Bois professed blacks to have – the ability to see through the distortion of racial bias – has in contemporary society mutated and multiplied. The quagmire of a 'double consciousness', what Du Bois described as '...a peculiar sensation... this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others; of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity', has been replaced by a maelstrom of refractive perspectives. And yet the paradox of race remains resilient. In many respects, the persistence of this paradox lies in the extended trauma experienced by blacks who continue to struggle to assert their humanity in spite of the gains made in civil rights, assimilation, economic mobility and political power.

This constant struggle has produced a depth and scale of being – an existential self – that is almost impossible to see with the naked eye. One must, as Du Bois suggested, 'step within the veil' (2003, p. 5). It is under this veil that one can locate oneself simultaneously *within and outside* of mainstream society. However, it is this same veil that has also enabled the formation of a unique vernacular and an extensive lexicon – cultural keloids, or hyper-regenerative tissue, a byproduct of

the lacerations formed as a result of the continuous battle against negation.

It is at this point that one begins to see when and where 'Black Conceptualism' emerged. The discourse began with the politics of resistance – the resistance to being Negro by black artists caught in the movement towards self-definition and self-determination – which coalesced with the opportunity posited by Conceptual Art to challenge existing hierarchical traditions of art and art making from within a *legitimised* structure.[1] As an intellectual endeavour and exercise of resistance, the Conceptual Art movement, while valid in the beginning for those black artists who undertook its mandate, became less useful in light of other strategies that allowed them to transmit and legitimise a politics unique and germane to their own experience. More interesting, and unspoken until now, is that the discourse of Black Conceptualism tends to hover somewhere between an aesthetic familiarity and a proclivity towards cultural output as the manifestation of ideology, language and ethos.[2] However, it is the term 'black' as a signifier of resistance and the social construction of race, that becomes the greatest paradox.

As a signifier of race, 'black' is a social construction that has undergone its own scrutiny. The long and sordid history of Africans in the United States has left any terminology related to their identity somehow inextricably tethered to a whipping post of perspectives, mores and definitions that shift with changes in the social, cultural and economic landscape. In the 1970s, 'black' as a signifier of identity was heralded as self-subscribed, essential and ubiquitous. In the 1980s, the term would be interrogated, suppressed and eventually replaced by 'Afro-American', then 'African American' in a new landscape of hyphenated identity devised to combat the rise in conservative politics. By the late 1990s, blackness would be resurrected in a

debate over its existential nature and its relevance in contemporary society.

The mid-sixties was a tumultuous time in the US and throughout the world. The 'race' problem was still just that, even after the passage of civil rights legislation. And the emergence of the Black Panthers as a political force in black communities across the nation was unsettling Negroes who had fought so desperately for integration and troubling whites who feared that black self-determination would manifest only through militant action. Already fractured, the US was splintering further under the insurmountable pressure of challenges to the prevailing systems of authority. Such challenges affected not only the social and political terrain, but also the cultural landscape, which had its own corollary systems of aesthetic imperialism. Cultural institutions were facing a backlash against the rigid definitions of 'legitimate art' and sanctioned art-making processes. Within the field of visual arts, the challenge would coalesce in Conceptualism, a form of art making that divorced itself from the 'fetishism' of specified materials as protocols of 'fine art' (i.e., Western art and modernism) and introduced such radical notions as temporal and performance-based work, systems and text-based art, and the incorporation of 'ready-mades', or materials already existent in the social landscape that could be co-opted in the creation of art. When Marcel Duchamp introduced the concept of the readymade with his *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, the seed of radicalism was embedded deep within the modernist tradition, coming to fruition some five decades later.

In its most essential form, Conceptual Art serves to privilege 'concept' over 'material', which is somewhat of a paradox since concept is germane to art making in general. However, the 'concept' within Conceptualism is more ideological. The visual manifestation of that ideology requires a process by which a 'product' or 'object' exists as a residual of an act that spectators

witness, observe and even participate in, the viewers in some cases becoming, through participation, the residual object themselves. In imploding the hierarchy of art, art making and presentation, the conceptual art movement in effect transformed the visual arts land-scape, shifting the paradigm outward from an imperia-listic and exclusionary centre to embrace divergent and diverse artistic expressions, giving legitimacy to what was once utterly invisible.

THE RISE OF BLACKNESS: THE EXISTENTIAL BLACKNESS OF BEING

> Now we demand a chance to do things for ourselves
> We're tired of beatin' our head against the wall
> And workin' for someone else
> We're people, we're just like the birds and the bees
> We'd rather die on our feet
> Than be livin' on our knees
> Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud!
> – James Brown, 1969

By the 1960s, 'black' had emerged as the new Negro and collectively initiated a shift in being—from object to subject. It is this collective self-determination that would become a double-edged sword for those artists choosing the liberation of the Conceptual Art move-ment that had simultaneously emerged into the US art scene. Exhibitions of Conceptual Art were being presented on both the East and West Coasts featuring the works of artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner among many others. Their 'text as medium/text as message' would resonate with many Americans, paralleled by the persuasive political rhetoric then emanating from microphones at churches, schools and the makeshift podiums erected in parks and community centres across the country. Text was already a pervasive medium within the black community, particularly in the arena of politics, where radical shifts were taking place. This groundswell of newly radical

political activity was the outward manifestation of an increasing generational divide and an internal pressure for change. Many blacks were simply tired of waiting for change and now demanded it 'by any means necessary'. A collective consciousness that had solidi-fied throughout the early part of the twentieth century was now asserting itself in the form of an unapologetic self-determination. This collective consciousness did not see itself, nor its history of struggle, as separate from the resistance in Africa and other parts of the diaspora, colonial countries that were undergoing their own transformation towards independence and self-governance. Those who embraced this Pan-Africanism (Legum 1965; Nkrumah 1963),[3] or collective unification, began to refer to themselves as 'black', using the term as a conscious and ubiquitous signifier of not only race but also racial origins and shared experiences. Ironically, 'black', the term that now signified a self-determined people, was once used by Europeans conducting the transatlantic slave trade. As Rick Powell states in his introduction to *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century*:

> Of course, Europeans who were engaged in the slave trade had long referred to Africans as blacks (in addition to other, frequently disparaging designations), but over time and a more entrenched colonial foot-hold in the Americas, ethnic terminologies... were superseded by the short and stinging 'black': a term that, in its brusque utterance, contained a white supremacist sense of racial difference, personal contempt, and oddly enough, complexity that came to define these new African peoples (1997, p. 8).

The co-option and re-presentation of 'black' as a signifier of race by black people ensured that their politics of self-determination was truly reflective of their complex histories and experiences. Despite the trauma of being uprooted and forced into servitude, the resilience of their essential being—their *African-ness*—however fragmented, was not only present but identifiable.

Black artists were quick to create a corollary to this new political ideology of self-determination and began to perceive of ways to express themselves that were rooted in, or complementary to, their own unique culture. Their mandate was to create an expression that would in effect service the community as a whole, realising its own history, beauty and resiliency. Although such efforts by artists and political leaders alike began quite early on, it would not be until the late 1960s that the avenue towards placing oneself in a position of authority and legitimacy within the larger social context was readily apparent. Black artists, now at war with the pre-existing systems of hierarchy, felt victory at hand. Although he was addressing issues within the black literary arena of the early 1970s, Hoyt W. Fuller's words encapsulate the sentiments of this victorious black aesthetic:

> The black revolt is as palpable in letters as it is on the streets, and if it has not yet made its impact upon the Literary Establishment, the nature of the revolt itself is the reason. For the break between the revolutionary black writers and the 'literary mainstream' is, perhaps of necessity, cleaner and more decisive than the noisier and more dramatic break between the black militants and traditional political institutional structures… [B]lack writers have turned their backs on the old 'certainties' and struck out in a new, if uncharted, direction. They have begun their journey toward a black aesthetic (cited in Gayle 1971, p. 3).

Larry Neal further expounded on the concept of the black aesthetic, which he described as being 'more concerned with the vibrations of the Word, than with the word itself. Like signifying' (cited in Gayle 1971, p. 15). But it is Ron Karenga's essay, 'Black Cultural Nationalism', that asserted the criteria of black art:

> Tradition teaches us, Leopold Senghor tells us, that all African art has at least three characteristics: that is, that it is functional, collective, and is committing

or committed. Since this tradition is valid, it stands to reason that we should attempt to use it as the foundation for a rational construction to meet our present day needs… That is why we say that all black art, regardless of any technical requirements, must have three basic characteristics that make it revolutionary. In brief, it must be functional, that is 'useful', as we cannot accept the false doctrine of 'art for art's sake'. For, in fact, there is no 'art for art's sake.' All art reflects the value system from which it comes… So what, then, is the use of our art — our art, Black art? Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution (cited in Gayle 1971, p. 33).

While many artists rushed towards a black aesthetic, others did not. Some artists attempted to maintain a precarious balance, adhering to black aesthetic politics even as they experimented with a variety of artistic expressions from other non-white cultures. And some artists fled the restrictive mandates and criteria of a black aesthetic to explore the new fertile territory of the art world's own revolutionary moment of Conceptual Art. By the 1970s Conceptualism was pervasive, encompassing performance, a deconstructionist approach towards material, the use of mathematical systems and serial imagery as valid aesthetic approaches to art making, the creation of temporal and interactive art experiences, as well as institutional critique and political discourse. Conceptual art enabled a different possibility, 'a new arena that encouraged artists to ask the fundamental questions about both art and the art world, about politics and the sociology of art' (Wollen 1999, p. 83).

Black artists were being educated in myriad institutions that ranged from historical black colleges and universities to the Ivy League institutions. But it was in the urban centres along the East and West Coasts that some would encounter and participate in the Conceptual Art movement.

On the East Coast during this period, three artists featured in this exhibition began to embrace Conceptual Art: Adrian Piper, Howardena Pindell and Charles Gaines. Piper, a black female artist educated in philosophy, was a young protégée of Sol LeWitt's. An important figure in the Conceptual Art movement in the US, LeWitt wrote the seminal text 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', which upon appearing in *Artforum* in 1967 provided an important framework for the definition of Conceptualism. Early in her career, Piper methodically composed and arranged works such as *Hypothesis Situation #19* (1969–70), a drawing composed of integrated text, photography and collage that functioned much like a performance piece. Similarly, Pindell, who engaged with the theoretical framework of Conceptualism after she graduated from Yale University in 1967, composed the series *Video Drawings* (1972–6), which essentially integrated photographs, frozen frames of action from various televised sporting events, with her own markings of anticipated/subsequent action, gestures and movements. Gaines graduated in 1967 from Montclair College (now Montclair State University) in New Jersey, his close proximity to New York leaving an indelible impression upon his practice. He used mathematics to derive composite drawings or grids, such as *Regression* (1973–4), from a system of formulas. He would continue this aesthetic practice throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, dissolving photographic images and portraits into a series of ordered numbers and later into text.

On the country's West Coast in the late 1960s, a virtual wellspring of artists emerged in Los Angeles. Among them were David Hammons and Senga Nengudi, who shared a studio. Hammons, who studied commercial advertising, and took additional classes at Otis Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design), knew Charles White, a significant figure in the Harlem Renaissance and of the famed Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project of the 1930s.

Hammons's involvement in the Black Arts movement was formidable. By the late 1960s and into the early 1970s, he had produced a series of body prints, whose black nationalistic theme was equal parts revolutionary, functional and committed. What distinguished Hammons's work from that of other artists, however, was not the radical nature of his subject matter, but the process by which he created his monotypes – the performance and gesture of placing his body (fully clothed) onto wet paint and then onto paper. Hammons's later work would also prove seminal to this codification of gesture, this time through mostly found or ready-made objects. Nengudi's performing objects were equally striking both in their transformative power to convert ready-mades into ritualistic artefact and their power as visually arresting sculpture. Her use of these objects, composed of nylon, sand and found materials in performance dates from the early 1970s. Ritual also became important in her later public performances, which involved Hammons and another fellow artist, Maren Hassinger, that were part experimental theatre, part dance and part diaspora ritual. Hassinger is a sculptor who uses nature (branches, leaves and soil) in her work as well as utilitarian man-made materials that she manipulates and presents to mimic nature. More than mediations upon nature, her sculptures, like *Whirling* (1978), and her collaborative performance work with Nengudi must be read with an eye towards the historical role of nature for the 'First World' or indigenous (oppressed) people of the Earth. Although somewhat distant from the epicentre of the Conceptual Art movement's rules and paternalistic oversight, these artists embraced a body politic of blackness in a seemingly effortless balance of nuance and experimentation.

The ability to maintain a balance between theoretical Conceptualism and black revolutionary ideology gave those artists living in Los Angeles a greater range and earned them acceptance by a wider audience.

Meanwhile, the artists living in New York were feeling pressure from two distinct imperatives: the growing internal politics regarding theoretical Conceptual Art and the more personal desire to respond more viscerally to a rapidly changing social and political landscape.

In the larger social and political landscape, many were seeing real and imagined plots by the Establishment in the series of political assassinations, the escalation of the US's involvement in Vietnam and the sanctioned government violence against black militant groups and anti-war groups alike. The inability of black artists to use a theoretical Conceptual Art framework to assert personal politics and expression without drawing attention to their 'Otherness' became an internal paradox that would lead to an even greater sense of alienation. Many eventually grew suspicious of the avant-garde in general. Moreover, the art world in New York did little to shield them from its own brand of racist politics. As an 'Other', they were objectified even within the democratic framework of theoretical Conceptualism, thus proving that Du Bois's paradox remained alive and well. However, artists like Piper and William Pope.L responded with their own brand of resistance to objectification. Piper in her performances literally took on the issue by using her own body as an art object, as did Pope.L, whose crawls through venues throughout New York served to confront issues of the body as both an intervention and an object. Piper even conceived in 1972, an elaborate performance work she titled *Slave to Art*, which she never realised. In the conceived work, Piper would literally become a servant to a powerful art dealer, displaying herself in the gallery for the public viewing during the day, while providing personal services for her collaborator a night. She would later muse about the work:

> I got the idea for this piece in 1972, after I had started to realize that I just couldn't bring myself to enter into the art-world power relationships, with all the compromises, humiliation, and coercion they seemed to demand... It's always seemed to me that the aesthetic and political implications of this piece would really be enormous. The problem was that I could never trust anyone enough to seriously consider collaborating on the execution of it, and I'd never met anyone in the appropriate sort of position in the art world who seemed to me to be intellectually self-aware or attractive enough to me to do this performance with (Piper 1996, pp. 190–1).

Amid the shifting mores in social consciousness, the term 'black', now intrinsically linked to a black radical and nationalistic agenda, also began to crumble under the weight of fear: government covert activity had all but decimated the Black Panthers, and those who were not dead were either imprisoned or in exile. The black radical agenda had also become a divisive force by challenging the tactics that many blacks had embraced as an investment in their future — tactics that had yielded dividends in the form of the institution of economic and social reform policies, most specifically the passage of the Civil Rights Act. By the late 1970s, 'black' as a racial and singular signifier had been summarily replaced by a hyphen, first the term 'Afro-American', then 'African American'.

THE FALL OF BLACKNESS: A HYPHEN AIN'T NOTHIN' BUT A NAME

> Here, then, is the dilemma, and it is a puzzling one, I admit.
> No Negro who has given earnest thought to the situation of his people in America has failed, at some time in his life, to find himself at these cross-roads; has failed to ask himself at some time: What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I Negro? Can I be both?
> — W. E. B. Du Bois cited in Fishel & Quarles 1967, p. 350

Ironically, it is again Du Bois's eloquence with regard to the paradox of black identity that gives voice to this new permutation of racial consciousness in the 1980s. It is ironic only in part, however, because Du Bois himself gave up on attempts to reconcile or unravel the racial paradox. Instead, disillusioned, he left the US in 1961 for Ghana in West Africa, where he lived through the twilight of his life (Du Bois 1967, p. vii). The re-emergence of Du Bois's paradox in the 1980s was also a blatant reminder that attempts to forge a collective consciousness that was both self-determined and self-defined by blacks had lost its momentum after only a decade. Questions emerged: What unified blacks as a people in contemporary society? What defined black/blackness and was that enough? Was there such a thing as 'monolithic' consciousness or was the African's experience in the US a more accurate projection of the black's understanding of himself and herself in a new contemporary society? Was a hyphenated identity, now under the larger rubric of 'multiculturalism', truer to the realities of the black than the failed attempts of a utopian ubiquity?

The larger society was also grappling with labels in the wake of the unprecedented social and political changes of the 1970s. Although resistance to change was real, the paradigm shifts from the margins to the authoritative centre had begun. Black artists who were eager to shake off the restrictions of a black aesthetic tradition, which by this time had lost much of its impetus, began to see themselves within these shifting paradigms not as static or monolithic, but as dynamic and complex composites. The utilitarian nature of stylised Conceptual Art practice became a natural point of transference for many artists who felt very strongly the need to continuously challenge the status quo and to resist the backlash of conservatism brought on by the inauguration of President Ronald Reagan in 1980.

Reagan's election marked a significant shift in the sociopolitical landscape of the US. His conservative social and economic policies were perceived as an attempt to reverse the radical changes that had occurred in the preceding decades. Giving birth to the 'me' generation, the ensuing eight years of Reagan's administration saw gross economic excesses and a growing divide between those in the nation who 'had' and those who 'had not'. The middle class, which then included African-American families reaping the rewards of economic mobility in the 1970s, quickly began eroding, unemployment among African Americans soared, and the HIV/AIDS and crack cocaine epidemics offered only death, incarceration and economic displacement (Mishel, Bernstein & Schmitt 2003).

Certainly, Reagan's policies drew the ire of some segments of the general public, as made evident when close to 300,000 protesters marched on Washington to protest his economic and social policies. None, however, were more sceptical of Reagan's legacy than African Americans, who felt the need to safeguard the political, economic and social gains made in the previous decades. The failure of Reverend Jesse Jackson's bid to unseat the president in 1984 brought with it the stinging indictment that fewer than 6 per cent of whites voted for Jackson despite record black voter turnout. Clearly, a racial divide still existed within the US, though the 1980s did see significant firsts within the political spectrum with the elections of Douglas Wilder as Governor of Virginia and David Dinkins as Mayor of New York.

Yet black artists, still sensitive to their hyphenated identity, were quick to give expression to the social and political disconnects that had emerged over the Reagan decade. In 1988, Hammons created *How Ya Like Me Now*, a billboard-size sculptural installation of Jesse Jackson with Caucasian features, blond hair and blue eyes to call attention to the anaemic support

Jackson had received from European-Americans. It evoked controversy when it was installed as a public art installation in Washington, DC in 1989, a component of 'The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism' exhibition organised by Rick Powell for the Washington Project for the Arts (WPA). Black passerby demanded that the installation be removed, and it was moved inside of the WPA building for the remainder of the exhibition.

A willingness to deal with confrontation would come to characterise the work by black artists during this decade. They buttressed their engagement with a passionate politics through Conceptual Art strategies. The continued use of materials, whether found or readymade, that evoked meaning and became a visual cue among African Americans was paramount. For instance, Terry Adkins used found and constructed material to create beautiful sculptures that served not only as functional objects for the artist's activation, but also as virtual lexicons for his own political and personal narratives. His *Muffled Drums* (2002) and *Sermonesque* (2003) allude to Du Bois's appearance in Duluth, Minnesota, where he gave his famous sermon on anti-lynching in 1921. The same dual function is true for the later works featured in the exhibition by Hammons, including *Bag Lady in Flight* (c.1982, recreated in 1995) and *Head* (1998), both situated within the precarious balance of being simultaneously a portrait and a cultural signifier.

The 'gaze' also became an important terminology during this period, marking a very specific moment in which artists not only reconciled Du Bois's theory of blacks' inability to achieve an accurate self-perception, but also employed it as an act of defiance and resistance. In her use of the gaze, *Piper's Cornered* (1988) reveals the sociological and psychological barricades that blacks had to negotiate in dealing with issues of race even in the 1980s. And Lorna Simpson's *You're Fine* (1988), an installation composed of sculptured text

and large photographs of a woman's torso in repose, her back to the viewer, allows for a sustained gaze even as the text resists the viewer's desire to objectify the body by signifying awareness of not only racism, but sexism in society. The Conceptual Art framework and the prolific awareness of oneself as not just a hyphen, but instead a complex composite of many identities, also enabled artists to speak of themselves beyond the scope of race and sex, extending expression to the broader framework of being gay, lesbian or bisexual. Using the medium of photography, artist Lyle Ashton Harris (with such works as *Bille #15* and *Bille #23*, both 2002) broadened the dialogue of the black male within the context of gay culture to not only interrogate boundaries of black masculinity, but to provoke discourse about issues of the black male body in an effort to recoup its legitimate value in contemporary society.

By the late 1980s and well into the early 1990s, terms like 'postmodernism' and 'post-structuralism' had occupied the contemporary art landscape. Opposition and resistance to the status quo, by not only black artists but other artists of colour, were seemingly paying off with a virtual explosion of exhibitions that celebrated difference. Yet critics and artists alike were suspicious of postmodernism. In the essay 'Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism', Gaines cited several sources in support of this suspicion, including the following quote from Cornel West:

> From my viewpoint, I remain quite suspicious of the term, 'postmodernism'... because the precursor term, 'modern' itself, has not simply been used to devalue the cultures of oppressed and exploited people, but also has failed to deeply illumine the internal complexities of these cultures. Under these circumstances, there is little reason to hold out hope for a new term 'postmodernism' as applied to the practices of an oppressed people (Gaines, Berger & Lord 1993, pp. 13–14).

Despite these growing concerns, a new generation of black artists emerged during this time whose work was widely exhibited. They included Fred Wilson, Danny Tisdale, Annette Lawrence, Gary Simmons and Ellen Gallagher. They communicated their unique brand of identity politics through a range of media, using the codification and co-option of imagery as a new template for their explorations. Wilson conducted an institutional critique through intervention and the use of found objects, in works like *Atlas* (1995), as historical and cultural markers of the black experience in the aftermath of the slave trade. Danny Tisdale's silk-screened canvas series chronicles the events of our contemporary society. Using images culled from television and newspapers, Tisdale presented events that range from the Rodney King beating to the tragedy of the September 11 attacks and the prisoner-of-war abuse at Abu Ghraib in Iraq with an almost decorative repetition reminiscent of Andy Warhol. Lawrence composed her serial drawings *Unborn* (1997), *11/97–11/98* (1998) and *Moons* (1995–6) using mathematical systems that referenced her own body's menstrual cycles. Simmons's drawings, created with chalk and slate board, not only expand the formal properties of drawing, but do so with non-traditional materials enlivened with a performance seeped in gestures that conceptually eradicate signifiers of racism.

Despite their enormous talents, these artists found themselves and their work caught in a problematic presentation, pre-packaged and marketed as an 'Other' (a signifier of difference from the mainstream), serving essentially as a tool for audience development. The language of 'Otherness' and the frameworks of scholarly investigation around the term also stigmatised the work. Rather than interrogating these individual artists' work within a context of larger aesthetic concerns and practice, the interrogation essentially stopped with *difference* in spite of the artists' own assertions of intent and their own definition of their work. This

systematic ghettoisation once again brings out the paradox of identity. How can artists be 'Other', i.e., how can they claim it without again being objectified? Beyond seminal exhibitions like Thelma Golden's 'Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art' at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in 1994, few curatorial endeavours have expanded the conceptual framework for such discourse while simultaneously resisting and subverting the paradox of race on this scale.

By the mid-1990s, postmodernism had expanded to encompass a number of new movements, including the work created by artists under the rubrics of globalism, nomadism and even post-nationalism. These new terms would once again evoke Du Bois, echoed by other scholars such as Paul Gilroy, Stewart Hall, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha among others who were beginning to seek new grounds of discourse.

THE RESURRECTION OF BLACKNESS: AS A POST-BLACK THOUGHT

> A retelling of Modernism to show how it predicts the triumphs of the current sequences would reveal that 'the Other' is your neighbour — that black and Modernist cultures were inseparable long ago. Why use the word, 'post-Modern' when it may also mean 'post-black'?
> — Robert Farris Thompson, 1991[4]

Post-black, as posited by Thompson in the early 1990s, asserted not only the current problematic moment of race relations in contemporary society, but also reminded readers that it was the 'Other' who had historically revolutionised the cultural discourse of modernism. Perhaps the discourse of Otherness, rooted as it was in co-option and the Other's manifestation as object, was the reason that even now, at the beginning

of the twenty-first century, the paradox remained such a persistent dilemma. Despite the black person's growing sophistication in understanding himself or herself as a complex entity, a composite of a multitude of refractive experiences and journeys, no word or phrase in the American lexicon seemed appropriate or truly accurate. The one true thing that remained consistent from the 1970s to the present was the clear understanding of blackness as an essential quality – the bedrock and foundation upon which all else was layered. It was this very essence that allowed artists to reach, explore and ironically enough see themselves as universally connected to not only other blacks, but other cultures as well. Globalism could only help in many respects to finesse Western society's understanding of the black person's racial paradox, but even that discourse, which was rooted in Du Bois's theories, seemed passé as well. Certainly, artists who fit within the rubrics of globalism were undergoing their own plight of exoticism and objectification. So what discourse could they construct to deal with yet another generation of artists, those who grew up in the 1970s and 1980s? Nothing emerged until 2001, when a peculiar and controversial thing happened – the resurrection of blackness into the conceptual discourse of identity.

In truth, the reassertion of the term 'post-black' a decade after Thompson's article in *Artforum* came with a very different set of suppositions, formulated not to debate Thompson's earlier statement, but to expound upon it and bring the discourse into the twenty-first century. Inherent in this new set of suppositions was still the question of blackness: how blackness manifested in cultural production and, more importantly, how artists could negotiate the paradox of race and identity without the debate of negation. In a 2003 interview with the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Thelma Golden, who had reasserted the term to define a unifying aesthetic among the younger generation black artists featured in her exhibition 'Freestyle' (2001), described

'post-black' as follows:

> There is no single way to think about [African American art]. I'm interested in bringing multiculturalism to the mainstream. I've become interested in younger artists who are steeped in the post-modernist discourse about blackness, but don't necessarily put it first. [Painter] Glenn Ligon and I started calling it post-black. Post-black is the new black (Hackett 2003, p. 1).

So, if post-black was the new black, why was it met with opposition? Perhaps the debate emerged over the nuances of the term in spite of Golden's definition. Did post-black mean ultimately that blackness was no longer intrinsic to cultural production? How would it be possible to forgo the very foundation of the black artist's existential self? Could blackness, once buried, be resurrected?

Certainly the advent of the twenty-first century brought with it many questions in regard to race and its paradox. Books such as John McWhorter's *Authentically Black: Essays for the Black Silent Majority* (2003) and Debra Dickerson's *The End of Blackness: Returning the Souls of Black Folk to Their Rightful* Owners (2004) called for a reframing of the existing paradigms of race relations in the social and political sphere. Their mandate was simple: blacks had to move again towards self-determination as opposed to remaining in the quagmire of a racial paradox built upon their suppression. An intense review of the political and cultural events of the 1960s and 1970s brought renewed interest in that period's doctrines and debates. What could be salvaged from the wreckage? Could blackness be resurrected without the baggage of its previous mandates and ideologies that had forced its earlier demise?

Race relations in the US at the turn of the twenty-first century seemed ever more divisive. Despite the increased political and economic mobility during the two-term administration of President Bill Clinton,

blacks were falling victim to renewed racial violence in the form of police brutality and profiling as well as hate crimes, including the brutal lynching of James Byrd Jr., in Jasper, Texas. They found themselves still grappling with the basic issue of unity, in part due to a lack of political leadership, which had been so vital to developments during the 1960s. And despite Clinton being jokingly referred to as 'the first black president', there was a dearth of political leaders from within the black community and little to sustain the notion of community or collective consciousness beyond the cultural phenomenon of popular music.

Popular music, specifically rap and hip-hop, thus became the unlikely vehicle for a renewed search for unification. The music of Public Enemy was germane to the experiences of its listeners: the group's seminal recordings, like *It Takes a Million to Hold Us Back* (1988) and *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990), captured the ethos of a generation of black youth. And if Chuck D and other rap artists like KRS-One came to signify black leaders, then DJs were the new historians of a black collective consciousness, their sampling assuring a collective continuity between the present and the past. The young black artists who emerged upon the scene in the late 1990s closely aligned themselves with this context. Educated in art schools and colleges, these artists possessed a working knowledge of Conceptual Art strategies and postmodern discourse. Their work in this vein was intuitive as they effortlessly sampled the cultural production and practices from a wide range of sources. For example, Sanford Biggers found correlations between the sensibilities of hip-hop and those of ancient Japanese practices. His work *Tunic* (2003) evokes a complex simplicity of both material and the process of production that is both meditative and methodical. Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid's *Rebirth of A Nation* (2004) is the visual manifestation of sampling technique and aesthetic. It should be noted that Miller composed a soundtrack for

this work, which is presented in this exhibition as an installation, though it was first performed at Lincoln Center in New York and at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. Beth Coleman and Howard Goldkrand also bring the aesthetic of sampling to art making. Their *Mobile Stealth Unit (Pink Noise) Series 002* (1999) approaches the concept of reverberation through a complex digital environment that presents the visual reverberation feedback from the sculpture itself. But not all work by these young artists has emerged from a DJ sensibility; some of their work ironically alludes to where it all began, theoretical Conceptual Art practice.

When looking at the semiotic work of Adam Pendleton, one cannot help but recall the work of Lawrence Weiner. But Pendleton's work moves the aesthetic further: instead of just placing text upon the wall, Pendleton offers up his own voice and its rhythm in his visual representations. Edgar Arceneaux's *Failed Attempt at Crystallization* (2002) also plays with text, but as object and narrative, or conceptually as an objectified narrative. The use of everyday materials is revived in Karyn Olivier's *Bench (seating for one)* (2003), a simply constructed brick wall with a singular seat protruding from one side. The poetic meditation it evokes with regard to isolation is palpable. In a nod to modernism's earliest manifestation, Robert Pruitt reasserts one of the most decisive symbols of modernity, Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, in his work *Low Rider Art* (2004).

In short, there has been without a doubt a resurrection of blackness — a resurrection that precludes the normal adages of mortality because it does not exist as a bodily object, but as a sensibility.

EPILOGUE

And so, here, the discourse pauses with the following thought: Black Conceptualism, or the integration of Conceptual Art practices with a black sensibility, has allowed black artists to negotiate, resist and in many respects consume the paradox of race. Although their participation in the Conceptual Art movement since the mid-1960s and the subsequent integration of Conceptual Art strategies within the visual lexicon of a black aesthetic have been rendered largely invisible by the mainstream, due in equal parts to bias and ignorance, these artists have left indelible imprints upon the contemporary art landscape over the last thirty years. Their participation and, the subsequent integration of Conceptual Art strategies within the visual lexicon of a black aesthetic have been rendered largely invisible by the mainstream due to bias and ignorance. However, these black artists have left indelible imprints upon the contemporary art land-scape over the last thirty years. Their influence stems not only from the authority of their collective and individual voices, but from their seamless integration of Conceptual Art precepts, such as the interrogation of disciplines and materiality, with a unique brand of self-reflexivity, or racial politics, in a way that has enabled them to expose the inherent and inescapable paradox of race. Moreover, this integration has also enabled the work of these artists to continue to expand through their own ethos, reconciliatory endeavours with identity and aesthetic sensibility – the very framework of Conceptual Art practice today.

Black Conceptualism has become the act of trans-ferring and manifesting the resilience of black self-determination in the mainstream art world. The effects of a black sensibility on that world have been significant, as this hyper-regenerative process of forming a unique visual language has steadily mutated the prescribed parameters of Conceptualism. The ability to continuously reshape and assert a new aesthetic lexicon, even after thirty years, is proof positive that Black Conceptualism not only exists, but is alive and well and, by its own existential nature, unbreakable.

POST FACE (2018)

Since the presentation of the exhibition, 'Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970' and the essay in the accompanying catalogue reprinted above from 2005, the social, political and cultural dimensions impacting the contemporary landscape has mandated new frameworks of discourse. That mandate has resonated not only within the US, but across the globe. Nowhere, however, has the discourse been more necessary than in the US, which has been the site of unyielding change.

In 2008, the country celebrated its first black president, Barack Hussein Obama, who served two terms in office. During those eight years, blackness was once again under scrutiny weaving between construct, signifier and condition. DuBois's paradox was once again in play with all the hallmarks of a second era of Reconstruction emerging in the wake. The rise of the alt-right (white supremacism) and inflections of state-sanctioned genocide upon black bodies intensified with an unprecedented number of murders of unarmed black men and women at the hands of law enforcement. This new era of intimidation has both served to upend and unsettle, but it has also calcified a resolve that blackness could not have been understood as a tentative and abstract notion. In between this period there has been a rise in the utopian ideals of Afro-futurism, which has enabled an imagining of a utopian existence that does not negate blackness, but rather expands its parameters exponentially, essentially imploding the strictures of historical binaries and proceeding with new perspectives of engagement

that move ever closer towards other marginalised cultures. While blackness remains, it is changing, shifting, expanding. And as a black resistance to the current siege strengthens, it embraces the histories that sustained it in the decades and centuries prior. In revisiting 'Double Consciousness', it becomes ever apparent that conceptual practices are also inherent in the imaginings and productions of black foremothers and forefathers who met the transgressions of oppression with perpetual thought and production. Even in the wake of an endless nightmare, they dared to dream, produce and create. Perhaps, it is in this repository that a new point of origin for conceptualism can be posited. Perhaps Dubois's 'veiled sight' only suggests the dimensional exchange of looking at oneself as one is being looked upon; but also a circularity of sight – to see beyond the immediate and in doing so, develop an ability to transcend and transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

REFERENCES

Brown, J. 1969, 'Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud', King Records Studios, Cincinnati.

Du Bois, W. E. B. 2003, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Modern Library Edition/Random House, New York, original work published 1903.

Fishel, Jr., L. H. and Quarles, B. 1967, *The Negro American: A Documentary History*, Scott Foresman, Glen View, IL.

Gaines, C., Berger, M. and Lord, C. 1993, *Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, exhibition catalogue, 11 November–17 December 1994, University of California, Irvine.

Gayle, A. ed. 1971, *The Black Aesthetic*, Doubleday, Garden City, NY.

Hackett, R. 2003, 'A Moment with Thelma Golden, Art Director', *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 1 April.

Legum, C. 1965, *Pan-Africanism: A Short Political Guide*, 2nd ed. Praeger, New York.

Mishel, L., Bernstein, J. and Schmitt, J. 2003, *The Fall of the Middle Class*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Nkrumah, K. 1963, *Africa Must Unite*, Heinman, London.

Piper, A. 1996, *Out of Order, Out of Sight: Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992*, Volume I, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Powell, R. 1997, 'Introduction', in *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century*, Thames and Hudson, London.

Thompson, R. F. 1991, 'Afro Modernism', *Artforum*, no. 91.

Wollen, P. 1999, 'North America', in L. Camnitzer, J. Farver and R. Weiss (eds), *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exhibition catalogue, 28 April–29 August, Queens Museum of Art, New York.

NOTES

1   Conceptualism in the United States was largely practised by white male artists and was therefore legitimate within society at the time it emerged. What was questioned was not the authority of white artists to challenge the status quo, but the credibility of their assertions.

2   While critics have applied this concept to studies related to vernacular art or folk art production, its inference within the realm of the fine arts is often suppressed because it lacks legitimacy within the mainstream criticism. Yet the concept of the 'readymade' or other avant-garde precepts have a parallel existence in much of black Southern cultural production, which is intuitive in its approach. I would, however, argue that the 'intuitive' nature of this production is a highly intellectual endeavour.

3   W. E. B. Du Bois was an early proponent of a unified and self-governing Africa. As early as 1900, he organised what would become over the following fifty-eight years a series of congresses attended by African thinkers and scholars.

4   I believe this is where the term 'post-black' is introduced. This framework, however, seems to run counter to the current pervasive use of the word to denote black artists who have moved beyond a consciousness of blackness.

IV
DAVID MEDALLA

IV
Introduction
David Medalla

Nick Aikens

Across these three texts that examine David Medalla's diverse and sophisticated conceptual practice from different analytical and art historical standpoints, a central focus emerges regarding the context through which we approach this work.

In her essay 'Dearly Beloved: Transitory Relations and the Queering of "Women's Work" in David Medalla's *A Stitch in Time* (1967–72)' artist and Black Artists & Modernism (BAM) principle investigator Sonia Boyce offers a close reading of Medalla's participatory work. Recounting its genesis, Boyce analyses the work's relational nature wherein viewers are invited to stich messages, thoughts or desires into a long stretch of cloth. Boyce considers this against emergent fields of participatory and dematerialised practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the recent surge of interest in Medalla's practice. She contrasts viewers' experience with the reverence expected on encountering works in public: 'The artwork is an invitation, ... and a question — a choice between viewing at a distance and nearness or getting directly involved.'

Recent framings of the artist's practice is central to art historian and BAM investigator David Dibosa's essay 'Ambivalent Thresholds: David Medalla's Conceptualism and "Queer British Art"'. Dibosa writes on Medalla's 1961 work *Cloud Canyons No. 3: An Ensemble of Bubble Machines (Auto-Creative Sculptures*) (remade 2004), placed 'some two and half metres beyond the exit to the exhibition' at Tate Britain. The positioning of Medalla's work, the only piece by a non-white artist in the show raises 'a series of concerns' for Dibosa, evidences an 'exceptionality', he argues, symptomatic of the larger issue of British art history's (mis)placing of the artist's work within narratives of British sculpture, conceptualism and queerness. Further still, Dibosa

suggests that the handling of *Cloud Canyons* within 'Queer British Art' is a missed opportunity to accommodate, quite literally, the complex, migratory nature of British identities with the intersections of queerness and art history.

In the final paper art historian Eva Bentcheva turns to the transition in Medalla's practice in the mid-1960s to what she describes as a 'cross-pollination' of conceptualism, performance art and activism. Highlighting both the possibilities and limitations of reading Medalla's work from the perspective of distinct art historical and sociopolitical contexts, namely Britain, Europe and the Philippines in the 1960s, Bentcheva's analysis complicates how we might situate Medalla's development as an artist and political activist. She stresses the need to understand Medalla's practice as occupying a liminal, or intersectional space between conceptualism as a formal practice, political activism and institutional critique that can offer a missing link between the historiography of both Filipino and European conceptualism.

Ambivalent Thresholds: David Medalla's Conceptualism and 'Queer British Art'

David Dibosa

In April 2017, a new exhibition, 'Queer British Art 1861–1967', opened at Tate Britain, London, to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the decriminalisation of male homosexuality in Britain. The exhibition focused on art production in Britain during the hundred years prior to decriminalisation.

It contained highlights, such as paintings by Simeon Solomon, including *Love Dreaming by the Sea* (1871, watercolour on paper), drawn from the nineteenth century, and works by David Hockney, including *Bertha alias Bernie* (1961, oil on canvas), drawn from the twentieth. One of the later works in the show was *Cloud Canyons No. 3: An Ensemble of Bubble Machines (Auto-Creative Sculptures)* (1961, remade 2004, mixed media). The artwork is a sculptural piece by David Medalla. Medalla was born in the Philippines in 1942. He started living in Britain in 1960, although, since that time, he has spent periods of time living in several countries.

A key point to note about Medalla's work was its positioning: it was installed some two and a half metres or so beyond the exit of the exhibition. The distance of the work from the main body of the exhibition has led to observations, albeit anecdotal, that some viewers were not even aware that Medalla's sculpture formed part of 'Queer British Art'. Given that Medalla was the only non-white artist in the exhibition, a series of concerns must be raised.

In this paper, I take the problematic positioning of Medalla's sculpture within 'Queer British Art' as symptomatic of a deeper problem with the positioning of Medalla within British art historical discourse. I will not give a detailed analysis of the Tate Britain exhibition here. Rather, I will look at the art historical context of post-war British sculpture, aiming to get a closer understanding of Medalla's positioning within British art historical traditions. Critic Guy Brett (1989) has written: 'Although, he has worked in Britain for more than thirty years… Medalla is not readily perceived as belonging to the British, nor for that matter to the Filipino art world.' My discussion asks whether that problematic positioning of Medalla the person has had an impact on the positioning of his artwork.

A NOTE ON CLOUD CANYONS

First made in 1961, *Cloud Canyons No. 3: An Ensemble of Bubble Machines (Auto-Creative Sculptures)* is a sculptural construction, consisting of metal, Perspex and machine parts. Its dimensions are variable. The entire work sits on a wooden base. The machine parts — compressors and timers — are located in the lower part of the sculpture. Above the base sits a 'bath' of soapy water from which Perspex tubes rise from the centre of the piece. A cylindrical construction, around 230 cm in diameter, made of riveted metal sheets, covers the bath as well as the bottom of the tubes, acting as a form of 'lid'. A single circular aperture, approximately 70 cm in diameter, appears in the centre of the top of the lid. Through this opening, the Perspex tubes can be seen to rise. The circular opening also allows viewers to see the surface of the soapy water solution in the bath. In total, five tubes can be seen to rise from the centre of the cylinder. They have varying heights of between 2.5 and 3 m. The compressors and timer mechanism causes foam to rise through the vertical Perspex tubes. Once at the top of the tubes, the foam

slides over the rim and slips down the sides. As Fiona Anderson writes in May 2014 in the work description on Tate Britain's website: 'The bubbles are produced constantly and form cloud-like clusters at the top of the tube.'

As the work's title, *Cloud Canyons No. 3* suggests, the piece on display in 'Queer British Art' was one in a suite of works that Medalla made in the 1960s. Although first made in 1961, the No. 3 work was remade in 2004 for the exhibition 'Art and the 60s: This Was Tomorrow' also at Tate Britain, which acquired the work in 2006.

MEDALLA AND BRITISH SCULPTURE

Medalla's nomination in 2016 for Britain's prestigious Hepworth Prize for Sculpture, shows that his work has been recently, and some would say belatedly, acknowledged as part of Britain's sculptural tradition. Although he has not been situated in relation to a lineage including Henry Moore and Anthony Caro, his work has connections to those who have been placed firmly in that line — among them, the so-called New Generation sculptors: Tim Scott, Phillip King, David Annesley and William Tucker. Medalla's 1961 version of *Cloud Canyons*, for instance, was made in the same year as Scott's *Peach Wheels* (1961–2, painted wood and glass) and only a couple of years before King's *Tra-La-La* (1963, plastic). One could also highlight parallels between the practices: just as Medalla used materials, such as Perspex, New Generation sculptors were distinguished for their use of such new materials. More specifically, the combination of materials in *Cloud Canyons* — metal and Perspex — also shared some of the material preoccupations with the New Generation artists, such as Isaac Witkin, who, in *Alter-Ego* (1963), used wood, metal and fibreglass. Indeed, it was such use of material that allowed New Generation to be placed, at some points,

David Medalla's *Cloud Canyons No.3*, installed in the Manton Foyer, Tate Britain, as part of 'Queer British Art' (2017). Photograph by Gavin Freeborn.

in contradistinction to the prevailing sculptural practices of the time. Given Medalla's absence from debates about such matters, one could begin to discuss his marginalisation within Britain's modern sculptural traditions. There needs to be an acknowledgement that Medalla's work has been set apart or, at least, treated differently to the sculpture of many of his contemporaries working in a similar vein. Stark differences emerged, for instance, in the institutional handling of the work. The sculptures made by the main figures within the New Generation group, for instance, entered the most major national collection of contemporary art in Britain (then Tate Gallery) within a decade of its production. This was largely due to a donation in 1970 by the construction magnate Alistair (later Lord) McAlpine, which became known as the Alistair McAlpine Gift and became connected to a 1971 show of the New Generation sculptors at the Tate. Medalla's work, however, did not feature as part of this set of circumstances and, indeed, did not enter the Tate collection until 2006, more than four decades after its original production.

Part of the reason for Medalla's historical marginalisation within sculptural traditions can be related to the range of his output, which went beyond the production of sculptural objects. According to the artist's most prolific commentator, Guy Brett (1989), Medalla's practice developed sequentially, as follows: the first phase, 'Kinetics' (1963–7), emphasised humankind's relationship to nature; the second phase, 'Participation' (c.1967–76), underlined interactions between people-nature-culture-art-politics; the third phase, 'Performance and Painting' (c.1975), stressed subjectivity and lived reality (Brett 1989, pp. 82–3). Medalla's biokinetics, from his early phase represented the marked separation from questions of sculptural form. Such matters had, arguably, preoccupied the mainstream of British postwar sculpture since Moore and Hepworth, for instance,

had concerned themselves with issues, such as the relation between 'open' and 'closed' forms. According to Brett, it was the emphasis on movement within bio-kinetics that led to Medalla's concern with movement and 'tender sensuousness'.

This emphasis on 'biokinetics' (Medalla cited in Brett 1989, p. 85) in *Cloud Canyons* demonstrated most markedly the shift away from the mainstream sculptural preoccupations towards the possibilities offered by mechanisation, allowing Medalla to explore new ideas of movement, space and time. Brett underlines the interrogation of movement within *Cloud Canyons*. In his book, *Kinetic Art: The Language of Movement* (1968), Brett included a later version of the work, *Cloud Canyons (Bubble Machine no. 2)* (1964).

MEDALLA AND CONCEPTUALISM

The preoccupation with movement in *Cloud Canyons* allied the work to debates later taken up in Conceptualism. It was Medalla himself who connected his work to what became some of the tenets of Conceptualism when he said: 'I wouldn't call myself a sculptor because a sculptor is one who shapes things out of whatever is there. I shape things more out of my head.'

Even if one accepts Medalla's ambivalent place in relation to British sculptural traditions, due to formal concerns, it remains possible to argue for a stronger positioning of Medalla's work as a precursor to Conceptualism in Britain. Art historians have recognised the significance of Gustav Metzger's work in this regard. Indeed, writer Jo Applin has stated:

> The precarious status of the object in the mid 1960s as something that was provisional, vulnerable and unstable was to become intrinsic to sculptural practice by the end of the decade with the drive toward

conceptualism. Metzger's auto-destructive activities might be considered precursors to that later 'dematerialization of the object' (2013, p. 194).

Metzger's auto-destructive work, though, cannot be easily cloven from Medalla's auto-creative bubble machines. Indeed, Wilson has pointed out that the bubble machines were clearly in a critical relation with Metzger's work. This critical relation crystallised in the connection of the artists within Signals. It was made evident by the publication of Metzger's fifth manifesto alongside a brief discussion of Medalla's bubble and sand machines in the *Signals Newsbulletin* of September 1964.

It is the preoccupation with growth, motion and animation in Medalla's *Cloud Canyons* that provides the direct relation to Metzger's interest in destruction. Metzger underlined his disinterest in ruins, favouring an interest in the *process* of disintegration. As Tate curator Andrew Wilson (2008, p. 191) wrote: 'The process of auto-destructive art does not stop with the object, but has a distinct social and ethical dimension as public art in creating a degree of catharsis.'

It is the question of process that links the auto-destructive to the auto-creative. The work of *Cloud Canyons* should, therefore, be seen in terms of motion and animation processes. The internal motion of machines having parallels with the internal motion of human bodies. As Brett (1989, p. 8) wrote: 'Movement produces the possibility of a work whose form is a process of growth.' It is in such terms I argue that, if Metzger's auto-destruction must be seen as a direct antecedent to British traditions of Conceptualism then Medalla's auto-creativity must, too.

MEDALLA AND 'QUEER BRITISH ART'

The problem posed by the positioning of *Cloud Canyons* can be thought of in terms of a 'dislocation' in which one can see that in terms of British art historical discourse the work has literally been treated as something 'out of place'. There is an exceptionality forced on *Cloud Canyons*. Such exceptionality was replicated in the handling of the work in respect of 'Queer British Art'. By placing it outside the exhibition, it exposes the presuppositions on which the show is based. For, the work met the chronological parameters of the exhibition (1867–1967). It also met the formal parameters of the show — since the exhibition also contained sculpture, such as Frederic Leighton's *The Sluggard* (1885, bronze) and Hamo Thorneycroft's *The Mower* (1888–90, bronze). It even included non-figurative, abstract geometric work of Marlow Moss, *Composition in Yellow, Black and White* (1949, oil and wood on canvas); and the abstract geometric sculpture, *Balanced Forms in Gunmetal and Cornish Granite* (1956–7, metal and granite).

In the case of 'Queer British Art', the exceptionality of *Cloud Canyons* becomes startlingly clear in relation to a particularly exclusive rehearsal of a national tradition. Such a reiteration refuses the nuances of nationhood and belonging that have existed in Britain, at least since the post-1945 period. It is the difficulty of articulating nuances within such a malleable category as 'Britishness' that proves to pose such an intractable problem for British art historians and, consequently, for curators in Britain's national museums. What belongs to our national tradition, is a question that must continually be posed. It remains significant for practical terms of acquisition and exhibition production as well as for broader political issues, such as the recounting of national narratives. Alongside such issues, though, are another set of questions reintroducing the issue of the unresolved relationship of Britain to the enduring legacy of its colonial past. Who belongs to our national

tradition, is the supplementary question after which a set of truculent refusals follow: a reluctance to recognise British culture as constituted through a history of migrations across the globe. As Salman Rushdie was reputed to have said: 'The British don't know their history because so much of it took place overseas.' The problem of who is British and who is not persists and the makeshift solution emerges that 'some people are more British than others', which produces its own issues.

CONCLUSION

During an interview, Medalla spoke of his birth near Manilla Bay, in the Philippines, and of his constant journeying throughout his life. Referring to his 'migrations' he said: 'I don't feel as a migrant, as an exile, I feel at home anywhere… like clouds…' It appears, though, as if Medalla's 'being at home anywhere' cannot translate into somewhere specific like Britain. Given that the Philippines was not part of the British Empire, a thorny question arises over where one places work by an artist born near Manila Bay. To put such work at the centre of an exhibition about British art would surely make a point about the migratory character of British cultural traditions. It is precisely the 'either/or' approach that would make it easy to leave *Cloud Canyons* outside a show titled 'Queer British Art'. The only way to avoid the trap of having to leave work 'out of place' is to reconsider what we think this 'place' is and how it got to be there. As cultural producers charged with rehearsing Britain's national traditions, there is a need to recognise such traditions as inherently migratory and dynamic. The tracing of a line from Simeon Solomon to David Hockney cannot delineate a history of queer British art, if it fails to follow the ups and downs, ins and outs, that constitute British history as a whole.

REFERENCES

Applin, J. 2013, 'When Attitudes Became Formless: Art and Antagonism in the 1960s', in D. Arnold and D. P. Corbett (eds), *A Companion to British Art: 1600 to Present*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ.

Brett, G. 1989, 'David Medalla: From Bioketicism to Synoptic Realism', *Third Text*, vol. 3, no. 8/9.

Wilson, A. 2008, 'Gustav Metzger's Auto-Destructive/Auto-Creative Art: An Art of Manifesto, 1959–1969', *Third Text*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 177–94.

Conceptualism-Scepticism and Creative Cross-pollinations in the Work of David Medalla

Eva Bentcheva

Writing in 1999 for the catalogue of the exhibition 'Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s', Thai art historian and curator Apinan Poshyananda (1999) pondered the birth of Conceptual Art across South and Southeast Asia. Poshyananda's essay not only teased out common features of 'idea-based' practices across diverse national, cultural and art histories, it also argued for the significance of Asian artists within the global history of this medium. Distinguishing between artists working abroad and their counterparts in Asia,[1] he contended that the former could be situated alongside their Euro-American contemporaries, whereas the latter were central to the birth of a political consciousness in contemporary South and Southeast Asian art. Nearly two decades after 'Global Conceptualism', there has been a concerted effort to rethink the birth of Conceptual Art beyond the binary frameworks of 'home' and 'abroad', 'local' and 'transnational', 'political' and 'conceptual' (Flores 2017a; Teh 2017).

In a career spanning nearly seven decades, Philippines-born artist David Medalla's diverse trajectories illustrate how artists navigated distances, definitions and networks. As one of the practitioners singled out by Poshyananda as a pioneer of Conceptualism on the international scene, Medalla's art has been acknowledged within Conceptual Art history in Europe – particularly Britain (Brooks 2000, p. 32) – and, albeit to a lesser extent, the Philippines (Benitez-Johannot 2012, pp. 4–23; Legaspi-Ramirez 2012, pp. 101–8). On the one hand, his affinity towards conveying scientific, philosophical and historical references through playful performances and collaborative works, exemplifies artists' moves away from object-based art towards idea- and process-based practices. On the other hand, Medalla never formally embraced the term

'Conceptualism' to describe his art. Preferring to align himself with categories such as 'kinetic art' and 'participation art', he even took a critical attitude towards the development of Conceptual Art, particularly in relation to the Philippines during the late 1960s and 1970s under the cultural politics of the Marcos regime (1965–86). This text delves into how his practice sits within national art histories and shifting understandings of Conceptualism in the late 1960s and 1970s. It traces how he responded to the different trajectories of this medium and argues that Medalla's work fosters a conversation, or cross-pollination, between the diverse strands of artistic activity developing in Europe and Asia during the 1960s and 1970s.

CONCEPTUAL VENTURES, 1960–9

Having left the Philippines for Europe in 1960, Medalla's art became largely marked by two practices – kinetic sculptures, which he produced as part of Signals London (1964–7), and participatory performances, which he developed with the collective 'dance-drama' group Exploding Galaxy (1967–9). Differing in their forms, both spawned a vibrant cross-fertilisation of historic, cultural, philosophical and scientific references.[2] While the artist did not formally associate these practices with emergent notions of 'dematerialisation',[3] the works' performative and allegorical undercurrents came to the attention of key curators and writers whose interests lay in idea- and process-based art (Taylor 1977, pp. 20–3; Mackintosh 1973, p. 4). Of particular significance was Medalla's interaction with the Swiss curator, Harald Szeemann (1933–2005), who played a seminal role in positioning artists working with ephemera and performance within the history of Conceptual Art. In 1966, Szeemann featured Medalla's *Cloud Canyon* (1964) in the group exhibition 'Weiss auf Weiss' at the

David Medalla's catalogue entry for 'Weiss auf Weiss', Kunsthalle Bern, 25 May–3 July 1966.

Kunsthalle Bern. Described as a dream-like, anthropomorphic sculpture, *Cloud Canyon* stood out for its resistance to stasis, evoking migratory movements and cross-cultural flows of imagination through its ever-shifting forms.[4]

A similar understanding of art as an ephemeral vehicle for transitory encounters and cross-cultural statements also underpinned Szeemann's inclusion of Medalla in the seminal yet controversial exhibition on Conceptual Art at Kunsthalle Bern, 'Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information' in 1969. Here, Medalla's contribution included a letter published within the exhibition's extensive catalogue,[5] and a number of poetic gestures and impromptu performances that the artist staged during a journey across Africa and Asia from 1968–9.[6] This inclusion played a central role in positioning Medalla as part of a generation of international artists who — as the exhibition's title suggested — emphasised actions and propositions over forms, and placed importance on the artistic persona as central to the making of art.[7] This understanding of Conceptual Art as a cognitive practice was later echoed by Medalla, arguing that the creation of an artistic 'inner life' (Medalla cited in Reyes 1989, p. 145) was crucial to the making of experimental art and escaping the constraints of national and institutional discourses. I would argue that this recurrent theme also came to the forefront of his artistic and political outlook upon his return to the Philippines in the late 1960s.

MEDALLA'S PRACTICE IN THE PHILIPPINE CONTEXT

Concurrent to his participation in the above-mentioned exhibitions, the late 1960s also marked a period in which Medalla experienced a changing attitude and growing criticality towards Conceptualism's development in the Philippines. Already before leaving the Philippines for Europe, Medalla's reputation as an experimental artist had begun to take root in Manila's artistic community. Throughout the 1950s, the young artist had cultivated a circle of friends interested in the arts and literature, organising regular gatherings in his home in the Mabini district of Manila (Benitez-Johannot 2012, pp. 4–23). An active contributor to contemporary art spaces and groups, he developed his practice foremost as a poet and painter, and laid claim to being one of the pioneers of performance and participatory art in the Philippines.[8]

During almost a decade of absence from 1960 until his return in 1969, Medalla did not sever ties with the Philippine art scene.[9] His earlier interactions with key curators and gallerists, coupled with travelling news of his activities in London, guaranteed him a place in key exhibitions on 'avant-garde' art.[10] In 1965, he was even nominated by the Art Association of the Philippines board to represent the Philippines at the Venice Biennale of 1966, alongside Roberto Chabet, Lee Aguinaldo and J. Elizalde Navarro.[11] Despite the fact that the project did not materialise, Medalla's inclusion in this proposed selection reflects that his practice was recognised within a lineage of artists increasingly turning towards 'experimental'[12] practices. The use of the term 'experimental' here was of strong significance in the evolution of what would later come to be recognised as Conceptual Art (Bentcheva 2019). In the 1960s, it was still used to describe multimedia and abstract approaches in painting and sculpture that broke away from earlier styles of realist and neo-realist painting

dominating the Philippine art scene in the 1950s. By the early 1970s, however, it evolved to encompass assemblage, installation, performance and photography, which were being produced across independent and artist-run spaces, as well as within government-backed institutions, particularly in Manila.

While there was no common definition of Conceptual Art, a number of artists, curators and critics took up discussing and debating the nature and relevance of this term. Examples of such discourses around the term 'Conceptualism' may be teased out through looking at artists such as Robert Chabet (1937–2013). During the 1960s and 1970s, Chabet became known for his use of readymade materials in the making of installations, deploying the term 'environment' to describe his practice.[13] Emerging as a formative figure in the Philippine Conceptual Art circuits, he framed Conceptualism as a bridge between the fine arts, architecture and theatricality, fostering an expanded interaction between artwork and viewer, albeit stopping short of developing any official position of critique (Legaspi-Ramirez 2015, pp. 123–59).

CONCEPTUALISM-SCEPTICISM

Returning to the Philippines in 1969 after almost a decade of absence, Medalla's breach with Philippine Conceptualism may be understood in light of the growingly intertwined relationship between contemporary art practices and the cultural politics of the Marcos regime (1965–86), which commenced in the late 1960s and came to fruition in the 1970s. By the late 1960s, Ferdinand Marcos and his wife, Imelda, had begun to expand their sphere of influence through the co-option of the arts. The building of massive new structures to champion the arts, most notably the Cultural Centre of the Philippines (CCP) completed in 1969 on the reclaimed land of Manila Bay, set out to

Roberto Chabet, *Sky Horizons*, 1973/2014, wood, rubber, 12 frames, 81 x 117 cm each, in 'The 70s: Objects, Photographs and Documents', curated by Ringo Bunoan, Areté, Ateneo de Manila University, 20 February–2 July 2018. Photograph by Eva Bentcheva.

serve as a venue for showcasing a grand unison of the arts in a multifaceted presentation of theatre, music, dance and the visual arts. Under its first director, the aforementioned Roberto Chabet, the CCP Art Museum developed a programme for supporting contemporary art, with a particular affinity for abstract, Minimalist and Conceptualism-inspired practices (Cruz 2005, pp. 18–29). Speaking in April 1973 of the decision to expand the remit of the CCP's scope, the institution's second director, Raymundo Albano (1947–85), justified the decision as a matter of pragmatism in support of artists working with experimental media.

> The thing is, we have the mistaken notion that just because Conceptual Art originated in New York, in Paris or in Germany, it should not be adapted here. (…) The reason why the CCP appears to promote this movement is because it's the only gallery in town which can provide an outlet for this kind of art. It is art representing ideas which cannot be sold, and therefore the other galleries just are not open to it (Albano cited in Reyes 1989, p. 164).

Medalla recognised the framing of experimental practices within the rhetoric of cultural politics as an attempt by the Marcos government to present the Philippines as modern and progressive, as well as to affirm an alliance with American cultural and political ties (Flores 2017a). As an active contributor to the Philippine art scene, this co-option posed several problems. His own exclusion as an artist working abroad and in the sphere of experimental art, came coupled with a perception that the selection of works championed by the CCP were derivative and imitative of Western practices. While Medalla had never been opposed to cross-cultural borrowing in his creative outlook, he saw the art being championed by the political and economic elite as being deeply derivative, stating 'it is a whole lifestyle that is utterly borrowed, imitative and trivial' (Medalla cited in Reyes 1989, p. 153).

Inspired to engage in a critical stance against the co-option of cultural institutions to serve political causes, he staged a protest on the inauguration night at the CCP, 8 September 1969. While Imelda and Ferdinand Marcos entered the building in the company of dignitaries such as the Ronald and Nancy Reagan, Medalla stood on the first floor balcony overlooking the entrance in the company of Philippine poet Jun Lansang and painter Mars Galang, and unfurled a self-made placard reading '*Abas la mystification* [down with the pretence], down with the philistines!' (Lacaba 1969, pp. 10–11). Wearing a traditional Philippine *sarong* while holding up the placard, the enactment was intended as political protest, yet also bore the marks of artistic intervention announcing a critique towards the exclusivity of the CCP.[14]

Marciano Galang, David Medalla and Jun Lansang display protest placards at the opening of the Cultural Centre of the Philippines, Manila, 8 September 1969. Jose F. Lacaba, 'The Art of Politics, The Politics of Art', *Philippine Free Press*, 20 September 1969, p. 10. Photographer unknown.

This 'protest-performance' may be read in light of the artist's growing scepticism with respect to the evolution of a discourse around Conceptualism in the Philippines via the rhetoric of the Marcos regime. Over the course of the 1970s, the CCP placed itself at the helm of experimental practices. Through a planned programme of exhibitions, awards and publications,[15] it became a key platform for a range of visual practices, including abstract painting and sculpture, experimental photography, installations and immersive 'environments'. It even served as the venue for some of the earliest works of performance art and large-scale 'happenings', such as José Maceda's *Cassettes 100* (1972), an experimental composition embracing collective actions, dance and installation in the spirit of early performance and sound art by Nam June Paik and John Cage.[16]

Revisiting Poshyananda's (1999, p. 144) claim that Conceptual Art in Asia grew from a critique against 'mainstream' art, which emphasised 'national identity, decoration, and elite aesthetic values', these examples challenge our understanding of Conceptual Art as counter-culture practice in Asia, despite recent interpretations that works – particularly by Chabet and associated figures – bore underlying 'veiled critiques'.[17]
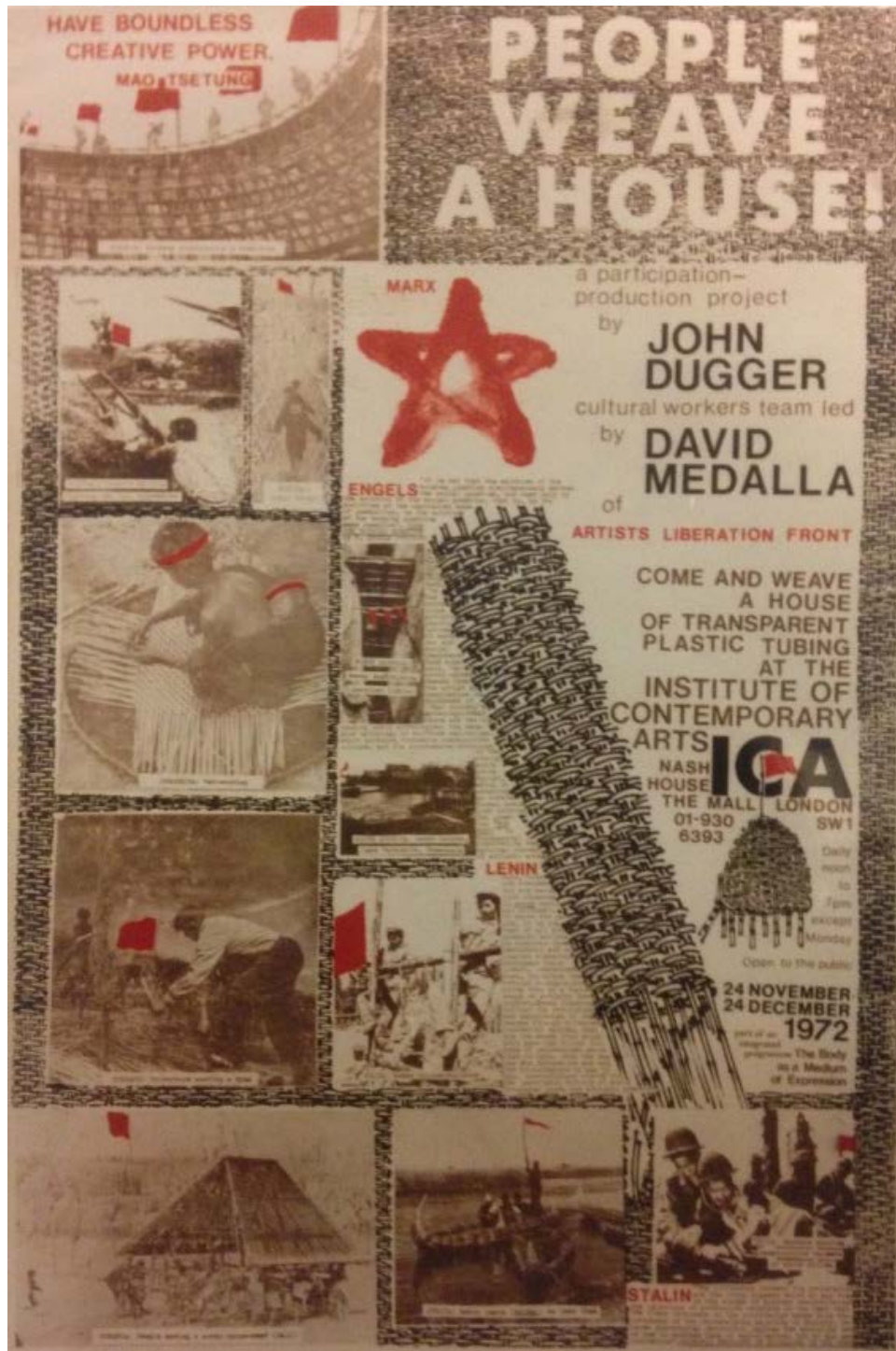
Poster for *People Weave a House!*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 24 November–24 December 1972.

On the contrary, such works often exemplified an effort to justify the existence of abstract, ephemeral and conceptual projects within the framework of government-sanctioned programmes and spaces. One example is Albano's formulation of the term 'developmental art' (Albano 1979 & 1981, pp. 15–16). Here the notion of 'development' was an overt reference to the Marcoses emphasis on infrastructural projects to raise the Philippines out of its Third World status. All the meanwhile, 'development' also signalled a formal artistic property, describing the making of fast, often ephemeral projects that could change form and context. As noted by art historian Patrick Flores (2017b), 'developmental' thus traversed the line between what was deemed politically acceptable and experimentally feasible, reflecting a shared position that a number of artists and curators working with Conceptual Art came to adopt during the 1970s. While Medalla would not have been able to foresee the extent to which such discursive productions would develop in the forthcoming decade, his unease at the growing relationship between 'experimental' art and cultural politics during the protest of 1969 pre-empted both a transition in his own art, and a growing debate within Philippine art scholarship.

FROM CONCEPTUAL ART TO 'PARTICIPATION-PRODUCTION'

In the aftermath of his protest, Medalla fled the Philippines, not to return again until the mid-1980s. Over the course of the 1970s, he made a conscious choice to distance himself from the emerging practices of Philippine Conceptualism, and what he perceived to be its strong institutional ties to institutions propped up by government. His practice became more politically engaged and discursive, inspired by both his recent experiences in the Philippines, and the rising political and leftist engagements and solidarities by artists and
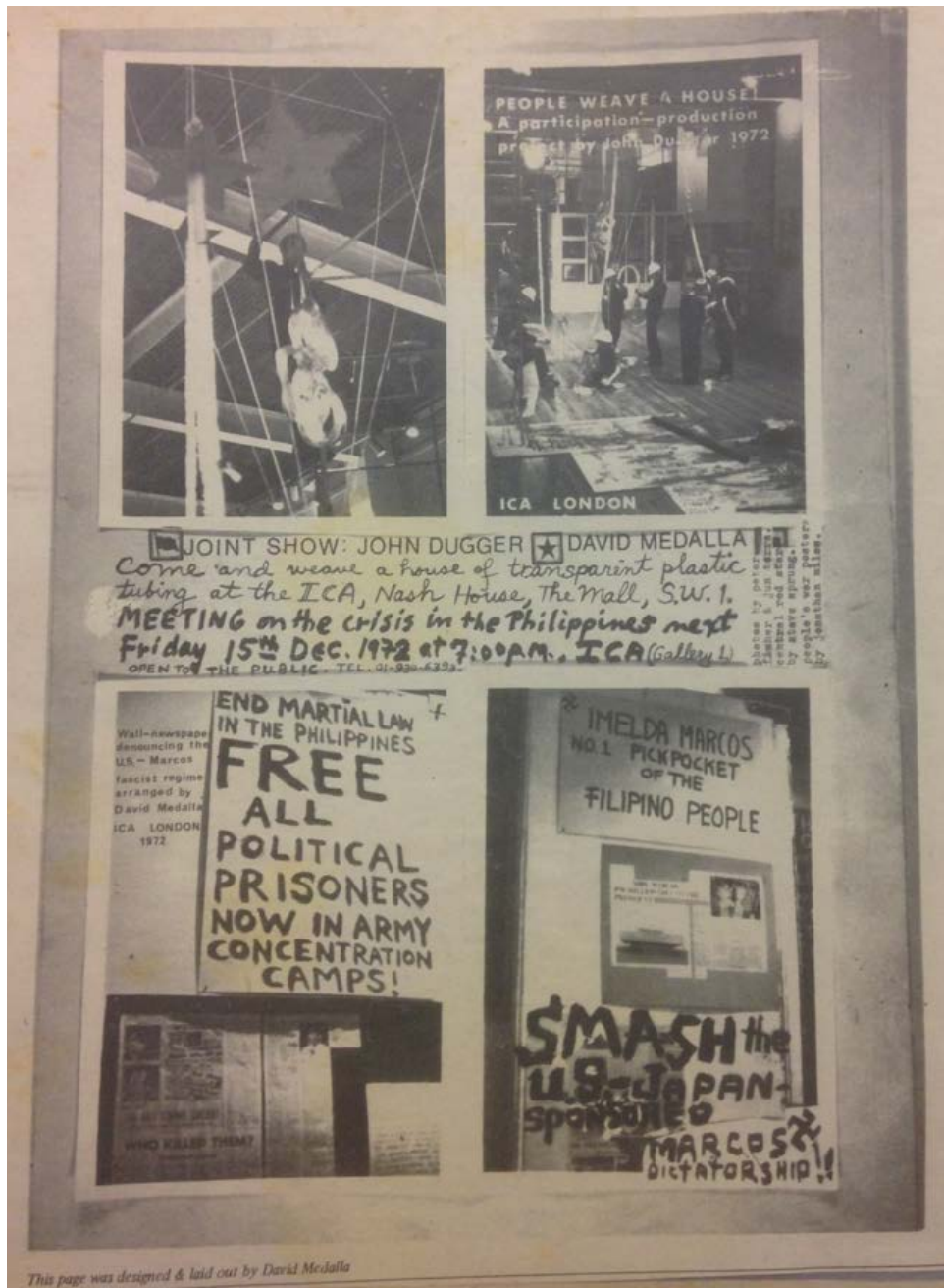
David Medalla, 'Meeting on the Crisis in the Philippines', 15 December 1972, organised as part of the installation *People Weave a House!* by John Dugger, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1972. Documentation from 'This Way Out of England: Gallery House in Retrospect', Raven Row Gallery, London, 2017. Photograph by Eva Bentcheva.

activists in Europe at that time (Bishop 2012, pp. 129–62; Walker 2002). No longer devoted to art as a purely poetic, cross-culturally referencing and creative practice, Medalla steered towards producing 'participation-production art' (Bentcheva 2016). This mode of art-making embraced collective and collaborative production — a tactic that the artist had espoused since his days with Exploding Galaxy — yet would later posit a resistance to the institutional co-opting of conceptual and performative practices. This concept is best illustrated in works such as *A Stitch in Time* (1972).

Originally conceived around the idea of a romantic exchange, this performative installation centred around an expanded stretch of cloth with an arrangement of hanging bobbins suspended above it, inviting participants to engage in a collective act of sewing.[18] This work was not only aesthetic and meditative, but also offered opportunities for conversation, exchange and reflection, which lent it an inherently discursive nature. In one of its earliest manifestations at the 'People's Participation Pavilion' (1972)[19] co-conceived with John Dugger at documenta 5, *A Stitch in Time* became a means to channel the artists' political statements, particularly with regards to their socialist leanings, and expressions of institutional critique. Envisioned as an openly accessible social space in the courtyard outside the Fridericianum, the pavilion hosted hosting gatherings, discussions and temporary interventions, including Medalla and Dugger's unfurling of a banner from the roof of the Fridericianum, which featured pictures of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao.[20] Alongside the installed works such as Medalla's *Cloud Gates: Kumbum*, a specially designed iteration of his kinetic *Bubble Machines* featuring a central pillar with a red start on top, as well as Dugger's *Perrenials*, the pavilion also presented an assortment of posters and printed materials, including an open letter by Medalla to then director of the Tate in London, Sir Norman Reid, criticising the decision not to purchase

the *Bubble Machine* in 1970.[21] Within this context, *A Stitch in Time* functioned not only as an abstract 'relational' gesture, but also as a discursive site of political and critical production. In subsequent projects, Medalla elaborated upon this model of 'participation-production art' in order to further develop overt counter-statements to cultural politics within the Philippines. For instance, working under the rubric of the 'Artists Liberation Front' (1972–4),[22] Medalla organised a discussion titled 'Public Meeting on Cultural Imperialism and the Crisis in the Philippines', condemning the onset of Martial Law in the Philippines at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London on 15 December 1972, alongside the exhibition of a participatory sculpture by Dugger, *People Weave a House!* (Medalla 1972b).

Despite his active interest in bridging experimental art and political discourses in Europe throughout the 1970s, Medalla did not partake in emerging politically engaged art in the Philippines during the 1970s. Nevertheless, the nature of his work across performance, installation, writing, debate and poster-making, as embodied in the aforementioned works, echoed a growing practice within the Philippines that has been described by art historian Alice Guillermo (2001) as 'Social Realism'. Throughout the 1970s, this formation of painters and multimedia artists made a marked return to painting practices to illustrate an often metaphoric, allegorical and satirical manner their opposition to the government and its apparatuses of control. While Medalla never officially identified with this group, his protest at the CCP and several of the works subsequently produced upon returning to Europe under the rubricof 'participation-production art' shared thematic and formal commonalities with these counter-culture activities in the Philippines. This includes a representation of the state as a force of destruction and repression, sympathy for socialist and Marxist convictions and support for the 'small against the big'

(Medalla cited in Araeen 1979). These positions were framed within a belief that the artist had the power to highlight injustices, particularly through the staging of collective actions and public enactments.

CREATIVE CROSS-POLLINATIONS BETWEEN POETICS AND POLITICS

Returning to the question of how Medalla's practices deepen our understanding of the intersectionality of Conceptual Art practices in the 1960s and 1970s, this text has argued for a reading of his works, which, on the one hand, embraced a critical stance towards the co-option of experimental practices for political ends. On the other hand, it is necessary to recognise that the artist did not abandon his commitment to poetic, ephemeral, participatory and allegorical cross-pollinations. While the changes in his practice during the 1960s and 1970s were informed by social and political developments both within Europe and the Philippines, it would be misleading to embed his work and outlook firmly within national histories.

Reviewing the artworks and statements by Medalla presented here, I would argue that a large part of the artist's effort to resist the term 'Conceptualism' was rooted in a wish to embody a position of liminality; Medalla's constant shifting across networks and definitions in Europe and the Philippines, as well as political activism and institutional critique, formed part of an underlying mission to never fully commit his artistic identity to any of these groupings. While, arguably, an impact of this liminality has been his under-recognition in the histories of Conceptual Art, both within Europe and Asia, it has also fostered a productive case study for a currently emerging line of scholarship on intersectionality between artistic movements, geographies, definitions and networks. By bridging the political/conceptual, didactic/artistic, as well as

national/international divides, Flores (1998) has argued that Medalla represents a 'missing link' within Philippine art history. Building upon this observation, this text has further aimed to widen the scope for thinking about how Medalla's practice has historically occupied a space of intersectionality by traversing not only geographies, but also challenging the art historical divisions of networks of artists practising in performative modes in Europe at the height of youth and leftist protests of the late 1960s and 1970s, and emerging discussions around the parameters of 'experimental' and 'social realist' art in the Philippines. As the rethinking of art historical categories around Conceptual Art in the Philippines currently takes shape, Medalla's art also offers a multifaceted methodology for rethinking pre-existing divisions and networks.

REFERENCES

Albano, R. 1978, *A Decade of Developmental Art*, Cultural Centre of the Philippines, Manila.

----. n.d. Alternative Spaces, *Philippine Art Supplement*, pp. 8–9.

----. 1979. 'A Decade of Developmental Art', Cultural Centre of the Philippines, January.

----. 1981, 'Developmental Art of the Philippines', *Philippines Art Supplement*, vol. 2, no. 4, July–August, pp. 15–16.

Araeen, R. 1979, 'Conversation with David Medalla', *Black Phoenix*, no. 3, pp. 10–19.

Baluyut, P. R. 2004, *Institutions and Icons of Patronage: Arts and Culture in the Philippines During the Marcos Years, 1965–1986*, University of California Press, Los Angeles.

Benitez-Johannot, P. 2012, *The Art and Life of David Medalla*, Vibal Foundation, Inc., Manila.

Bentcheva, E. 2016, 'A Stitch in Time? Situating David Medalla's 'Participation-Production Performances' between British and Philippine Performance Art History', *Contact Points*, seminar, 21 November, Tate Modern, London.

----. 2019, 'From Ephemeral Experiences to Lasting Legacies: Discourses of Experimental Art in the Philippines in the 1960s and 1970s', *Tate Papers*, no. 32, Autumn, viewed 29 November 2019, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/32/discourses-experimental-art-philippines-1960s-1970s.

Bishop, C. 2012, 'Incidental People: APG and Community Arts', in *Artificial Hells*, Verso, London, pp. 129–62.

Brett, G. 1995, *Exploding Galaxies: The Art of David Medalla*, Kala Press, London.

----. 2004, 'David Medalla: On a General Attitude and Two Works in Particular', *Carnival of Perception: Selected Writings on Art*, Iniva, London, pp. 72–89.

Brooks, R. 2000, 'An Art of Refusal', in C. Philpot and A. Tarsia (eds), *Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain, 1965–75*, Cornerhouse Publications, London.

Bunoan, R. 2015, 'Seeing and Unseeing: The Works of Roberto Chabet', in R. Bunoan (ed.), *Roberto Chabet*, King Kong Art Projects Unlimited, Manila, pp. 63–183.

Chikiamco, C. O. 2017, 'With New Eyes: The Struggle for Philippine Art, 1948–1969', in P. Benitez-Johannot (ed.), *The Life and Times of Purita Kalaw-Ledesma*, Vibal Foundation, Inc., Manila, pp. 85–121.

Cruz, J. 2005, 'Transitory Imaginings', *Pananaw: Philippine Journal of Visual Arts*, no. 5, pp. 18–29.

Flores, P. 1998, 'Missing Links, Burned Bridges: The Art of the 70s', *Pananaw: Philippine Journal of Visual Arts*, no. 2, pp. 52–63.

----. 2017a, '"Total Community Response": Performing the Avant-garde as a Democratic Gesture in Manila', *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*, vol. 1, no. 1, March, pp. 13–38.

----. 2017b, 'Raymundo Albano', *Mapping Performance Art and Conceptualism in the Philippines: Historiography*, roundtable discussion, University of the Philippines, Tate Research Centre: Asia, Manila, 22 August.

Guillermo, A. 1987, *Social Realism in the Philippines*, Asphodel, Manila.

----. 2001, *Protest/Revolutionary Art in the Philippines 1970–1990*, University of the Philippines Press, Manila.

Jones, C. A. 2017, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennals, and the Aesthetics of Experience*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Lacaba, J. F. 1969, 'If It's Wednesday This Must Be The Cultural Centre: The Art of Politics, the Politics of Art', Philippines Free Press, 20 September, viewed on 22 November 2019, http://kapetesapatalim.blogspot.co.uk/2009/10/cultural-center-of-philippines-day-one.html.

Lanot, M. 1969, 'A Centre for Whom?', *Manila Chronicle*, 16 November.

Legaspi-Ramirez, E. 2012, unpublished MA thesis, University of the Philippines, Manila.

----. 2015, 'Chabet's Conceptual Paradoxes: Reneging on the Last Word', in R. Bunoan (ed.), Roberto Chabet, King Kong Art Projects Unlimited, Manila, pp. 123–59.

----. 2017, 'Shelved Lives: The Nineteen-Seventies in the Purita Kalaw-Ledesma Trove', in P. Benitez-Johannot (ed.), *The Life and Times of Purita Kalaw-Ledesma*, Vibal Foundation, Inc., Manila, pp. 123–59.

Lippard, L. R. and Chandler, J. 1968, 'The Dematerialization of the Art Object', *Art International*, vol. 12, no. 2, February.

Mackintosh, A. 1973, 'Art for Whom? David Medalla interviewed by Alistair Mackintosh', *Art and Artists*, January.

Medalla, D. 1972a, 'Open Letter from David Medalla to Sir Norman Reid', Tate Archives, London.

----. 1972b, 'Public Meeting on Cultural Imperialism and the Crisis in the Philippines', flyer, 15 December, Tate Archives, London.

Poshyananda, A. 1999, '"Con Art" seen from the Edge: The Meaning of Conceptual Art in South and South-east Asia', in L. Camnitzer, J. Farver and R. Weiss (eds), *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exhibition catalogue, 28 April–29 August, Queens Museum of Art, New York, pp. 142–8.

Reyes, C. 1989, *Conversations on Philippine Art*, Cultural Centre of the Philippines, Manila, pp. 163–6.

Szeemann, H. 1966, 'David Medalla', *Weiss auf Weiss*, exhibition catalogue, 25 May–3 July, Kunsthalle Bern, Bern.

Taylor, B. 1977, 'David Medalla in Conversation with Brandon Taylor', *Artscribe*, no. 6, pp. 20–3.

Teh, D. 2017, 'Baramee: Thai Relational Art and the Ethics of Withdrawal', in *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, pp. 109–44.

Walker, J. A. 2002, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain*, I. B. Tauris, London.

NOTES

1 Poshyananda identified the Asian artists working abroad in the field of Conceptualism as Anish Kapoor, Rasheed Araeen, Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, Huang Yong Ping, Cai Guo-qiang, Rikrit Tiravanija, Vong Phaophanit and David Medalla. He contrasted these with artists based within Asia, naming Miyajima Tatsuo, Yanagi Yukinori, Vivan Sundaram, N. N. Rimzon, Montien Boonma, Lee Bul, Navin Rawanchaikul, Ellen Pau, Surasri Kusolwong, Kamol Phaosavasdi, Gu Dexin, Wong Hoy-cheong, Tang Da Wu and FX Harsono (Poshyananda 1999, p. 143).

2 In a conversation with Pakistan-born artist Rasheed Araeen in 1979, Medalla described his affinity to mythological, historical and scientific principles in his work, all the meanwhile refraining from voicing a firm commitment to political and social causes (Medalla cited in Araeen 1979, pp. 10–19).

3 In 1968, Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler argued 'as the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art. The studio is again becoming a study. Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete' (1968, p. 31).

4 Medalla's biography in the exhibition catalogue emphasised his study of philosophy and ancient Greek literature, alongside asserting his place as a pioneer of kinetic or 'elemental' art. The catalogue also included a poem by Medalla (previously published in *Signals Newsbulletin*, 1965), which captured the artist's desire to express the philosophical principles underlying his sculpture (Szeemann 1966).

5 Medalla was not in Europe for the exhibition as he was travelling around Africa and Asia with then collaborator John Dugger. Medalla's letter to Szeemann published within the catalogue read as follows:

A Merry Xmas and A Happy New Year
Until 6th January 1969 my address will be: David Medalla, passenger from Venice to Bombay, aboard the M/S Victoria, Lloyd Triestino, Mitchell Cotts Ltd. P.O. Box 141, Mombasa Kenya

From the 18th January 1969 my address will be c/o, the Philippine Embassy, New Delhi, India

Mr Harald Szeemann
The Kunsthalle Bern
Switzerland

Dear Mr Harald Szeemann,
Your letter was forwarded to me here in Dakar, Senegal. I am now on my way to India where I intend to live for one year (with a six-month stay, after a year, in Ceylon). In India and Ceylon, I shall do all sorts of artistic manifestations – also, I shall be writing a book on Kathakali, the great dance-drama of Kerala, South India. India will be an immense challenge – but I think it will offer me all sorts of possibilities to realise some of my large-scale environmental projects as well as contributing directly to helping solve some of the problems of the Indian peoples. Of course I would like to participate in the Anti-Form show, would it be alright if I send you from New Delhi some drawings for an environment involving sand and capillary action? Please invite also for this show a brilliant young sculptor from America John Dugger (he is travelling with me and with Trixie Stapleton and Michael Chapman two avant-garde English poets). Lygia Clark knows of John Dugger's work and a page is devoted to one of his projects in the Exploding Galaxy Report prepared by Paul Keeler. For documentation about my work write to: Guy Brett, art critic of the Times, London. Please write me immediately at the address above.
With best wishes, David Medalla

6 Medalla and Dugger left the UK in the winter of 1968, and journeyed across Africa and Asia in the spring of 1969, before arriving in the Philippines where they remained for six months until September 1969. Guy Brett (1995, p. 194) has detailed Medalla's submission as 'a small object in an envelope, a woven paraffin mantle to be sprinkled with blue pigment and set alight', which Medalla posted while en route. In a conversation with the artist, Medalla described performing a series of impromptu performances featuring found objects, poetry and dance while travelling around Africa and South Asia in the spring of 1969, and has confirmed that he posted letters and objects to Harald Szeemann while en route. Conversation with David Medalla and Adam Nankervis, April 2017, London and Berlin.

7 Caroline A. Jones has described Szeemann's cura-torial vision as inviting artists from a diverse range of backgrounds, working in a range of media. Jones sees this approach as fostering a 'theatrical platform for the experience of purely individual views' (2017, p. 177).

8 Medalla's self-proclaimed status as the founder of performance art in the Philippines came to be contested in the early 1970s by art critics such as Jolico Cuadra and Alfredo Roces (Legaspi-Ramirez 2017, pp. 123–59).

9 Responding to the criticisms on whether he could be considered a 'Filipino artist', Medalla stated that throughout his absence, he continued to be engaged in the lives and concerns of the Philippine peoples: 'I would accept that criticism against me only in the sense that I am not completely immersed in the life of the people back home. On the other hand, I am very conscious of the fact that my roots are in the Philippines. And although I have severed myself from our country in a physical way, I have never been alienated from the Philippines' (Medalla cited in Reyes 1989, p. 144).

10 An interview with art critic Cid Reyes identifies the artist's 'most active' period in the Philippines as commencing in 1955 with a solo exhibition at the artist's home studio known as 'La Cave D'Angely', followed by participating in further exhibitions at the Philippine Art Gallery in Manila and a solo exhibition in the artist's studio in Pasay City entitled 'The Blue Bamboo' (Reyes 1989, p. 143). In the 1960s, Medalla was also featured in group exhibitions such as 'Twenty Years of Philippine Art' in 1967 at the Luz Gallery.

11 The exhibition did not take place, most likely due to funding constraints (Chikiamco 2017, p. 112).

12 In an interview in 1973, Chabet commented on the significance of Medalla's practices for Philippine art, singling him out as 'the only Filipino artist who never stops experimenting. He is very, very "avant-garde" although it is possible that some of his works are quite "dated"' (Chabet cited in Reyes 1989, p. 126).

13 Chabet's understanding of 'environments' has a close ties to Allan Kaprow's definition of the term in the text 'Assemblages, Environments and Happenings' (1966) in which he defined it in terms of a fluidity between art and life, and a theatrical encounter with art.

14 During an artists' conversation sponsored by the CCP on 20 September, Medalla further elaborated his critique arguing that the CCP ought to provide 'a place for all artists – an experimental ground free from all your rules and regulations' (Baluyut 2004, p. 32 citing Lanot 1969, p. 20).

15 The Thirteen Artists Awards, an influential prize granted to pioneering young artists working with experimental media was initiated by Chabet in 1970.

16 The exhibition 'Attitude of the Mind' (CCP, 26 September–3 December 2017) curated by Dayang Yraola, examined the legacy of Maceda's writings and compositions on visual and sound art in the Philippines.

17 According to Ringo Bunoan, 'Chabet was the leader of a new generation whose works were labelled as "anti-museum" for they made use of unconventional materials that are perishable and hard to keep. Against the backdrop of Martial Law, in a venue such as the CCP, one could also surmise that Chabet's works were veiled critiques from within the institution itself' (Bunoan 2015, p. 73).

18 Medalla has described the idea for the work as arising from the gifting of a handkerchief to a lover, and later re-encountering the same handkerchief on the backpack of a passer-by in an airport terminal. *A Stitch in Time* has been restaged across a number of institutional venues and as an impromptu action, with no fixed configuration of bobbins and varying materials (Brett 2004).

19 The temporary building had two entrances, one at the front and one at the back. In order to enter, visitors needed to remove their shoes and pass through troughs of water. After passing through the troughs of water at the entrances of the pavilion, the audiences encountered a number of Dugger's sonic structures known as 'perrenials', followed by one third of the pavilion which was devoted to Medalla's work. Here, Medalla once again installed a version of *A Stitch in Time*. Interview with Dugger 2017.

20 Their decision to feature Stalin alongside other socialist figures has been criticised on the grounds of taking an uninformed and dismissive attitude towards socialist ideologies. According to John A. Walker, 'The inclusion of the dictator and mass-murderer Stalin, rather than Trotsky or Rosa Luxemburg, indicated a lack of discrimination on the part of the two artists' (2002, p. 86).

21 The inclusion of this letter in which Medalla accused the director and trustees of the Tate of holding secret meetings in which they protracted their decision on whether to purchase the *Bubble Machine*, became a source of critical reception (Medalla 1972a).

22 The Artists Liberation Front was initiated John Dugger and Medalla in 1972. The initiative comprised a loosely organised collective of individuals who shared an interest in political activism, socialist ideology and supporting solidarity amongst artists. The members attended political meetings and debates across London, which further heightened their political consciousness.

Dearly Beloved: Transitory Relations and the Queering of 'Women's Work' in David Medalla's *A Stitch in Time* (1967–72)

Sonia Boyce

Several critical accounts of *A Stitch in Time* (1967–72) by David Medalla have adopted the retelling of the mythic beginnings of the work of art as if it were an originary or primary scene, one that invokes a network of cities, countries, transnational and desiring same-sex encounters between friends, lovers and strangers. In retelling the beginnings of the artwork in an interview with Adam Nankervis, Medalla (2011) says:

> *A Stitch in Time* (…) reveals the 'atomic' nature of my artworks. In 1967 two lovers of mine came to London. One was on his way from California to India, the other was on his way back from Africa to New York. I arranged to meet them at Heathrow Airport [and] gave each one a handkerchief (one black, one white), some needles and small spools of cotton thread. I told them they could stitch anything they like on the handkerchiefs, on which I had stitched my name and a brief message of love.

Medalla (2011) goes on to say:

> One day many years later, while waiting for my flight back to England at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, I noticed a handsome young man who carried a backpack to which a column of cloth was attached (…) with many little objects (…) and all kinds of embroidered messages.

The young man said someone in Bali had given him the column of cloth and told him he could stitch anything on it. I looked at the bottom of the column of cloth and saw the black handkerchief I gave to one of my lovers with my name and message on it.

Dearly Beloved: Transitory Relations and the Queering of 'Women's Work' in David Medalla's
A Stitch in Time (1967–72) - Sonia Boyce

283

It is worth considering how the narrative acts like a genesis story of homo-social and transnational encounters: multiple lovers and a fleeting conversation, that are released from the constraints of a nationalist, heteronormative and patriarchal set of conditions, as objects and intimacies beget objects and intimacies, and exchanges take place between California and India; Africa and New York; Heathrow in London; Schiphol in Amsterdam; Bali in Indonesia.

What is striking about this originary scene is that it is marked by a single material gesture, where the embroidered handkerchief stands in for the symbolic connective tissue of a sprawling network across space and time, and an uncanny loop of intimacy and estrangement. Without saying it directly, this narrative suggests that the totemic memento — an expression of tenderness and care, is passed between transitory figures. It is even intimated that the stranger, 'a handsome young man', may have also been a love interest of a former lover for whom one love interest's personalised and intimate memento, and by extension affections, may have been traded.

In framing how one relation begets another, Medalla reveals how spatial, sexual and social attitudes were being refashioned in the 1960s. There are echoes of Marc Augé's *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Super-Modernity* (1995) with his focus on the impact of technology on our relationship to space, the opening up of the global through the development of commercial travel and the specificity — or not, of place. Augé uses as an example, airports, as having a transformative effect on the congregation and flow of people.

TOUCH, INVITATION AND ITS LIMITS

Like a hammock, *A Stitch in Time* consists of a long stretch of cloth suspended in a public place, not necessarily a gallery, with several spools of thread and needles that invite the public to stitch a small object or message of personal significance onto it. The colourful and highly textured result of the contributions builds evidence of a collective mark that challenges the dominant ideas about art's production: from a singular form of authorship to a collective form of production. The artwork is an invitation and a question — a choice between viewing at a distance or getting directly involved. Writer Guy Brett puts it succinctly when he says: 'It was easy to enter' — and here, Brett quotes from Medalla, who says, 'people can walk in and out of my situations' — 'and the invitation to sew took away all preconceptions associated with high art, yet the ambience exerted subtle psychological pressures' (1998, pp. 197–225).

The 'psychological pressures' inferred are propositions to the viewer to give something of themselves and to cross the threshold between self and the self-conscious production of an artwork in a public space. It has to be remembered that during this period an art-going public would have been conditioned to have a certain reverence towards artworks, which were generally considered beyond the reach of an audience's touch. The alternative to the invitation, or sense of pressure, depending on the viewer's inclination, was to keep one's distance in detached contemplation. Medalla called these artworks 'participation-production-propulsions', thus converting individual acts of contemplative energy into a glorious collective force, which returns us to Medalla's comments about his works being 'atomic': a singular and irreducible component that contributes to a larger system.

David Medalla, *A Stitch in Time*, 1967–2017, Arsenale Venice Biennale.
Courtesy another vacant space, Berlin. Photograph and © Adam Nankervis.

As an artwork, *A Stitch in Time* can be seen as a counter-narrative to the accelerated time and points of departure of global travel as sign-posted in Augé's Non-Places, instead Medalla asks the audience/contributors to stop, sit, give and make by hand in slow-time. What is being presented is a site, or to be more precise, a sculptural-event, through and around which friends and strangers can congregate around the act of sewing. As Medalla (2011) has noted: 'The thing I like best about this work is that whenever anyone is involved in the act of stitching, he or she is inside his or her own private space, even though the act of stitching might occur in a public space.'

A Stitch in Time has been shown several times, and as a consequence of its production and the people that decide to get involved, it changes with each iteration. Versions have been shown in places such as documenta 5 (1972) curated by Harald Szeemann in Kassel, and the Gallery House in London, in the exhibition *A Survey of the Avant-Garde in Britain* (1972) curated by Sigi Krauss and Rosetta Brooks. A slightly earlier version was shown in the much-maligned exhibition 'POPA at MOMA: Pioneers of Part-Art at the Museum of Modern Art' in Oxford, in 1971, where, as Hilary Floe has pointed out the emergent questions about a participatory practice were being tested.

In her essay 'Everything Was Getting Smashed: Three Case Studies of Play and Participation, 1965–71', Floe discusses three exhibitions where instances of chaotic 'over-participation' occurs. One of the exhibitions Floe discusses is 'POPA at MOMA: Pioneers of Part-Art' (short for Participatory Art) in which *A Stitch in Time* was displayed, and which closed almost as soon as the exhibition opened. The curators for the exhibition were keen to promote the most apposite developments in this burgeoning field and looked to the practices that had been foregrounded by Signals gallery on Wigmore Street in London, which was run by Medalla, Guy Brett,

Paul Keeler, Gustav Metzger and Marcello Salvadori (1964–6). Although Signals at the time would not have described its focus as participation art, but more aligned with kinetic art, the international range of artists exhibited in its short life – Takis, Sérgio de Camargo, Mira Schendel, Lygia Clark, Liliane Lijn, Mary Martin, Hélio Oiticica and Li Yuan-chia among many others – played an important role in defining London in the 1960s as a centre for internationally radical artistic expression.

Along with pieces by Medalla, 'POPA at MOMA' also comprised the works of Clark, Oiticica, John Dugger, Yuan-chia and Graham Stevens, with a poster that announced the exhibition's intention to break down the symbolic barrier around art objects, with a very feisty hand-written declaration on the exhibition poster by Medalla stating 'PARTicipation ART is opposed to TOTALitarian ART', which Floe (2014) surmised 'implied newfound liberation from all conventions of artistic appreciation'. She goes on to explain:

> At the opening the largely undergraduate audience apparently took such statements at their word and, buoyed by the complimentary wine and the energising effects of bouncing on Graham Steven's large inflatables, began to physically engage with works of art in ways unintended by their creators. Medalla and Dugger, who arrived at the exhibition three-quarters of an hour late, were indignant at what they saw. Medalla, a Buddhist, objected to the serving of wine at the preview and, according to the Birmingham Post, 'told the audience: "You are all Philistines. People should know how to treat works of art."'

> (…) Medalla and Dugger withdrew their works from the exhibition immediately, while Stevens pulled out the following day. Sensational headlines such as 'Art Preview Ends in Uproar' and 'Artists Call Spectators Philistines – And Quit' appeared in local and national newspapers…

The fraught relations between intention and outcome are very clear in this example and may go some way to giving credence to the proliferation of Instructional art as an important hallmark of Conceptual art as it unfolded. In fact, this tension remains a question if one is to consider the continued interest in works like *A Stitch in Time*.

Between 2016 and 2017, *A Stitch in Time* was gaining momentum as a significant artwork of the mid-twentieth century. It became a nominee for the inaugural Hepworth Prize for Sculpture in Wakefield; it was shown in the exhibition 'This Way Out of England: Gallery House in Retrospect' at Raven Row Gallery in London; and, in the Arsenale during the 57th Venice Biennale, where several people noted the prominence of individual business cards that were sewn onto the cloth.

It is, perhaps, to be expected in our neoliberal and social-media times that the devices of participatory practices, community engagement and the democratisation of art's production would bleed and be turned on their head to become an opportunity for enterprise culture to regard as another marketing platform. Enterprise culture seems to be an avaricious process of co-option that strives to gain sovereignty over anything and everything, including practices that are regarded as a radical alternative and make it capitulate to the captive demands of the market.

WHAT'S CONCEPTUAL ART GOT TO DO WITH IT?

We are all familiar with the sweeping changes that took place around the world during the 1960s. These social upheavals were exemplified by the Vietnam War, the emergence of the civil rights movement and Stonewall protests, widespread national liberation struggles opposing colonial rule and the advocacy of women's rights through the growing feminist movement. There

was also a defining break made from the dominant attitude towards art. Shifts were occurring from the New Sculpture of the post-war period, most notably turning away from artists like Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, who art historian Andrew Causey suggests maintained a 'tightly guarded boundary between art and life' (1998, p. 256). John A. Walker, in his book *Art Since Pop* gives an account of the material and conceptual new ground that was being forged by artists in Britain, when he says: 'Sculptors have traditionally favoured hard, durable materials in order to create rigid objects that remain constant in form. However, no sooner had Minimal art established itself publicly that a different attitude to form and a more catholic approach to materials was manifested' (1975, p. 32).

Instead, a formlessness emerged that searched for a non-rigid and less formulaic set of conditions away from the autonomy of art, to its context, or from art's formalist essence, to its spectorial effect. This move towards greater social awareness was sweeping away the old guard as articulated in Lucy R. Lippard's *Six Years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (1973). Lippard remarks that a radical emergent group of Conceptual artists were keen to 'escape the frame-and-pedestal syndrome in which art found itself' (1973, p. viii).

The line-up of key figures inducted into our collective understanding as bona fide Conceptual artists appears quite certain. At the top of the list of major players are artists and collectives like Joseph Kosuth, Art & Language, Piero Manzoni, Joseph Beuys, Hans Haacke, Yoko Ono, Hanne Darboven and Sol LeWitt. The often-rehearsed canonisation process, it would seem, leaves little room for revision on the one hand, or interrogation on the other.

In her introductory essay to the exhibition catalogue *Power to the People: Contemporary Conceptualism and the Object in Art* (2011), Hannah Mathews outlines six key tropes of Conceptual art: 1) that it is often language-based; 2) images are often black and white, and print-based; 3) the use of lo-fi technologies; 4) the works are executed via instruction; 5) it is experiential; and, 6) it often exists outside of the gallery context, questioning the nature of art and how we experience it. By this account, *A Stitch in Time* could be seen as employing at least three or four of these strategies. Yet, Medalla would seem to occupy a nebulous position within the story of Conceptual art as it has been told.

It is often forgotten or downplayed that Medalla was at the forefront of this emerging trend. He was one of the artists invited to take part in the landmark exhibition 'Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information)', curated by Harald Szeemann in Bern in 1969. The actual details of his contribution to the exhibition seem difficult to trace. There is a suggestion that he sent some items via the post to be displayed in a vitrine as part of the 'Information' section, although the inventory of items is unclear. Medalla's entry in the exhibition catalogue consists of a hand-written letter to Szeemann, denoting what had become his trade-mark journeying from Venice to Bombay; Mombasa in Kenya; the Philippines Embassy in New Delhi; Dakar in Senegal; Kerala in South India; Ceylon, as well as his ongoing collaborations with artists and writers: John Dugger from the United States; and Guy Brett in London (1969, p. 105).

Why has it been so easy to displace him from this genealogy? If accounts framed by the recent Tate Britain exhibition in 2016, 'Conceptual Art in Britain, 1964–1979' is anything to go by, where Medalla was quite obviously overlooked. In her essay 'An Art of

Refusal' for the exhibition catalogue *Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965–75*, Rosetta Brooks makes a challenging statement when she says: 'It could be argued that when the art world attempted to dump Gustav Metzger, John Latham and David Medalla at the end of the 60s, they buried the existential roots of Conceptual art in Britain' (2000, p. 32). Let's also not forget the impact of Feminist art practices and critiques, which was a key ingredient of the sweeping changes taking place in the 1960s.

BETWEEN THE BODY AND THE OBJECT

I have been thinking about a work by Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece* first performed in Kyoto in 1964, and then in New York and London. While pointing to a more aggressive message than *A Stitch in Time*, I have been drawing connections between the two works. In *Cut Piece*, the artist sat alone on a stage dressed in her best suit with a pair of scissors in front of her. The audience were told that they could take turns approaching her and use the scissors to cut off a small piece of her clothing, which was theirs to keep.

Cloth-cutting and stitching, the private and the public, as well as the boundaries between the individual and the collective, are what partially connects these two artworks. Remarkably, in the critical reception of *A Stitch in Time*, little has been said about the employ-ment of needlecraft as its basis – a practice that was once considered 'women's work'. Which begs the question: to what extent is *A Stitch in Time* in dialogue with Feminist and Conceptual art critiques of the hierarchical values within art?

Roszika Parker, in her highly influential book *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984) chronicles the devalued histories of women's involvement in needlecraft via mending, as

Dearly Beloved: Transitory Relations and the Queering of 'Women's Work' in David Medalla's *A Stitch in Time* (1967–72) - Sonia Boyce

293

well as through acts of destruction and resistance. In the book, she reveals the coded framing of repressed and displaced female sexuality as a projected representational trope that situates the lone figure of a mainly white middle-class female – a feminine ideal – waiting at home, presumably for her husband, quietly engrossed in her domestic activities of cultured embroidery. Parker notes the historical division between the arts, where fine arts are pitched against craft as a major factor in the marginalisation of women's creative expression.

I am not suggesting that *A Stitch in Time* is a Feminist artwork – I am wary of making such claims after some feminist criticisms of artists like Mike Kelley who have been chastised for appropriating radical Feminist art strategies that have recouped methods like stitching and knitting as part of its critical armoury. However, Feminist art discourses have inevitably brought into sharp focus the aligning of gender in relation to con- temporary visual arts practices. So much so, that several recent exhibitions like 'Boys Who Sew' held at the Crafts Council in London (2004) and 'Pricked: Extreme Embroidery' held at the Museum of Art and Design in New York (2007) have sought to challenge gender expectations in a bid to change societal norms.

In reviewing 'Pricked: Extreme Embroidery', Karen Rosenberg noted: 'In the 70s artists who swapped their paint brushes for a needle and thread were making a feminist statement. Today, as both men and women fill galleries with crocheted sculpture and stitched canvas, the gesture isn't quite so specific' (2007). It is only in recent years that audiences for contemporary art have become accustomed to the protocols and invitation to get actively involved in artworks by entering installa- tions, touching objects and performing the work of art. When, in 1965, the team at Signals invited Lygia Clark to exhibit, thus introducing her work to a London audience, Medalla continued a dialogue with a kindred spirit who

was also concerned with the liberating possibilities of group encounters as art.

In her essay 'Play, Ritual and Politics: Transitional Art- works in the 1960s', Anna Dezeuze (2010, p. 32) writes:
> In their shared interest in (...) human engagement with the world of things, [Lygia] Clark, [Hélio] Oiticica, [Yoko] Ono and [Bertolt] Brecht created works that set up a new space of 'in-between-ness' – between subject and object, mind and matter, inside and out- side. This in-between-ness, I would argue, can be usefully compared to the 'intermediate area of experience', that was delineated by British psycho- analyst Donald W. Winnicot in his notion of the 'transitional object'. Winnicot explained how a favourite toy, blanket or other object can play an important role in the process through which infants and small children gradually learn to differentiate themselves from their mother's bodies, and to perceive themselves as separate human beings.

One can easily align *A Stitch in Time* with this scenario of 'in-between-ness' and the meanings to be drawn from connected bodies and things: of the stitcher, the cloth, the message, and, its intended recipient, or indeed, through other works like Exploding Galaxies (1967–8), a collective of artists, musicians, poets and dancers who carried creative expression into new territories. Jill Drower in her book *99 Balls Pond Road: The Story of the Exploding Galaxy* (2014) chronicles the collective and its protagonists who lived together as a community and defied the boundaries between the practices of art and life.

However, there is possibly a different path to take from the adult-child power relations indicative of transitional object-relations theory that Dezeuze (2010, p. 32) outlines:
> The transitional object exists in an 'intermediate' area because it is perceived by the child simultaneously

as two contradictory experiences. On the one hand, the transitional object appears to be totally controlled by the child, as in the infant's experience of being able to 'possess' and become at one with the mother's breast when it cries out to be fed. On the other hand, it exists in itself, separately from the child who chose it, just like the mother who is gradually perceived as a different (and sometimes absent) person.

What Dezeuze argues is how these artists shift the focus from works of art as commodities, recognising that objects and subject-object relations have the potential for social transformation, while underscoring an inter-dependency between self, other and the object as a replacement or intermediary device.

I would like to offer another reading where transitory relations, and by that, I mean temporary exchanges between people and objects in *A Stitch in Time*, has a different register to transitional object-relations. Whilst still bearing an emotional connection or expressing a personal situation through the stitching of personal messages, transitory relations are shifted from the recriminations projected onto the mother's body for being either a 'good enough mother' or a 'bad mother': the figure who has neglected the child and is, thus, absent.

There is a different kind of 'abandonment' issue from the mother-child scenario so favoured within psycho-analytic theory, because an ambivalence prevails in *A Stitch in Time* that is both festive and throw-away, that is hopeful in its poly-vocal accumulations and at the same time melancholic. I go back to the original story of Medalla's messages of love, intimacy and care. There must be an element of sadness that an item that was quite personal, and maybe treasured, had been traded. Also, that the future life of that handkerchief (and those interpersonal connections) — its status, becomes uncertain.

By departing from the relational debates that are anchored on the mother's body, *A Stitch in Time* opens up other possibilities. It revels in the coexistence of different cultural signs and meanings; its 'origins' narrative validates homo-social and transnational spaces and offers a gender-contested context — eschewing sewing as a gender-specific activity. Instead, the work of art becomes an opening for potentially subversive encounters.

REFERENCES

Brett, G. 1998, 'Life Strategies: Overview and Selection. Buenos Aires | London | Rio de Janeiro | Santiago de Chile, 1960-1980', in P. Schimmel (ed.), *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*, Thames and Hudson, London.

Brooks, R. 2000, 'An Art of Refusal', in C. Phillpot and A. Tarsia (eds), *Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965–75*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London.

Causey, A. 1998, *Sculpture Since 1945*, Oxford History of Art, Oxford.

Dezeuze, A. 2010, 'Play, Ritual and Politics: Transitional Artworks in the 1960s', in A. Dezeuze (ed.), *The 'do-it-yourself' artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Floe, H. 2014, '"Everything Was Getting Smashed": Three Case Studies of Play and Participation, 1965–71', *Tate Papers*, no. 22, Autumn, viewed 26 March 2017, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/22/everything-was-getting-smashed- three-case-studies-of-play-and-participation-1965-71.

Lippard, L. R. 1973, *Six Years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California Press, Los Angeles.

Medalla, D. 2011, 'A Stitch in Time, Conversations', *Mousse*, vol. 29, viewed 12 April 2017, http://moussemagazine.it/david-medalla-adam-nankervis-2011/.

Rosenberg, K. 2007, 'Needling More Than the Feminist Consciousness', art review, *New York Times*, 28 December, viewed 27 November 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/28/arts/design/28embr.html.

Szeemann, H. ed. 1969, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form (Works—Concepts—Processes—Situations—Information)*, exhibition catalogue, 22 March–27 April, Bern.

Walker, J. A. 1975, *Art Since Pop*, Dolphin Art Books, Thames and Hudson, London.

David Medalla and Li Yuan-chia:
Conceptual Projects from the 1960s to 1970s

Wei Yu

I

David Medalla was among those to introduce Li Yuan-chia to the London art scene in the late 1960s. Their shared interest in Abstract Expressionism before arriving in Britain would later be found in their mutual challenging of the rigid, inflexible and closed framework of art. Participation and its democratic implications became increasingly prominent in their work, related to their other cultural practices in the coming years with publications, artists collectives and running art spaces.

Medalla's and Li's practices are entangled with British, post-war avant-garde and Black Arts Movement discourses: they were both included in 'The Other Story', the seminal London exhibition curated by Rasheed Araeen in 1989. This was long after Li moved to Cumbria in Northern England in 1968, away from the London-centred art world. 'The Other Story', then, the last major exhibition Li participated in before he died in 1994, was almost a rediscovery of the artist. African, Asian and Afro-Caribbean artists are collectively discussed under the umbrella term 'black artists', allying together as representative of 'blackness'. Here non-Western or non-European art was strategically foregrounded as a way to dispute, and to enrich, the idea of 'Britishness'. However, these two East Asian artists also challenged the stereotyped ethnic labels and complicated the discourse of 'black arts'.

II

Li Yuan-chia was born in Guanxi Province, China, in 1929. After the Second World War, he moved to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek's government and lived in Taipei where he received art training and started his career.

He was the founding member of Ton-Fan, one of the two leading groups of avant-garde art in Taiwan, along with Fifth Moon Group, during the late 1950s and the 1960s. Belonging to the first generation of Chinese abstract artists in Taiwan, Li and his contemporaries made varied attempts to modernise Chinese art. The integration of Eastern philosophy, the brushstrokes of Chinese ink painting and Western abstract art were among the most distinctive features of their work.

Both groups' members had attended private lectures held by the artist, Li Chung-shan, in his studio and coffee house in Taipei previously. As the first artist to introduce the ideas of Western abstract art to the island, Li Chung-shan could only distribute his idea through private meetings outside the institution of academic art where figurative art remained dominant. Retrospectively, that spirit of self-organisation might have influenced Li Yuan-chia's ten-year project, the LYC Museum and Art Gallery, in later years.

The 1950s also marked the starting-point of Medalla's art career. He started to make paintings from 1954–7 when he attended Columbia University as a special student, and had his first solo show soon after returning to the Philippines. His earliest paintings are mainly shaped by gestural forms with some primitive appearance, combining figurative motifs with calligraphic symbols. The art critic Guy Brett sees their most striking feature as, 'expressionist dynamics of the gesture and rude figuration' (1995, p. 168). In these paintings, Medalla usually mixed paint with sand to create a rough surface, incorporated with found objects on the canvas such as animal bones, leaves, bird feathers, etc. By challenging the traditional manner of painting adopted by most Filipino artists at that time, these works were considered highly avant-garde when they appeared in the Philippines. This also made Medalla the first artist in the Philippines to respond to Abstract Expressionism (Brett 1995, p. 168).

The Abstract Expressionist vocabularies in the works of Li and Medalla were extended or changed after they left their respective home countries. Li moved to Europe in 1963 with other Ton-Fan members, first staying in Milan and then Bologna, where he cofounded the art group Punto. During this period he produced a great number of minimalist works using ink and paper, moving from an abstract calligraphic line to the motif of the 'point'.

In Bologna, Li stayed at the studio of furniture designer Dino Gavina where he began to use easily found materials like wood and metal sheets to make reliefs – mostly pieced together objects with a hard-edged geometry. Traditional painting frames were seemingly absorbed into the artworks to become part of their geometric design. This induces the viewer to notice that these objects when mounted on the wall form relationships with their surroundings. The works, therefore, changed from an expressive medium into a specific art object.

Medalla too moved to Europe in these years, staying in Paris and London, radically shifting his focus from painting to what he called 'biokinetics': a concept involving 'a vision of life of maximum freedom and spontaneously creativeness'. The latter's goal is to achieve what he called, 'The Astro-Acupunctured Man', whose being is so charged with love that body and spirit fused into One, 'becomes a transmitter of cosmic forces' (Iskra 1967). In December 1963, Medalla began work on the first *Smoke Machine* and the first *Bubble Machine* titled *For Smokey in Paris*, showing it first to French philosopher Gaston Bachelard and American artist Man Ray. These works reflected his earlier idea, 'to give tangible form to invisible forces… to find a model which would show the transformation of matter into energy'. Although he seemed to abandon painting, his kinetic works inherited some features of his early paintings, be it in the similar dynamics or the use of

raw materials. The unpredictable organic rhythms brought by the predictably mechanical framework made Medalla's 'machines' responses to the relationship between technology and nature.

Both 'machines' were first exhibited in 'Structures Vivantes: Mobiles, Images', Britain's first survey show of kinetic art and optical art organised by Paul Keeler and held at Redfern Gallery, London in February 1964. After the show, like-minded artists from the show formed a group. Medalla and Keeler moved to a flat in Cornwall Gardens in South Kensington, where they founded the Centre for Advanced Creative Study, with Guy Brett, Gustav Metzger and others. To distribute their ideas more widely, the centre started to publish *Signals Newsbulletin*, which was edited and designed by Medalla. Later, Signals London became the name of the group.

After they moved to a large four-storey building, Signals London opened its doors as an art space with a show-room to encourage experimentations in art. Keeler and Medalla would commission artists to make a new environmental work for each show. Soon the venue became an important hub for the emerging kinetic art and international artists in Britain at that time.

III

Medalla's first encounter with Li Yuan-chia's works was in 1965 when he saw reproductions of Li's reliefs on the invitation to a joint exhibition held in a Zurich gallery. Struck by those images, Medalla suggested Paul Keeler invite the artist to participate in Signals' summer show, 'Soundings Two' featured in the summer issue of *Signals Newsbulletin*. That was the first time Li's works were showcased in Britain. Medalla praised Li's reliefs featured in the show as 'the "statements" of a wonderful conception of space: a resonant and cosmic space which owes nothing to perspective-recession or

surface-configuration'. In a sense, the tendency of conceptualisation had emerged in those works as Li assigned symbolic values precisely to each colour: black as 'origin and end', red as 'blood and life', gold as 'nobility' and white as 'purity' (Medalla 1966).

A year later, Li showcased his works again at Signals in a Punto group show, titled '3 + 1', with Hsiao Chin, Ho Kan and Italian artist Pia Pizzo. The small exhibition attracted some attention from the English art scene since it was the country's first exhibition of Chinese artists residing in Europe. Described by the media as 'the first abstract artists from Red China', three Chinese/Taiwanese artists' backgrounds were specifically highlighted (Blakeston 1966). Li was commissioned to produce a large relief; it consists of five panels occupying an entire wall, each with one or two points on its surface like a folding book. In a way, Li drew the whole venue into the expanding frame of the work. Looking at this piece, a viewer would not only focus on the points, but the emptiness that surrounds them. This work was almost the first time Li's art expanded from specific object to environment.

'3 + 1' was a point of departure for Li. His art became increasingly environmental, interactive and participatory. There was a spatial expansion in his work, similar to Medalla's, from painting to art object and then, environment. However, what defines this expanding field has always been the 'points'.

After '3 + 1' Li did not return to Italy with the other artists but stayed in London. He left most of his Punto period works to Gavina's family. His first solo exhibition, 'Cosmic Point', was held at Signals a year later. Medalla contributed a text to the catalogue titled, 'Two Poems for Li Yuan-chia', in which the opening phrase in every paragraph 'the galaxy exploded' most grabs attention. It was no coincidence that the same year saw Medalla initiate the Exploding Galaxy, an art commune of artists,

dancers, musicians and poets. Although this short-lived collective project dismantled at the end of 1968 before Medalla and John Dugger left for a tour of Africa and Asia, it showed Medalla's ambition to explore inter-disciplinary art and the potentials of self-organisation. Li was not a member but occasionally joined the Galaxy's gatherings and parties. This was when Li first obtained a camera and started to take photographs, a medium which played a significant role in his later works. His relationship to the Galaxy was hinted at by his photo-graphs documenting the group's events (Drower 2019).

IV

When Li had his solo show, 'Cosmic Multiples', held at Lisson Gallery in 1968, he collaborated with the gallery to produce his first multiple, *Cosmagnetic Relief*. At about the same time, Takis also made his first multiple, called *Signal* (1968). Their multiples were regarded by the media as the first two examples of this form of work in Britain (Blakeston 1968). Seeing multiple as 'a form of the concept', Medalla similarly embraced the trend of the multiple and participated in the exhibition 'New Multiple Art' (1970–1) at Whitechapel Art Gallery, curated by Biddy Peppin and Hugh Shaw.

Concerning price, mass production and the interactive quality, Li's *Cosmagnetic* multiples functioned more like toys than artworks, something of which the artist was certainly aware. In an interview in the same year of making the work, Li said his next would centre on the idea of 'toy art' (Brett & Sawyer 2000, p. 147). Toy art was not necessarily meant for children, but emphasised the kinetic quality of toys, and would allow viewers to freely manipulate the work. In 1971, Li participated in 'Play Orbit' organised by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, which brought together artworks geared towards children. Li contributed a suspended metal disc that included magnets with lettering viewers can rearrange to make different meanings.

Some of Li's works were small interactive objects designed to have a closer relationship with the audience suggesting not only interactivity but intimacy between audience and works. Li's toy-like interactive objects resonated with the 'Fluxkits' being made by Fluxus artists, in which experiences involving sight, hearing, touch or smell created by objects is essential. In these works the object no longer represents the concept but *is* the concept *per se*. With the emphasis on the objecthood, Fluxus artists formed 'concept art', which differed from the dematerialisation of 'conceptual art', coined by artist Henry Flynt in 1961 to describe Fluxus (Lippard [1973] 1997; Young 1963).

Li and Medalla's kinetic art-based experiments between the late 1960s and the early 1970s also include partici-pation, as exemplified by Li's interactive magnetic 'points' and Medalla's *A Stitch in Time* (1968–present), a series inviting the audience to immerse themselves in the act of stitching. These works are some of the earliest examples of participatory art in Britain. In 1971, both artists joined the show, 'Popa At MoMA: Pioneers of Part-Art' at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, along with Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, John Dugger and Graham Stevens. The show, which was regarded by the media as 'the first of its kind to be staged in this country', caused a sensation by directly challenging the will of both artists and viewers. On the night of the opening preview, however, Medalla and Dugger, 'upset with the behaviours of the opening night crowd', later decided to withdraw from the exhibition as their protest (Hutton 1971).

Li and Medalla's art during this period suggested a radical shift from Abstract Expressionism to Concep-tualism. In Abstract Expressionist paintings, the artist's subjectivity is justified by the result of the painterly surface. Kinetic art, however, displays the process of artistic production by inviting the audience to witness, or participate in, the making. The task of creating

experiences is no longer dominated by an artist, but a system, or a set of relationships. The role of an artist is demystified in a way. The artwork is no longer a product but a catalyst. Not only does the artistic language change, but so too the role of the artist. This reflexive potential suggests a link between kinetic art and Conceptualism. Ultimately, the 'democratic state' occupied the very core of Li's and Medalla's experiments. From this perspective, we can also rethink the role of both artists, recognising them as cultural practitioners in a broader sense. Li's LYC Museum and Art Gallery (1972–83) is a perfect example of the democratic state of creative activity.

In the winter of 1968, Li was invited by his friend Nick Sawyer to Cumbria in Northern England for Christmas, which encouraged him to settle down there. He bought a farmhouse from painter Winnifred Nicholson and spent three years on renovations and additions – all work he did by himself. The result was the LYC Museum and Art Gallery, an art centre with a library, studio, darkroom, theatre and children's Art Room, which opened its doors in 1972. The museum held more than 200 events and presented the work of 330 artists. On most weekends four exhibitions were running. Li also established a printing house, LYC Press, and published 115 catalogues, all 14-square centimetres, the signature format of the museum's publications.

The Art Room was a place where children could play with 'toy art' and make their own works freely. According to some participants who went on to become artists, photographers and designers, they remember the Art Room for significant experiences that motivated them to study art. This kind of empowerment fundamental to the spirit of the museum resonated perfectly with the democratic state of Li's works.

V

From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, the work of David Medalla and Li Yuan-chia moved from having a fixed framework to an open system. Interactivity, participation and democracy became increasingly prominent in their development, signalling the emergence of social engagement in their art and cultural practices. This shift was exemplified by their various experiments, such as Medalla's formless *Bubble Machine* and participatory work, *A Stitch in Time*, Li's interactive 'cosmic points' and 'toy art'. They assimilated, changed or challenged the tradition of Western modernism with their conceptual approach. Buoyed by their artistic experimentations, their social role also changed: from creators to cultural practitioners.

REFERENCES

Blakeston, O. 1966, 'Around the Galleries with Oswell Blakeston', *What's On In London*, 22 April.

----. 1968, 'Around Some New Shows with Oswell Blakeston.' *What's On In London*, 16 February.

Brett, G. 1995, *Exploding Galaxies: The Art of David Medalla*, Kala Press, London.

Brett, G. and Sawyer, N. 2000, *Li Yuan-Chia: Tell Me What Is Not yet Said*, INIVA Institute of International Visual Arts, London.

Drower, J. 2014, *99 Balls Pond Road: The Story of the Exploding Galaxy*, Scrudge Books, London.

Hutton, A. 1971, Artists Call Spectators Philistines – And Quit, *Oxford Mail*, 15 February.

Iskra, I. 1967, 'A Note On David Medalla', exhibition invitation card, Indica Gallery, London.

Lippard, L. R. 1997, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. University of California Press, Berkeley, original work published 1973.

Medalla, D. 1966, '3 + 1 = Pia Pizzo, Ho Kan, Hsiao Chin, Li Yuan-Chia', exhibition catalogue, 5 April–14 May, Signals London.

Young, La M. 1963, *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low, New York.

V

CONCEPTUALISM AND INTERNATIONAL FRAMINGS

V

Introduction
Conceptualism
and International
Framings

susan pui san lok

Shifting the conjuncture of terms and axes or approaches for rethinking and reworking through 'conceptualism', we move from intersectional readings to international framings — not to propose an either/or methodological framework, but to overlay our framing questions. As will already be evident from the preceding sections, these essays do not purport to offer answers or methods, but rather, tentatively and speculatively, seek to explore various possible readings and rereadings of familiar and not-so-familiar works, practices and histories. With intersectionality in mind, we now turn to question the ways in which the 'international' has been constituted with, through or without certain artists. One of the questions that we are asked (and indeed, ask ourselves) is: What is it that we're trying to do here? Are we trying to expand existing canons and classifications? Are we trying to make visible things that are already there? Both visibility and expansion have been and continue to be key in the work of Rasheed Araeen, whose presence at the conference and practice as an artist, writer and publisher (represented in his retrospective at the Van Abbemuseum), offer reminders of a range of long and critical lenses through which we may view our own endeavours. However, while we may be doing a bit of both — expanding and making visible — we are also, paradoxically, seeking to dismantle and transform what we know and what we do.

The four essays by renowned art historians in this section will help us to navigate and complicate this conjunctural, palimpsestic, contradictory and unstable terrain, where modernism, conceptualism, intersectionality and internationalism meet in unexpected moments and places. They invite us to remember that histories, geographies and politics are entangled, unevenly experienced and unequally remembered.

Yu Wei revisits David Medalla's *A Stitch in Time* (1972) and Li Yuan-chia's interactive 'cosmic points' (1968) as examples of their simultaneous assimilation and challenge to Western modernism, within and through their conceptualism. Yu suggests that the increasingly important idea of participation in both Medalla's and Li's practice, reflects the sociopolitical upheavals of the time and their democratic implications, signalled in and through the potentiality of social engagement in their art. Alice Correia posits 'the potentialities of photography' in the work of Mohini Chandra and Allan deSouza, to question the place of the migrant in relation to transnational borders, spaces of transit and the limits of what might be identified as 'British Art'. Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes argues that behind the Iron Curtain, the conceptual impetus served as strategy for bypassing censorship, with churches functioning as rare spaces for relatively free speech, art production and dissemination, and oppositional, interdisciplinary group-formation. Juan Albarrán examines the long-time marginalisation of Spanish conceptualism and its subsequent institutional recuperation into narratives of the contemporary over the last two decades, including at Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Barcelona and Museo Nacional Centro de Reina Sofía in Madrid. Focusing on the relationship between Spain and Latin America and drawing on Spanish theorist Simón Marchán Fiz's notion of 'ideological conceptualism' to allude to Spanish and Argentinian politicised practices, Albarrán discusses the insertion of Spanish (conceptual) art into discourses of the Global (South), and asks us to reconsider the political motivations of museums as collections change.

Allan deSouza and Mohini Chandra: Conceptual Photography, Migrations and the Articulation of South Asian Identities

Alice Correia

The artists Allan deSouza and Mohini Chandra both work from the fluid site of the global South Asian diaspora. In their respective photographic practices, they regularly address themes of belonging and the contradictions and difficulties of finding and securing a place in the world from the position of a migrant outsider. More specifically, they are both deeply imbricated in debates regarding the nature of diasporic Indianness, and their works raise questions about the place of diasporas within the seemingly narrowing definitions of twenty-first-century national identities in the United Kingdom and United States.

That they are able to address such issues is achieved through their nuanced approaches to both the form and content of their work, wherein conceptualist photographic strategies and an engagement with identity politics act concomitantly in order to convey multiple aesthetic and sociopolitical concerns. Undertaking a close reading of two recent bodies of work, deSouza's *The World Series* (2010–11) and Chandra's *Plane Views* (2012), what becomes evident are the ways in which their application of Conceptual photographic forms facilitates a critical analysis of migration, broadly defined. It is the contention here that, in paying close attention to the vicissitudes of migration as not simply a formative experience, but an unremitting one, deSouza and Chandra each present the diasporic condition as an ontological one: a state of being continuously en route, in-between or in transit.

Art historical approaches to Conceptual photography have, in the main, concentrated on a limited historical timeframe during the 1960s and '70s, and have primarily focused on a distinct group of male North America-based artists, including Jeff Wall, Ed Ruscha and Joseph Kosuth (Soutter 1999, p. 8; Edwards 2004; Iversen & Diarmuid 2010, pp. 134–80). If, as Lucy Soutter (1999, p. 8) has argued, this group of artists refused 'to take photography seriously on its own terms', regarding the medium as a mode for conveying 'brute information or uninflected documentation', they nonetheless took photography in new directions, breaking out of Modernism's confines. As Urs Stahel (2004, p. 27) has noted, in its rejection of the Modernist fetishisation of the singular, hand-made art object, Conceptual art, narrowly defined, moved away from the notion of the 'auratic' and 'emblematic' in favour of thinking about photographic images as working in relation – whether that relation was to other images or textual annotations. The serial or sequential presentation of multiple photographs marked a move towards the understanding of 'art as a medium of research' (Stahel, p. 27), while a growing appreciation of the vernacular or quotidian street scene as a ready-made art image, and, following Marcel Duchamp, the presentation of the found photograph as a readymade art object, all expanded the terms by which photography defined itself (Edwards 2004, p. 143).

The strategies of the serial and the readymade, initiated in the '60s, have been deployed by deSouza and Chandra in various bodies of work. But unlike their Conceptual forbears who asserted theirs as a neutral, detached photography, deSouza and Chandra do not seek to jettison cultural context from their application of conceptualist forms (Bann 1999). Instead, their work reflects the evolution of Conceptual art to Conceptualism, where the latter term describes artworks that use conceptual strategies but which also 'function as an act of political engagement' (Camnitzer, Farver & Weiss

1999, p. ix). Using conceptual photography, they advance institutional critique informed by identity politics, enabling an address to the structures and spaces of power through which the diasporic subject navigates. To follow Okwui Enwezor, their work 'acts like, looks like, and resembles those practices' of Conceptual art, but refuses to adopt its claim to objectivity and a detached, disinterested stance.

Undertaking a critical analysis of deSouza and Chandra's work necessarily demands a reflexive appreciation of how (conceptualist) art by artists of colour has been framed within art historical discourse. Considering the historiography of Black British art history in which both deSouza and Chandra are positioned, Kobena Mercer has written of the 'chaos and confusion as to what the primary object of attention actually is. Is it the background information about the artist's cultural identity, or the foreground matter of the aesthetic work performed by the object itself?' (2005, p. 52). As Mercer (2005, p. 55) went on to argue, the biographical should lead to an exploration of 'the deeper structures of diaspora subjectivity that it opens onto', so that while an artists' subjective experience may have motivated a particular strand of artistic enquiry, this is not to say that the resultant artwork is wholly, or even partly, auto-biographical. Rather than reducing discussion of an artwork to an exposition of an artists' racial or ethnic identity, a productive balance must be found in order to consider those contextual factors in dialogue with the formal strategies and material qualities of the art object. However, as Nizan Shaked (2017, p. 28) has observed, critical historiography of Conceptual art has 'considered conceptualism and art concerned with identity as two separate developments'. How then, does one approach the work of artists whose practices are motivated by their personal experience of diaspora, and which engages with broader (collective) concerns regarding identity politics, while employing conceptual photographic forms and strategies? In short, the artists

under consideration here reject any division between their formal concerns and critical intent, and audiences (including art critics, curators and historians), are beholden to be similarly attentive to the complex syntheses of ideas and forms in operation.

Since the 1990s both deSouza and Chandra have engaged with the potentialities of photographic practices developed in the 1960s and '70s to pose questions about living in, or with, a perpetual transitory sense, or what might simply be called a diasporic sensibility. As someone of Goan heritage, born in Kenya, raised in London, and who now lives in the US, deSouza cannot, as Margo Machida has noted, 'claim first-hand, "authentic" knowledge of India', and yet he is 'implicated in the discourses of Indianness' due to his position within the South Asian diaspora (2008, p. 79). Likewise, Chandra's ancestors originated from India, but her immediate family came from Fiji, while she was born in Britain and raised in Australia. She has written about her family's history as indentured labourers from India, who were transported by the British to Fiji to work in the sugar plantations in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Chandra 2000). Scarce and incomplete records mean that it is unlikely that Chandra will ever know where in India her family were from, so the continent, as Salman Rushdie (1992, pp. 9–21) has so eloquently described, exists as an 'imaginary homeland'.

However, created by numerous historical, often coercive dispersals and ejections, diasporic South Asian identities cannot be 'conceived in terms of a single homeland' (Machida 2008, p. 77). Although an imaginary India may be a shared point of familial origin, arguably, what links deSouza and Chandra, and a heterogeneous South Asian diaspora more generally, are shared experiences of colonial and post-independence displacement, migration and racism; experiences informed by multiple dispersed geographies, cultures

and histories. As such, these artists respectively bring to their work a critical understanding of how personal identities are imbricated within larger historical and contemporary discourses of migration. Formed at the interstices, the in-between, their work seems to convey the experience of migration not as a journey with a start and end point, but an ontological state of being. As W. J. T. Mitchell has observed: 'The most salient fact about migration in our time is the way it has become, not a transitional passage from one place to another, but a permanent condition in which people may live out their lives in a limbo' (2011, p. 63).
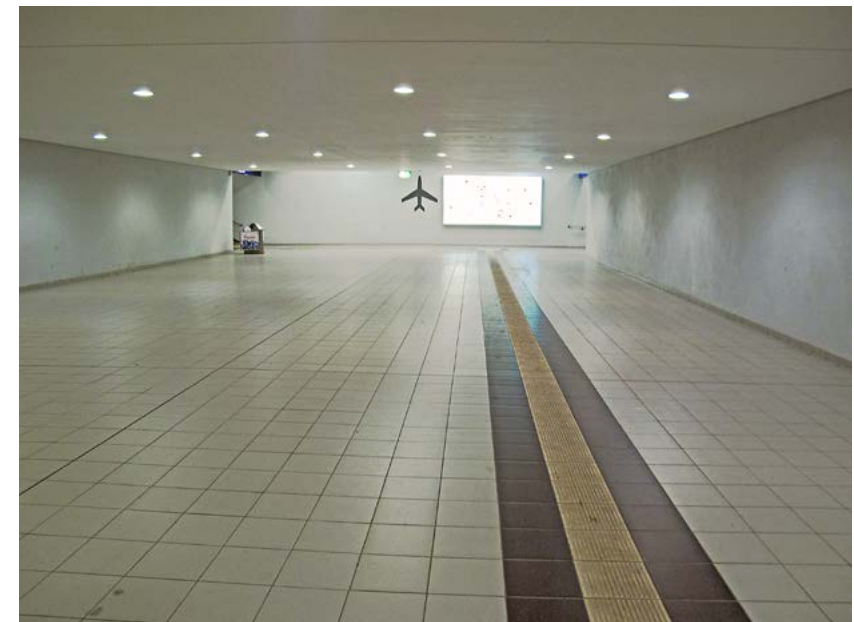
Fig. 1 Allan deSouza, *Terminal*, from *The World Series*, 2010–11. C-print, 30.48 x 40.64 cm © the artist.

Working with an expanded definition of the ready-made, and regarding the everyday environment as a potential readymade image, deSouza has utilised and photographed the existing visual environment in order to prompt a renegotiation of explicit and latent signified codes embedded within, for example, street signage, advertising and the in-transit spaces of airports. deSouza's *The World Series* (fig. 1) was initially made

in response to Jacob Lawrence's epic Modernist narrative, *The Migration Series* (1940–1), which charts the mass migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North in search of a better life during the 1920s. Building on this conceit of aspirant migration, deSouza's sixty colour photographs present a collection of routes and throughways, urban intersections, street furniture, aerial views and internal rooms and corridors, locating the viewer in various banal, everyday spaces across North America, Europe and South Asia.

Although deSouza's photographs physically exist as separate prints, they are not presented in isolation. Displayed in a single line, they were conceived to be viewed collectively, with their arrangement enticing the audience into what David Campany has described as an 'active decoding of relations between the images' (2008, p. 73). Closer examination of the framing and composition of each photograph reveals that the journey does not advance along a single arc, but rather, progresses in staccato-like rhythms, with journeys taking place within journeys. Clusters of images work together to progress movement, while others hinder or abruptly bring it to a halt. In a sequence of four images navigating the spaces of an airport, *Point, Revolve, Terminal* and *Stop*, progress is made only falteringly as the repetition of vertical lines within each of the four photographs prohibiting easy lateral progression from one to the next. If these photographs of banal airport spaces present what Marc Augé (1995) and others have described as postmodern non-spaces, taking the position of the migrant provocateur, deSouza's works show these sites of mobility as inherently restrictive, and often prohibitive for non-conforming bodies. Drawing attention to the inbuilt systems of power and surveillance that organise the practices of everyday life, deSouza asserts a socio-political critique through the very quotidian nature of what is pictured.
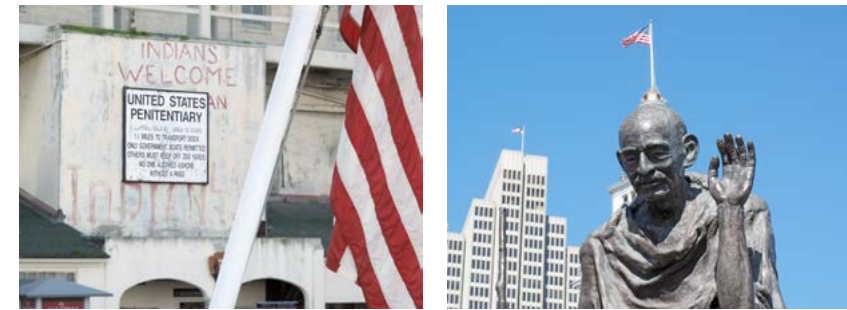
Fig. 2, 3, 4 Allan deSouza, *Indians, Mahatma* and *Welcome Back*, from *The World Series*, 2010–11. C-print, each 30.48 x 40.64 cm © the artist.

On their journey, deSouza's migrant provocateur subversively collates details. In a sequence of three images, *Indians, Mahatma* and *Welcome Back* (fig. 2, 3 and 4), Indian identity is wilfully misunderstood, translated and transformed in visual and verbal play. A statue of the Indian Independence leader Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), with his hand raised in a sign of friendly recognition, is positioned between two photograph: one records graffiti in a US penitentiary proclaiming 'Indians Welcome', and the other shows an interior space at London's Heathrow Airport, complete with a billboard-size studio portrait of a British-Asian policeman pictured with his arms held open in a welcoming gesture. Engaging with a network of pre-existing linguistic and visual signs, deSouza considers here the inter-

section of the individual (diasporic) Indian with the typological, while also questioning the efficacy of visual and textual tropes when exposed to subversive misinterpretation. In the context of the US, the 'Indians' identified here most likely refer to indigenous peoples. Nonetheless, in deSouza's photographs, signals of welcome are made to and by the Indian who is identified as within and without a national imaginary, in both the US and UK. But with knowledge of Gandhi's status as a trained lawyer, his imprisonment in South Africa by British colonial authorities, and his policy of non-cooperation during the Indian independence movement, his statue's position sandwiched between the prison and policeman undermines any easy, hospitable welcome. Attention to these three images also demonstrates that deSouza is alert to the different conventions of Conceptual photography available to him. While *Indians* recalls an informal snapshot, and *Welcome Back* a banal document, *Mahatma* presents an apparent 'effacement of camera skills' (Buchloh cited in Edwards 2004, p. 146), in which deSouza has deliberately aped 'bad' photographic composition. Reminiscent of John Baldessari's *Wrong* (1967), in *Mahatma* the light source is positioned obliquely behind the statue, casting its face into shadow, while a flagpole rises from the top of the sculpture's head and culminates in a rippling US flag, here positioned as Gandhi's hat. The consequence of these compositional tactics is a sense of destabilising humour, whereby deSouza is able to ironically challenge the emotive power of the flag, and the powerful governmental and national structures it represents. Cumulatively these three works propose that welcome is dependent upon one's designation as a 'good' or 'bad' Indian: the lateral flow between images challenges viewers to see the double standards at play according to when and where the South Asian migrant is greeted.

In his various references to the Indian in *The World Series*, deSouza addresses the experiences of a

heterogeneous South Asian diaspora that is continually negotiating its own identities in opposition to reductive stereotypes. As such, he engages with the value systems inherent in language, challenging its ideological structures and the normalisation of pejorative terms designed to delimit, contain and disenfranchise. What is at stake when reading deSouza's – as indeed in Chandra's – work beyond the biographical is the notion that artistic engagement with identity politics can critique hierarchies of power rather than be confined to expressions of the self (Shaked 2017, p. 28).
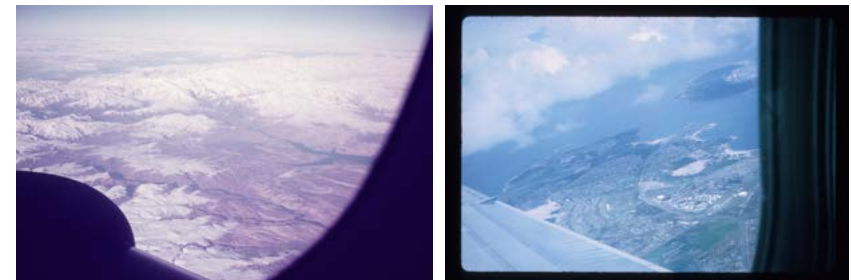
Fig. 5, 6. Mohini Chandra, from the series *Plane Views*, 2012. Archival photographs, dimensions variable © the artist.

Much of Chandra's work has utilised and reflected upon her father's personal photographs that recorded his multiple migrations, which took him from Fiji to Canada, the UK and Australia. *Plane Views* is an assemblage of photographs taken by her father during the 1960s and '70s, depicting aerial views of the Earth, taken from the windows of multiple aeroplanes undertaking different journeys (fig. 5 and 6). All share a similar compositional form, variously showing the oval frame of the aeroplane window, a glimpse of an engine, or the tip of a wing. The horizons beyond are captured via slightly blurry views of clouds, sky and indistinct landscapes. Seen together, *Plane Views* presents a typology of views. Much like Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), which documented different gas stations using similar compositional forms in order to highlight their unique but ultimately uniform design,

Chandra's *Plane Views* gesture towards different, but ultimately similar journeys. Seen as a series, the differentiation between each of Chandra's vernacular readymades dissolves, and distinct journeys become interchangeable. In this reading, the start and end point of the journey is effaced leaving the unseen migrant forever en route; there is no before and after, there is no here or there. Held in this state of perpetual motion, the passenger never lands, disembarks or settles down; it is not known whether what is shown records the relief of escape, or thrill of arrival (or vice versa). In a family photo album, it might be expected that an aerial view taken from an aeroplane would be preceded by a picture of the departing traveller, and/or succeeded by an image of their arrival. But *Plane Views* offers no such comforting narrative: the aeroplane never touches the ground. Chandra's repeated views of the in-between marks her migratory subject as different – other – from fellow passengers who might also temporarily inhabit this space of the aircraft. *Plane Views* gives an embodied experience of the diasporic migrant for whom travel is not an easy form of postmodern nomadism; what is captured is not cosmopolitan nomadism in a Deleuzian sense, of being at home in the world, everywhere and nowhere. Here, the migrant is always and forever on the move, always in a state of unsettled restlessness. As such *Plane Views* cumulatively conveys a poignant and pensive meditation on perpetual displacement. Indeed, Chandra has stated:

> in a diaspora situation, when the trip being made is for the purpose of migration, this process of seeing and then photographing the view from a plane goes beyond the generic and acquires a specific set of meanings. The resultant images, which record a kind of limbo, the space in between departure and arrival, can be read as a metaphor for the migrant's own particular state of 'not belonging' (Chandra 2015, pp. 110–11).

Without that final act of disembarkment, each image of *Plane Views* is suffused with anxiety of unknown futures and the possibility that entry will be denied. Knowledge of the archival source of Chandra's ready-mades is pertinent not *because* the work is necessarily about her father, but because that information adds a contextual, and ultimately poignant, layer to the broader objectives of her appropriation of those particular images. As well as standing as a tribute to her father's resilience in the face of multiple migrations, his authorial gaze out of the aeroplane window is rendered in Chandra's re-presentation as indicative of a more widely felt diasporic state of being.

deSouza and Chandra 'go to the heart of the displace-ment, slippage, interruption, and alienation that stem from the conditions of human mobility' (Mathur 2011, p. xi). It is my contention that they are able to address these concerns so successfully because of their con-centration on, and prioritisation of, in-transit sites and transitory spaces. As Homi Bhabha reminds us: 'These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself' (1994, pp. 1–2). Significantly, each artist utilises personal and collective South Asian diasporic experiences in order to participate in contem-porary debates around migration and freedom of movement; their work alludes to the multi-locational positioning of the global South Asian diaspora as colonial consequence, as well as commenting on contemporary anxieties over the migrant as an invasive body, or body out of place. Considering *The World Series* and *Plane Views*, what reverberates is a heightened sense that arrival and settlement is bestowed, granted or permitted, and may not be permanent. Cumulatively, but in formally different ways, these photographic series propose that living in transit is part and parcel of a shared diasporic condition

Allan deSouza and Mohini Chandra: Conceptual Photography, Migrations and the Articulation of South Asian Identities - Alice Correia

329

and they consequently speak to a broad and varied spectrum of constituents.

While knowledge of deSouza's and Chandra's personal heritage and migratory experiences may underpin an initial approach to *The World Series* and *Plane Views*, it is clear that discussions of these works cannot be limited to the personal or sociopolitical. The journeys pictured in deSouza's *The World Series* may recall his own experience of multiple migrations, but are not documents of them. In *Plane Views*, Chandra may present photographs found in her father's personal archive, but articulated as readymade art objects they are displaced from the Chandra family biography and repositioned as allegorical and indexical signifiers of a shared experience of diasporic migration. Attending to the formal and visual rhetoric of the photographs themselves, it is evident that these are works of art that are sensitive to both the exigencies of identity politics and the operations of Conceptual art. Indeed, the formal and material choices made by deSouza and Chandra directly assist their critical enquiry: utilising strategies of street photography, documentation and linguistic play, deSouza exposes existing ideological systems of spatial control, language and iconography. By putting those systems on display and opening them to scrutiny, *The World Series* performs a meta-critique of the assumptions that organise society. Presenting her readymades as 'a suite of variations on a theme' (Wollen 1978, p. 22), Chandra's *Plane Views* explores the nuances of typological multiplicity while simultaneously activating the specific materiality of the found, archival photographic object in ways that extend the personal experience into the communal. Here the image-object functions as both historic document and contemporary commentary. Cumulatively, through their respective series of photographic works, deSouza and Chandra demonstrate that the binary separation of Conceptual art forms and political critique cannot be sustained.

REFERENCES

Augé, M. 1995, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. J. Howe, Verso, London.

Bann, S. 1999, 'Introduction', in L. Camnitzer, J. Farver and R. Weiss (eds), *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s–1980s*, exhibition catalogue, 28 April–29 August, Queens Museum of Art, New York.

Bhabha, H. K. 1994, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London.

Camnitzer, L., Farver, J. and Weiss, R. eds. 1999, 'Foreword', in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s–1980s*, exhibition catalogue, 28 April–29 August, Queens Museum of Art, New York.

Campany, D. 2008, *Photography and Cinema,* Reaktion Books, London.

Chandra, M. 2000, 'Pacific Album', *History of Photography*, vol. 24, no. 3.

----. 2015, 'Plane Views', *Photography and Culture*, vol. 8, no. 1.

Edwards, S. 2004, 'Photography out of Conceptual Art', in G. Perry and P. Wood (eds), *Themes in Contemporary Art*, Yale University Press, London.

Iversen, M. and Diarmuid, C. eds. 2010, *Photography After Conceptual Art*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester.

Machida, M. 2008, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Mathur, S. 2011, 'Introduction', in S. Mathur (ed.), *The Migrant's Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Mercer, K. 2005, 'Iconography after Identity', in D. A. Bailey, I. Baucom and S. Boyce (eds), *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Mitchell, W. J. T. 2011, 'Migration, Law, and the Image: Beyond the Veil of Ignorance', in S. Mathur (ed.), *The Migrant's Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora,* Yale University Press, New Haven.

Rushdie, S. 1992, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*, Granta, London.

Shaked, N. 2017, *The Synthetic Proposition: Conceptualism and the Political Referent in Contemporary Art*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Soutter, L. 1999, 'The Photographic Idea: Reconsidering Conceptual Photography', *Afterimage*, vol. 26, no. 5, viewed 2 October 2018, https://search.proquest.com/docview/212110677?accountid=8058.

Stahel, U. 2004, *Well, What is Photography?*, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Winterthur.

Wollen, P. 1978, 'Photography and Aesthetics', *Screen*, vol. 19, no. 4, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/19.4.9.

330

331

Allan deSouza and Mohini Chandra: Conceptual Photography, Migrations and the Articulation of South Asian Identities - Alice Correia

Notes on Activist Practices Behind the Iron Curtain: Liberation Theologies, Experimental Institutionalism, Expanded Art and Minor Literature

Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes

The stakes are getting higher for activist art in many countries today, at a time when the West and Western modernity have been identified as ripe for change. The project FORMER WEST (2008–16) was carried out by BAK – basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht and the Van Abbemusem, Eindhoven and other partners. In the concluding publication, much work was conducted on ways of 'formering' the West, especially in terms of postcolonial and decolonial discourse (Hlavajova & Sheikh 2016). My own Central European background led me to contributions by Chto Delat, who provided a Perestroika timeline, Boris Groys and the title image by Július Koller, *Question Mark Cultural Situation (U.F.O.)* (1992). This question mark/infinity sign points to the genealogies of protest and the never-ending, questioning work of activism.[1]

Holding the *Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989* book in my hands on its release, I had a very specific question, which I think was not so explicitly addressed in the book: How can the West be 'formered' through the practices that brought about the peaceful or 'Velvet' revolution of 1989?[2] The West incorporated this region into its markets and systems nearly seamlessly, but not equally. It infantilised its citizens, especially dissidents, by, for example, not asking what it could learn from the East. In the art

332

333

Notes on Activist Practices Behind the Iron Curtain: Liberation Theologies, Experimental Institutionalism, Expanded Art and Minor Literature - Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes

context, the beginnings of Manifesta, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art and documenta 12 are exceptions through their inclusion of Eastern European positions. The number of exhibitions recouping Eastern European material has been growing in recent years. Yet I still think that it is time to further study dissident artists from behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War who contributed to a climate that enabled the peaceful revolution of 1989: their in 1989 ultimately successful practices may be particularly necessary as we find that the formerly 'free' West has turned less democratic.

This is not to say that postcolonial and decolonial work should not be done, or that the FORMER WEST's focus was misguided, but rather that there is more work to be done looking into the colonial mechanisms and connecting them to their aftermath within Europe (Ireland being close to my heart). Questions of comparability between experiences and regions, remain. David Dibosa drew attention to this during the 'Conceptualisms – Intersectional Readings, International Framings' conference: the topic of transcontinental solidarity and shared experience in art and activism is usually absent from discussions that are frequently centred on one region.

As complement to FORMER WEST, I would here like to focus on how artists have experimentally 'instituted otherwise' (to echo both a motto of BAK and Charles Esche's experimental institutionalism). This involved searching for and 'using' an internationally connected institution that was often willing to be experimented with, the church, as well as an interest in the liberating elements of canonical literature (which for the present purposes includes both the Bible and what one can call 'minor literature', mostly avant-garde writing) and expanded concepts of art (Joseph Beuys et al.). A framework for where these elements meet can be found in liberation theologies and cultural practitioners'

investment in them. I cannot, of course, do justice to the many movements and specific contexts that made up and still constitute liberation theologies. They all interpret the life of Jesus Christ as focused on the poor and bind their early, not yet institutionalised Christian impetus with their communities' experience of persecution and struggles for civil and human rights. Liberation theologies originate from the Catholic context of Central and South America,[3] while Black Theology or Black Liberation Theology draws inspiration from Dr Martin Luther King, Jr and Malcom X.

One way to convey commonalities and mutual inspiration or solidarity between those who found themselves repressed across the globe, is to consider shared experiences, like the singing of the 1900 gospel song 'We Shall Overcome' in the global civil rights movements since the 1960s. But what artistic, aesthetic approaches can go with this? I am afraid to say that it is not that exemplified by the Washington memorial to Dr Martin Luther King, Jr unveiled in 2011 by President Barack Obama. Victor Margolin has incisively analysed its many faults:

> Lei Yixin's experience as a creator of Chairman Mao statues (…) contradicts the narrative of Dr. King's life. (…) Sculpture based on the tenets of Socialist Realism was adopted as well by authoritarian leaders around the world. (…) The point of being 'with' the people rather than 'above' them was missed. (…) The choice of a black artist would have (had) significance in that a major issue of black history is the earlier exclusion of black workers from good jobs as well as the exclusion of black artists from the art world. (…) What makes the (…) Memorial most problematic in the end is the inability of the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation to understand the parameters within which its meaning is and will continue to be determined. (…) The totality of meaning depends on a relation between the work's appearance and the conditions of its production – (…) all the (…) factors

that, in this case, contradict the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life and what he fought for (Margolin 2012, pp. 400–8).

What would have been a more appropriate aesthetics or artistic approach? Has such work been developed elsewhere in line with King's legacy, following his 'I Have a Dream' speech, 1963, or his assassination in 1968? In keeping with my interest to add to the Eastern European focus implied by the FORMER WEST project, I will try to find it behind the Iron Curtain.

The countries behind the Iron Curtain were generally religion-adverse. In the Marxist public sphere, religious belief was considered as the oft-quoted Marx statement goes, the 'opium of the people', and substituted with secular rituals linked to the communist party. The Eastern bloc had abstained from signing the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, but joined the Helsinki Accords in 1975, which enshrined the human rights of freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief. Maintaining a façade of enabling human dignity better than the West, one did not want to flout certain rights too overtly, which one had accepted in Helsinki.

Differences existed, of course, between Eastern/Central European countries: the People's Republic of Poland and the German Democratic Republic are two key examples here. In Poland, the Catholic Church had preserved the Polish language and culture while the country historically did not exist (for over 100 years until 1918) and had thus achieved strong emotional ties among the broad population. This was vastly enhanced by Karol Wojtyla's ascension to the papal throne as John Paul II in 1978, followed by much church-building. With its strong ties to Rome, the Catholic Church in Poland was not overtly critical of the system. Individual priests, such as Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, who expressed views in line with liberation theologies, suffered for it by being imprisoned for his anti-Stalinist

stance and prevented from international travel for support of Solidarność (the Solidarity union). The ascent of Solidarność in the 1980s profited from international models in the fight for democracy (Lichanski 2009, pp. 597–610).

In East Germany, the Protestant – that is, Lutheran – Church dominated. While some decades earlier, it had largely succumbed to the Hitler regime, the post-war church-led resistance against the Communist dictatorship remembered two notable pastors. One was Martin Niemöller, who penned the famous lines beginning 'First they came for the Socialists…', where at the end there was nobody to speak up for him, when they came to arrest him. He spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps. The other, Dietrich Bonnhoefer, who had conspired to overthrow the Nazi regime, was executed in 1944. The Lutheran Church in East Germany was no monolith, but on the basis of these examples, many wished to respond better to the challenges that the totalitarianism of the Communist regime posed.

In theological circles in the traditionally somewhat rebellious German university town of Jena, Latin American liberation theology was directly, ecumenically inspirational (Dietrich 2017; Neubert 1998, pp. 293–4). Student parishes and youth groups held reading and discussion groups, organised theatre productions, ecological initiatives, advised young people who came into conflict with the regime and even developed strategies for countering the state systematically. Church activists sought to reach a larger public with many activities, which was difficult in a stifling bureaucracy that tried to prevent exactly that.

Across the Eastern bloc, within the churches as relatively free or dissident zones during the Cold War, liberating thought was sustained through many sources, namely, the Bible and its tenets of following Christ's

example, turning the other cheek and practising forgiveness. There was a search for a socialist alternative, and attempt to think a state that would live up to the rhetorical claims of the regimes by which one was repressed. There was a search for contemporary philosophical perspectives in support of this, such as the writing of Hannah Arendt. Information arrived through visiting parish groups from the West including the Netherlands, art networks were maintained through mail art and visits. Richard Demarco in Edinburgh, for instance, had many contacts and mediated the reception of Joseph Beuys's ideas and works in the East (Blume 2007, pp. 304–19). Following news of events in Nicaragua offered an international comparison of socialist states.

Karl Marx with his *Umwertung der Werte* (re-valuation) and Rosa Luxemburg were read against the state-sanctioned grain. In Luxemburg's case, there was a clear anti-colonial element to this, too. Stasi Prison waited for those, however, who chose the 'wrong' quotation for a banner, notably her 'Freedom is the freedom of those who think differently' dissent.

Key characteristics of the art and thinking in these dissident spaces across the Eastern bloc that contributed to the Velvet or peaceful revolution include: 1) dissidents' need for cultural means, a centre in which to not just be defined *ex negativo* through opposition to a violently oppressive regime; 2) practising personal belief, even if not an initial motivation, safeguarding against allegations of agitation and instilling discipline to do not as one was being done to, but instead having the right to be human, fallible (forgive and be forgiven) encouraged to think for oneself; 3) the link brought by churches to (and solidarity with) a global organisation — with liberation theologies as a sub-frame — even if (and especially when) those involved wanted to do nothing more than eschew institutions and hegemony and act in solidarity with international civil rights movements.

The church as institution, not always welcoming and often abandoned very quickly after 1989, provided a refuge, as well as a setting to engage with, following Charles Esche, experimental institutionalism. Why not see art as temporarily transplanted (back) from museums to the churches? Art seems to have briefly and locally, but importantly before 1989, returned to that context, having left the church as institution at the beginning of the modern era. To view cultural practice in this way also implies understanding art as experimentally expanded, in keeping with (and often inspired by) Joseph Beuys (Blume 2007).

I would like to focus particularly on the third point: the links and networks possible to be made through religious frameworks. Dissident artists in the East during the Cold War showed marked interest in canonical literature: the Bible and classical mythology are reference points, but also Modernist classics. I am encouraged to focus on this in the Conceptual art framework after reading Athena Athanasiou's essay 'Performing the Institution "As If It Were Possible"' in *Former West*. In a sub-chapter 'What about the Book to Come' she shows images of communal reading scenes, including the standing-reading protest, Istanbul, 2013. Communal reading 'creates space for the eventness of non-corporate, non-commodified, sustaining institutions in the face of losing one's (…) livelihood, (…) home, (…) or public education'.[4]

Behind the Iron Curtain, where permission to travel to the West was rare, books were much used and shared tools and also status symbols: what was giving access to other worlds of escape, a partial substitute for the kind of education that remained inaccessible, and — when canonical — an insurance that one was engaging with larger debates than the narrow geographical frame allowed. For the rare occasions of international contact, canonical literature offered bridges to understanding, even if knowledge of contemporary discourses were

Notes on Activist Practices Behind the Iron Curtain: Liberation Theologies, Experimental Institutionalism, Expanded Art and Minor Literature - Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes

339

Stjauby Tamás / IPUT, Sit Out – Be Forbidden!, action, 1972.
Photograph by Czene Gábor.
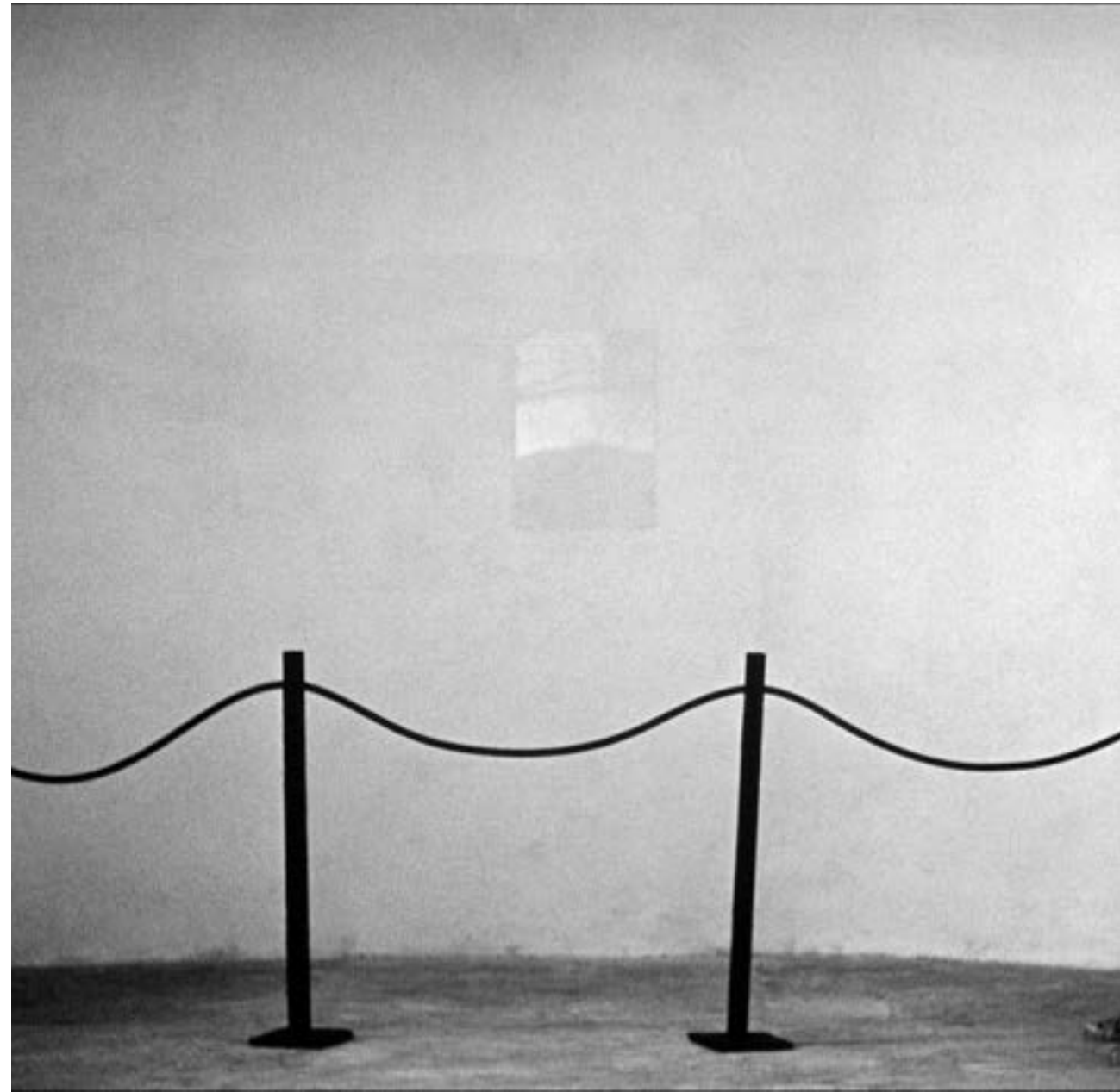
St. Auby Tamás / IPUT, Be forbidden!, action object, 1973.
Photograph by Galántai György.

limited. It should go without saying that the canon was not resorted to in the interest of preserving the status quo. George Orwell's *1984* (1949) held immediate relevance, as did the plays of Samuel Beckett performed in Warsaw, or stories by Franz Kafka on life under stiflingly bureaucratic regimes. James Joyce's attention to the lives of ordinary people, seen through a mythological macrocosmic lens, reliant on the reader's own active participation through an 'open work' or allegorical, obliquely effective strategy was also certainly attractive.[5] What Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would call minor literature, these deterritorialised works functioned as communal enunciations and held political immediacy (Deleuze & Guattari 2006).

The most direct reference I could find to liberation theology — and black theology — in Eastern European visual art linked to conceptual practice, is Tamás Szentjóby's performance *Sit Out/Be Forbidden!* (1972). In 1968, cofounder of the Black Panther Party Bobby Seale was jailed for conspiracy and inciting a riot. In 1972 the charges were eventually dropped and Seale freed. Police violence and torture of Black Panther members was reported widely. In Szentjóby's performance, the artist sits bound and gagged on a chair in a public space in Budapest, the police arriving shortly after the action finished. His arrest would have put the regime in a difficult double bind: laud the work as a condemnation of the race-motivated police violence in the United States, or repeat that system's punishment, thereby affirming the regime's hypocrisy while making a martyr of the artist.

The following year, Szentjóby would use the *Be Forbidden!* title also for a work on paper that bore these words (written in very small type) exhibited behind an elaborate rope barrier in a Romanesque church outside Budapest, which a pastor had given a group of artists to use. In this idyllic space for developing alternative ways of living together in the tradition of artist

colonies, Szentjóby was apparently recommending that both church and art audiences reach an early Christian state of affairs, to find their space in illegality, in hiding and persecution — and to practice in the here and now by breaching the rope barrier to read the drawing.

Szentjóby, also known as St Auby (he variously uses a 'saintly' form of his name), was made stateless and forced out of Hungary for his film *Centaur* (1973–5), which shows working peoples' lives as the regime prescribed it (and made conditional for the use of state-owned cameras: it was not possible for private individuals to own a film camera). Szentjóby then overdubs his film with a soundtrack of disarmingly irreverent, critical, but utterly dry and normal comments put into the protagonists' mouths: a human head to the animal body. The classical mythological title constitutes a reference to canonical texts. Already since 1966, Szentjóby worked under the banner of the self-styled artwork/union IPUT (International Parallel Union of Telecommunications) pre-empting the Solidarność strategy. He/it is still today campaigning for a universal basic income: Szentjóby is still sharing (communing), like Christ's disciples, still seeking to redistribute wealth — in an overtly secular manner.

Identifications of artists with Jesus Christ are a Romantic topos. From behind the Iron Curtain, this topos mostly — maybe apart from Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 5* (1974), which establishes a different, more spectacular or mythical artist persona — took on less heroic dimensions: Jerzy Bereś shows crudely nailed-together wooden altars and crosses as sculptures — and, as a shy individual, his fragile, naked body, acting out ephemeral rituals among audiences from the mid-1970s onwards, often in churches. Dorota Jarecka writes in retrospect: 'What seems as a contestation of the modernist gallery space in the West seemed just a touch imposed in Poland. Those who wanted independence in the 1980s were pretty much limited to a church

Notes on Activist Practices Behind the Iron Curtain: Liberation Theologies, Experimental Institutionalism, Expanded Art and Minor Literature - Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes

343

or a factory' (2013). But artists did choose churches sooner than that, and, as I show here, engaged in a deliberate and complex manner with the traditions and conventions to be found – and fought – there.

They even brought religious motifs into the art academy: Mirosław Bałka, in *Remembrance of the First Holy Communion* (1985), his degree show piece, the artist echoes Polish societal values sensitively as a matter of the heart. The work is a document of his own struggle with Catholic orthodoxy, as he told me in a conversation in Warsaw in 1999, understood as an outcome of his reading not so much of the Bible, but of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). This reading led him to abandon figuration and turn to a broadly conceptual sculptural practice, which is nevertheless anchored in the senses: the protagonist Stephen Dedalus's memory of how wetting the bed felt, first warm then cold. From this, Bałka developed – and, in due course also through his reception of Joseph Beuys's work – sculptures with electrically heated elements, or a 'holy water font' containing whiskey: *250 x 280 x 120 (Sweets of Sin)* (2004) is a sculptural work (with these measurements) referencing Joyce's dual fight with Catholicism and alcohol. Bałka created it for 'Joyce in Art', an exhibition I curated at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, 2004.

For artists, Christian iconography seems, very soon after the historic changes of 1989, (again) to have related to the (mostly Catholic) Church as a hegemonic entity, something to be commented on critically and in a visual language that departs from conceptualisms, where the possibility to align with global liberation theologies seems forgotten and the different legibility of objects – identified as a feature of global conceptualisms – quickly disappeared.

Zbigniew Gostomski is Conceptual in an even narrower sense. The artist, associated with the Foksal Gallery in

Warsaw, made *Pascal's Triangle* in 1973. His conceptual aesthetic is international, but he does something that would come across as atypical in the West (where Conceptual works contained definitions or instructions not literary quotations until Joseph Kosuth introduced them in the 1980s). Gostomski is directly quoting Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922): 'each one who enters imagines himself to be the first to enter whereas he is always the last tern of a preceding series (…) each imagining himself to be first, last, only and alone, whereas he is neither the first, nor last nor only or alone.' That book was passed around clandestinely in artistic circles during the Cold War. Gostomski combines the quotation in Polish and English with a photo from 'normal' (and dirty) Eastern bloc industry (the slag heap from mining), as well as numbers arranged in triangles on five out of the seven A4 pages that make up the work: these numbers are added with their neighbours and increase in size. The mathematical equation indicated in the title, the heap of slag or sand and the *Ulysses* quote all insist on connections, whether in the natural, mathematical or human world: a comment aimed at overcoming a specifically Eastern European sense of isolation. Some canonical texts were considered to have a liberating effect in this isolated part of the world, where the regime claimed to be unchanging: be all and end all. The connections insisted upon in the work also seem to ensure a relevance in external cultural discourse. Literature and mathematics function as relatively safe sources, to be understood poetically and politically: indirectly. What interests me about this work by Gostomski is its clear development from a triangle or pyramid, the symbol for hierarchy, a sense of the individual's connectedness. Two years later (!) Deleuze and Guattari were to publish their Kafka book, proposing the concept of subversively minor literature. Gostomski here already anticipated what with these Western authors one could call a rhizomatic existence on 1000 plateaus, i.e., an undoing of hierarchies through being differently networked (deterritorialised and

aiming at communal enunciation with political immediacy). The Iron Curtain is today variously understood as a 'nylon' one and, indeed, from liberation theology to the specific appreciation of liberating literature, much was exchanged. *Pascal's Triangle* also, however, points to successful, early and independent development of liberating ideas and strategies in the East that are today not as well-quoted as the concept of minor literature, as they could not be formulated directly. The thinking and creation of artists in the global conceptual domain is one place that deserves attention when looking for pathbreaking liberating developments.

Nancy Adajania (2013) has spoken, in the context of FORMER WEST, about tactical quietude, which does not fetishise or instrumentalise politics, but rather displays what she calls an 'ecumene': an attitude, where the world is inhabited as home, where otherness is not erased, but the world is made more inhabitable. During the Cold War years, without any hope of leaving one's home in Eastern Europe, making that context more inhabitable may have made the regime survive longer. (I remember as a child 'helping' people from the parish to make a dangerous bend in the road less dangerous, a challenge to which the regime had not risen.) Humble, often collective actions of resilience also showed up the state apparatus's loudly pronounced claims of incessant success as *hollow* and ridiculous — and the regime itself as less and less necessary: one had learned to help each other.

I prefer the notion of an ecumene to Klara Kemp-Welch's (2017) term 'antipolitics' as a prevailing sentiment among Central European artists: Kemp-Welch seems to use it in the sense of anti-regime. These conceptual uncertainties are arguably to do with a changed understanding of politics today. Jacques Rancière's notion of art being a form of dissensus and the deep, inextricable connectedness between art and politics, however, seem to suit the current essay's context well. And that is not

surprising, as Rancière's understanding owes much to Friedrich Schiller. Not only is the present (Western) concept of art as a whole — and especially Conceptual art — still based on the ideas of Jena Romanticism, as Peter Osborne (2013) has shown, that thinking is also what was available to the multidisciplinary dissidents I have in mind. Schiller and the Jena Romantics belonged to the un-censorable canon, minor literature read with local pride for the many liberating, minor elements to be found there.

If that literature stood at the beginning of the modern, joined in the esteem of artists behind the Iron Curtain by that timeless and often oppressive classic, the Bible, and avant-garde literature, I think we can say that there are elements of the avant-garde that have systematically countered modernity as a chauvinistic, colonising, violently oppressive force. With a view to the Cold War, it would, following Claire Bishop, be ahistorical to consider social practice as something new in the 1990s. Bishop, who has thorough knowledge of Eastern European art (Bishop & Dziewanska 2009), considers a broadening of the concept of art, what one now calls Social Practice, as owing to a Christian, Protestant ethos (Bishop 2012, pp. 39–40). We no longer take such ahistorical shortcuts.

However, we also have not as yet paid attention to the line of solidarity clearly seen behind the Iron Curtain with the struggles of disenfranchised people in other parts of the world, who have also developed liberating theologies. This is understandable to some degree, as much work that defies genre boundaries did not satisfy the then officially prevailing definitions of art (and thus often not seen as such even by the creators, or deliberately eschewed, for example, when created under prohibition to work: in German, *Berufsverbot*). Art, especially overtly critical art, often could not be produced — or chose to inhabit a broadly conceptual realm. I think the term 'stealth' practice expresses

this well. Curator Maria Lind has used it, not for such historical dissident work, but for Dora García's work *The Joycean Society* (2013) on the Zurich reading group of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), where an ideal obliqueness or unfaithfully faithful response to the writer (the canon) is generated in the academic margins (Lind 2014). I agree with Lind that this 'useless' activity of paying attention, to let minor literature work, constitutes a social practice.

Eastern European artists' engagement with liberating theologies and literatures in conceptual ways is largely absent from current critical discourse. A likely reason is that this focus goes against three very convenient half-truths often assumed in the West: that all religion is necessarily oppressive orthodoxy, that all orthodox institutions today were and will be always that and that oppression can only come from the political right. I realise that there are still obstacles to be removed before an engagement against dogma in different times and places can become a common concern, rather than the specifics of an oppressive regime's claimed political stripes.

The work on which I focused did not take an easily consumed and self-defeating, monumental shape, such as the Martin Luther King, Jr monument discussed earlier. It needed a conceptual, nearly dematerialised form in order to stand in for forbidden speech, while avoiding the creation of incriminating evidence, and to be consistent with its own humble, conceptual, performative ethos. Artists expanded their art practice towards all activities of cultural production that could circumvent arrest or *Berufsverbot*, but socially construct a different future nevertheless. This would include parenting, picture restoration, demonstrating, choir-singing, organising, writing complaint letters to officialdom, helping neighbours and reading liberating canonical/minor literature. Such historically (in 1989) successful work can in my view best be approached

when not only expanding our concepts of art, as Beuys has done,[6] but also of politics (á la Rancière) – and, in the current context – of theologies to include their liberating, often also ecumenical and 'secular' variants (Martin Luther King, Jr was inspired by Mahatma Ghandi as a politician).

Artistic statements that show a liberating theological sensibility look different today: how well the Bible still works as a nuisance, however, could be seen at documenta 14 – Olu Oguibe chose a (multilingual) Bible quote to be engraved into an obelisk in public space in Kassel: 'I was a stranger and you took me in.' The provocation has been seen and countered: with an AfD lawsuit for the sculpture's removal. Right-wing xenophobes are now fighting against what formally is a colonial marker – and they are closing off for themselves the path of seeking the authority of the Bible. I am reminded of St Auby's tactical work on Bobby Seale. Or such work now takes the shape of Tania Bruguera's *The Francis Effect* (2014): she and anyone in her audience who chooses to use the postcards she distributes are petitioning the Vatican (an EU state and the only one whose *raison d'être* lies in ethical principles) to issue passports to refugees.

Despite gradual differences today, I present this argument so that those fighting against what is still oppressive may no longer cut ourselves off from claiming for our dissidence the success and genealogy of those who made ephemeral, conceptual work of their lives, who identified the institutions with which to engage experimentally and who sustained the networks, courage and humility necessary to bring about a peaceful revolution.

348

349

Notes on Activist Practices Behind the Iron Curtain: Liberation Theologies, Experimental Institutionalism, Expanded Art and Minor Literature - Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes

REFERENCES

Adajania, N. 2013, 'An (Un)Timely Meditation: Pointing to a Future Ecumene of Art', talk, 'Documents, Constellations, Prospects', Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 18–24 March, viewed 27 October 2018, http://www.formerwest.org/Documents-ConstellationsProspects.

Badovinac, Z., Čufer, E., Freire, C., Groys, B., Harrison, C., Havránek, V., Piotrowski, P. and Stipančić, B. 2012, 'Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe: Part I', *e-flux journal*, no. 40, viewed 27 October 2018, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/40/60277/conceptual-art- and-eastern-europe-part-i/.

Bishop, C. 2012, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its discontents,' in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London.

Bishop, C. and Dziewanska, M. eds. 2009, *1968–89: Political Upheaval and Artistic Change*, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Warsaw.

Blume, E. 2007, 'Joseph Beuys and the GDR: The Individual as Political', in C. Mesch and V. Michely (eds) *Joseph Beuys: The Reader*, I. B. Tauris, London.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. 2006, in trans. D. Polan, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, original work published 1975.

Dressler, I. 2010, 'Subversive Practices: Art Under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s-80s / South America / Europe', in H. D. Christ and I. Dressler (eds), *Subversive Practices: Art Under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s-80s / South America / Europe*, Hatje Cantz, Stuttgart, pp. 8–58.

Hlavajova, M. and Sheikh, S. eds. 2016, *Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Jarecka, D. 2013, 'Janusz Bogucki, the Polish Szeemann?', in *Rejected Heritage: Polish Art of the 1980s*, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Warsaw, viewed 27 October 2018, https://artmuseum.pl/en/publikacje-online/dorota-jarecka-janusz-bogucki-polski.

Kemp-Welch, K. 2017, *Antipolitics in Central European Art*, I. B. Tauris, London.

Kuoni, C. and Wagner, A. eds. 2009, *Considering Forgiveness*, Vera List Center for Art and Politics, New York, p. 49.

Lerm Hayes, C.-M. 2004, *Joyce in Art*, Lilliput, Dublin.

Lichański, J. Z. 2009, 'Theology Of Liberation And Its Tradition In Poland: The Church, Politics, And Rhetoric in 1981–1989', in L. Pernot (ed.), *New Chapters in the History of Rhetoric*, Brill, Leiden.

Lind, M. 2014, 'The Triumph of the Nerds,' *ArtReview*, September, viewed 27 October 2018, http://artreview.com/opinion/september_2014_opinion_maria_lind/.

Margolin, V. 2012, 'The Martin Luther King, Jr Memorial: A Flawed Concept', J*ournal of Visual Culture*, vol. 11, no. 3.

Neubert, E. 1998, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR: 1949–1989*, Ch. Links, Berlin.

Osborne, P. 2013, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London.

The Other Trans-Atlantic: Kinetic and Op Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America 1950s-1970s. 2017–18 [exhibition], Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, November–February.

Thurston, N. ed. 2017, *Somebody's Got to Do It: Selected Writings by Pavel Büchler since 1987*, Ridinghouse, Manchester.

Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980. 2015–16 [exhibition], Museum of Modern Art, 5 September–3 January, viewed 27 October 2018, https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1532.

NOTES

1 I was born in Jena, East Germany. For the current essay, I held conversations with my childhood friend, Christian Dietrich, Director of the State Thüringen's organisation for dealing with the SED dictatorship (STASI files, etc.), December 2017, with my relative, Elly Reichel, a Dresden artist, December 2017 and August 2018, and Erfurt artist Gabriele Stötzer, April 2018. Since 2007, I have had regular contact with Pavel Büchler and Tamás Szentjóby. I thank them all.

2 Of course, the 'former East' was not a homogenous zone and the revolution did not occur in the same way in each country. In the following, I am less interested in these differences, which historians of Eastern Europe can better differentiate, than in the responses developed by artists in relation to a pervasive public and political sphere of repression (Dressler 2010).

3 In some recent art publications, comparison between Latin America and Eastern Europe has been established, but liberation theologies are so far excluded from consideration such as in exhibitions ('The Other Trans-Atlantic' 2018; 'Transmissions' 2015/16) and texts (Badovinac et al. 2012). By contrast, *Considering Forgiveness* does mention the global civil rights movement and Hannah Arendt's 'strategic alliance with as unexpected a figure as Jesus of Nazareth [giving] forgiveness an unexpected secular salience' (Kuoni & Wagner 2009, p. 49).

4 Athena Athanasiou, 'Performing the Institution "As If It Were Possible"'. *Former West,* p. 690.

5 Conversations with Reichel and Stötzer (Lerm Hayes 2004).

6 Büchler explains the difficulties of offering both unreserved approbation and critique of any art in the 1970s in his native Prague, even in a samizdat context. He adds that, according to him, there were not a large number of praiseworthy artists under totalitarian conditions in the Eastern bloc (Thurston 2017, p. 210). When applying an expanded concept of art to forms of activism, there may be more to be appreciated.

350

351

Notes on Activist Practices Behind the Iron Curtain: Liberation Theologies, Experimental Institutionalism, Expanded Art and Minor Literature - Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes

Repositioning Spanish Conceptualisms: New Institutionalism, Coloniality and the Contemporary[1]

Juan Albarrán

Since December 2011, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid's third and last part of its collection, 'From Revolt to Postmodernity (1962–1982)', has been available for public viewing. The display, curated by Jesús Carrillo, Rosario Peiró and the museum's director Manuel Borja-Villel, showcases additions to the collection that were meant to build a continuity between a modern art collection structured around Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) with the contemporary.

Upon arriving at the Reina Sofía in 2008, Borja-Villel and his team started a deep reorganisation of the collection in order to update and expand the discourse of the museum.[2] At the same time, they have been thinking about how the new conceptualisation of the collection could transform the institution itself: its relation to history, capacity to establish a dialogue with social movements and main goals in a society suffering an economical and institutional crisis.

In this presentation, the team puts forward a political perspective strongly related to Spanish conceptualism, which has been traditionally ignored by the previous museum directors and Spanish histories of art (Carrillo 2008). The works are arranged throughout several titled rooms: for example, 'Art and Politics at the End of Franco's dictatorship' with works by Francesc Abad, Colita, Alberto Corazón, artist and intellectual collective Grup de Treball, Concha Jerez, Pere Portabella, Redor Gallery, and the collective Video-Nou, most of whom

are key authors of Spanish conceptualism — the so-called *nuevos comportamientos artísticos* (new artistic behaviours). Unlike the other rooms with works from the collection, this one has barely been modified since the opening. 'Art Activism in Latin America' has experienced many changes; at the time of writing in January 2018, the display includes works by Colectivo Acciones de Arte (C.A.D.A.), Felipe Ehrenberg, Pedro Lemebel, Carlos Leppe, Juan Carlos Romero and Sergio Zevallos.

Juan Carlos Romero, *Violencia*, 1973–7, installation view, in 'From Revolt to Posmodernity', Museo Reina Sofía, 2017. Photograph by Juan Albarrán.

It is significant that the term 'conceptualism' does not appear in the rooms' titles, nor in their captions, nor in the museum's brochures; the museum distances itself from the conventional art labels that articulate Western art history. Nevertheless, we can affirm that the referred artists can be inscribed within a set of conceptualist practices that — in dictatorial contexts — furthered a politics of resistance and shed light on state repression. The abovementioned rooms establish a clear physical,

visual and discursive connection between Spanish and Latin-American conceptualisms. The collection proposes a narrative in which both sets of practices represent alternative and decentred 'points of origin' regarding the northern genealogies of contemporary art. In this essay, I examine the contiguities between Spain and Latin America as a strategy used by the museum to insert Spanish conceptual — and contemporary — art in the global (South) art, but also to reconsider the political objectives of the museum in our society through the incorporation of (post)colonial issues in its agenda. I study how Spanish conceptualism has been resituated in art history and, by extension, in the narrations of the contemporary, by focusing on the relationship between Spain and Latin America, the political dimension of their conceptual practices and the strategies subjacent to institutional recuperation, specifically in the case of the Reina Sofía.

IDEOLOGICAL (SOUTHERN) CONCEPTUALISMS

While the bond between Spanish and Latin-American conceptualisms has a long history, a brief survey of artistic transfers between the regions can help us understand its political connotations. The first contact between agents working on both sides of the Atlantic took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In those years, Spanish theorist Simón Marchán Fiz, in close dialogue with Argentinean curator Jorge Glusberg, coined the expression '*conceptualismo ideológico*' (ideological conceptualism) to characterise Spanish and Argentinean politicised and dematerialised practices.[3] This category appeared in the second edition of Marchán Fiz's seminal book *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto* (From Object Art to Concept Art) first published in 1972. For him, ideological conceptualism was an inversion of the tautological conceptual art: '[ideological conceptualism] is not a pure productive force, but a social one. Self-reflection is not satisfied

by tautology, it goes into its own specific production conditions, into its consequences in the process of appropriation and the world's active transformative configuration from its specific field of activity' (Marchán Fiz 2012, p. 405). In his view, northern conceptual art was mainly cold, rational and linguistic, while southern conceptualism tended to be warm, poor, poetical, less analytical and usually more politicised. He notes this 'inverted' version was valid for both Spain and Argentina (p. 404).

The 'ideological conceptualism' Marchán Fiz discusses in his 1972 book could be considered a re-elaboration of Glusberg's ideas in the show he curated that same year 'Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano' (Towards a Latin-American Profile of Art), at Centro de Arte y Comunicació (CAyC) in Buenos Aires, of which he wrote: 'the art as idea represented in this exhibition is indicative of a revolutionary opacity, opposed to the dishonest consciousness of ideologies' (Glusberg 1972).[4] Glusberg conceived an opaque conceptual art that tried to denounce the transparency of the dominant ideology. In this sense, Argentinean conceptualism was not accurately ideological, but counter-ideological, since it was opposed to the dominant ideology reproduced by the media. Glusberg developed this theory to bring together the work of artists who he named *Grupo de los Trece* (Group of the thirteen) — including Carlos Ginzburg, Víctor Grippo, Luis Pazos, Juan Carlos Romero and Horacio Zabala — not all of whom were comfortable with his leadership.

The 'ideological conceptualism' proposed by Glusberg under the Argentinean dictatorship and by Marchán Fiz in late Francoism met with unforeseen critical success in the 1990s. This was thanks to Puerto Rican curator Mari Carmen Ramírez, who quoted it in the catalogue for the exhibition 'Latin-American Artists of the Twentieth Century' at the Plaza de Armas, Seville in 1992 (Ramírez 1993). Ramírez recuperated it in

order to establish a direct connection between Latin-American conceptualism and political projects that fought dictatorships. In doing so, she contributed to widening the gap between northern conceptual art (linguistic, hegemonic) and southern (ideological, peripheral). A few years later in 1999, Ramírez, assisting an extensive international team, curated the Latin-American section of 'Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s' at Queens Museum of Art (now Queens Museum), curated by Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss. In her long essay for the catalogue, she expanded on the hypothesis of her 1992 text, outlining three elements that differentiated Latin-American conceptualism — not only Argentinean practices — from the Anglo-Saxon: its ethical and ideological profile, the critical recovery of the object and research in the field of communication (Ramírez 1999).

TOWARDS A NEW INSTITUTIONALISM

It is precisely this political dimension of Southern conceptualism that the Reina Sofía's display promotes to build a reviewed narrative of Spanish contemporary art, and, with some nuance, to shape a new institutional programme for the museum. But before arriving at its discussion, let's look at how 'Global Conceptualism' reconnected with the Spanish context. By 1999, an early revision of Spanish conceptualism was ready to be presented among practices that could be part of the pluri-centric discourse proposed in 'Global Conceptualism'. *Recorreguts* (Routes) (1973) by Grup de Treball — the most well-known and politicised collective of the Catalan transition context — was included in the 'Western Europe' section curated by Claude Gintz, who considered it 'probably a unique example in the history of Western European conceptualism of overtly political commitment' (1999, p. 38).[5] It seems clear that this was an exaggerated statement, but it helped to resituate Catalan conceptualism in connection with

the Latin-American context more than with the European framework. The work's inclusion could also be due to the friendship between Camnitzer and Grup member Antoni Muntadas since the 1970s, when Muntadas moved to New York. Camnitzer admitted that by the late 1990s he did not know Spanish conceptualism (Hontoría 2010), while Gintz learned about it from Grup member Antonio Mercader. The Grup worked on several issues with different strategies related to the artists' labour problems and the economic dimension of the art object, or the social role of art in late Francoism. Their piece in 'Global Conceptualism' is the one that is most directly linked with the political repression of the Catalan society: different measuring systems for the route covered by the 113 detained members of the main anti-Francoist Catalan organisation — Assemblea de Catalunya — to the police station. Formally, its materialisation is typically 'conceptual', based on performance, photo-documentation, metrics and slide projections. However, what is important to note is, with 'Global Conceptualism', Grup was admitted into the new proposed genealogy. It was therefore internationally recognised thanks to its political dimension.

Grup de Treball, *Recorreguts*, 1973, installation view, in 'From Revolt to Posmodernity', Museo Reina Sofía, 2017. Photograph by Juan Albarrán.

The Reina Sofía's current director Borja-Villel was previously director of Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). In 1999, a few months after his arrival at the Catalan museum, he opened the exhibition 'Grup de Treball' curated by Antoni Mercader and Glòria Picazo. Since then, the collective has been a corner-stone in the MACBA's collection display and in the redefinition of its institutional identity. Catalan art history had been traditionally linked to surrealist traces and the painting of Antoni Tàpies and his group Dau al Set; Borja-Villel's choice to feature Grup de Treball and its politicised conceptualism served as an entrance point to contemporaneity. The Grup and some of its former members — especially Muntadas and Portabella — were important figures in the successive presentations of the MACBA's collection where the connection between Spanish and Latin-American conceptualisms was also highlighted.

The repositioning of Spanish conceptualism not only served to build a new genealogy, but also to project a politicised approach to the museum's role in society. At the MACBA, Borja-Villel participated actively in the construction of a 'new institutionalism' or 'new institutionality', as the museum preferred to call it (Ribalta 2009), an undertaking that involved several European contemporary art institutions in the early twenty-first century (Kolb & Flückiger 2013). In this framework, the MACBA tried to rethink its goals in dialogue with social agents, especially in connection with the at that time rising anti-globalisation movement. This strategy was developed through an intense public programme that complemented the exhibitions and collection presentations. The will to open the museum to the society and commitment to protest movements and activists needed some key historical references as pillars for the new narrative. The Grup was one of them.

The Grup's work is closely related to the fight against dictatorship, working-class solidarity, the construction

of democracy, and institutional critique. But the collective, which dissolved in 1975, also represents the defeat of the leftish utopia by neoliberalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This utopia could be recovered in the 1990s by agents that pursued the radicalisation of democracy in and around the institution. According to Borja-Villel, 'art history is a space where a political battle takes place. (…) The historiographical narratives, although based on realities, act like fictions. The narratives that you construct as a historian, mediated by the institution, are utterances with effects on the present reality, and also modify the collective perception of the past' (Expósito 2015, pp. 103–4). From this perspective, the recuperation of the Grup served to put into circulation a political legacy that could be reclaimed by activists collaborating with the museum and who needed a genealogy in which they could place their practice.[6] This politicised history was widely explored and expanded in the research project 'Desacuerdos' (Disagreements) (Roma 2013), led by the MACBA in collaboration with other Spanish institutions, pretending a political revision of the narratives of local contemporary art.

In 2007, a new platform came to add more elements to this genealogy and to reinforce the relationship with Latin America. In May of that year, the MACBA hosted the seminar 'Thinking About Global Conceptualism'. The event was part of the independent research project 'Vivid [Radical] Memory. Radical conceptual art revisited: a social and political perspective from the East and the South', whose main objective was to discuss the historical recovery of those conceptualisms produced under repressive conditions.[7] 'Vivid [Radical] Memory' was led by Antoni Mercader, lecturer at University of Barcelona and co-curator of the 1999 show on the Grup. The seminar was a founding moment for the Red de Conceptualismos del Sur (Southern Conceptualisms Network), taking into account that some of the most active members of the network attended. Created in

October 2007, the Red Conceptualismos describes itself as 'an international platform for collective undertakings, thinking and political positioning' and intends to act as a political lobby — not only a research project — aiming to reactivate 'the memory of conceptual practices which was developed in Latin-America in the 1960s and 1970s' (Red Conceptualismos del Sur 2007). In the years following the Red de Conceptualismos were important interlocutors in the construction of the institutional project led by Borja-Villel at the MACBA and the Reina Sofía.
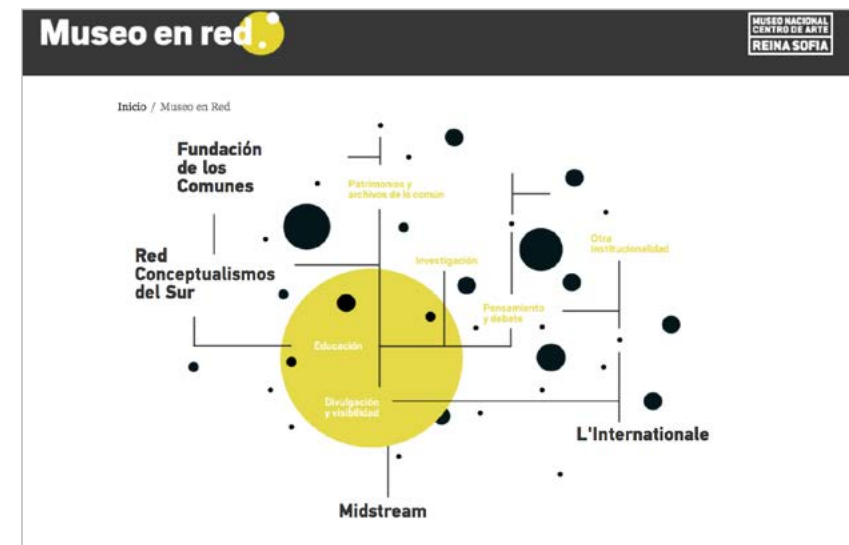
Museos en red, Museo Reina Sofía: http://www.museoreinasofia.es/museo-en-red.

CONCEPTUALISMS, THE CONTEMPORARY… AND THE AVANT-GARDE

This project for a new institutionality, first developed in the MACBA, travelled to the Reina Sofía in 2008, when Borja-Villel was elected to direct the museum. The objectives and strategies defined during his directorship in Barcelona were adapted to a bigger institution, and quickly won prominence in the media

and scholarship as the new contemporary museum paradigm: the Reina Sofía was a case study in Claire Bishop's well-known book *Radical Museology: Or What's Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (2014) in which she analyses three institutions as new experimental and politicised models, also including the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and +MSUM | Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, Ljubljana. In these museums, 'the contemporary is understood as a dialectical method and a politicized project with a more radical understanding of temporality' (Bishop 2014, p. 6). This dialectical contemporaneity would be tested in their collections, designed to 'suggest a provocative rethinking of contemporary art in terms of a specific relationship to history, driven by a sense of present-day social and political urgencies, and marked by particular national traumas: colonial guilt and the Franco era (Madrid), Islamophobia and the failure of social democracy (Eindhoven), the Balkan Wars and the end of socialism (Ljubljana)' (p. 27). In the case of the Reina Sofía, Bishop draws attention to the importance of critical pedagogies in its programme, and the revalorisation of non-Eurocentric modernities that invited thinking in a more complex contemporaneity. These alternative narratives, constructed in the Spanish case in collaboration with Red Conceptualismos, became an important chapter in Latin-American conceptualism.

There has certainly been an intense dialogue between the Red and the museum, wherein Latin American scholars and curators received support in a discursive space where they might test their research in seminars and exhibitions such as 'Losing the Human Form: A Seismic Image of the 1980s in Latin-America' (2012-13). In exchange, the Reina Sofía could incorporate Red's content and methodologies into its discourse. These included their critical approach to the archive — based on a commitment to its reactivation — the referred political weight of conceptualisms and even some

traces of blackness in the reflection on the 1804 Haiti revolution recovered in a public activity around the 2010 *bicentenarios*, the independence anniversary celebrations of some Latin American states (Red Conceptualismos del Sur 2010). These elements helped to redefine the imaginary role that the museum played in the international scene.

As Bishop notes in her book, the pedagogical and political aspects and the Southern perspective are standpoints from which to give a differentiated identity to the Reina Sofía's museological programme. However, some problems and contradictions underlie the museum's discourse, especially in relation to non-Eurocentric modernities. I would like to suggest two voids related to Spain's recent history that conditioned the position of the Spanish conceptualism in the Reina Sofía's collection. Bringing into play these 'other' modernities as seeds for a different contemporaneity necessarily implies a re-evaluation of the Spanish modernity — if such a thing exists — and, specifically, the role of the local avant-garde in art history. We cannot forget that some Spaniards — Picasso, Dalí, Miró, Gris — were central authors in the Paris avant-garde, heroes of modern art. But in the Spanish territory an avant-garde scene with a constellation of magazines and exhibitions comparable to European contexts did not exist. In addition, the very few avant-garde experiences developed in the 1930s were persecuted and dismantled during early Francoism. In different ways, *Guernica*, the highlight of the Reina Sofía collection, embodies all these issues. At the same time, it is important to note that the concept of avant-garde (*vanguardia*) lay at the heart of 1960s and 1970s Spanish artistic debates during the rise of conceptualisms. Art historian Paula Barreiro demonstrates how the concept of avant-garde was crucial in the theories of some militant critics in late Francoism and the transition to democracy in connection with the European redefinition of Marxism (Barreiro López 2016). The

notion of avant-garde allowed them to evaluate the relationship between art and politics from their specific context, conditioned by the weakness of local first avant-gardes and the historical trauma engendered by dictatorship. These contextual aspects – the relationship to the Spanish avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s and the evolution of the concept of avant-garde in the 1970s – could be productive in understanding modernity, conceptualism and the contemporary in Spain.[9] In my opinion, this has not been addressed by the Reina Sofía in the recuperation of Spanish conceptualisms.
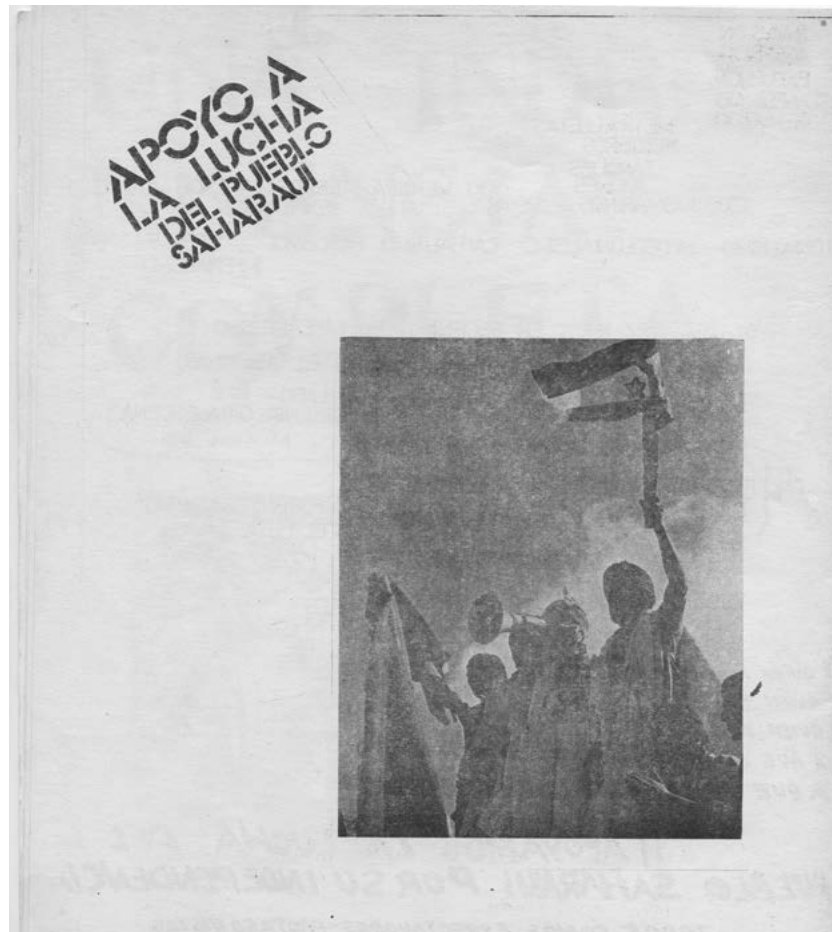
La Familia Lavapiés, *Solidarity with the fight of the Sahara people*, 1976. Courtesy Darío Corbeira.

A second blind spot in the presentation of conceptualist works in this collection relates to the Spanish colonial past. The colonial exploitation of the Americas was revisited in the exhibition 'Principio Potosí' in 2010 – curated by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Max Hinderer, Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann – but it does not have a presence in the collection. While the colonial relationship with America ended a long time ago, colonial dominance in Guinea and Western Sahara remained until 1968 and 1975. There are key conceptualist works criticising the Spanish colonial policy, specifically in Western Sahara: Madrid collective La Familia Lavapiés's *Solidarity with the fight of the Sahara people* (1976) and the Assemblea Democràtica d'Artistes de Girona (Girona Democratic Artists' Assembly) project *El Aaiun: Construction of a Spanish City in Western Sahara* (1976).[10] These works dealing with the (de)colonisation of Northern Africa have not been considered by the Reina Sofía, although *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966) – a film about the decolonisation of French Algeria – opens the final section of its collection. This could be owing to the museum's preference to read Spanish conceptualism in relation to Latin America and the shared experience under dictatorship, forgetting recent Spanish colonialism in Africa. Additionally, we need to keep in mind that the Spanish government that funds the museum would probably not assume the museum directly critique this colonial past. This past is still very present if we consider that Guinea has a cruel dictatorship and the Sahara territory is still occupied by Morocco after a failed decolonisation process. At the same time, an important part of the Spanish society is still not really sensitive with its colonial history. Colonial problems are not on the political agenda, and I am afraid certain public institutions would face serious problems if they tried forcing a debate on this topic.

Mexican scholar and curator Cuauhtémoc Medina explains that, although contemporary artistic practices imply a break from modern practices and their political

utopias, 'for those who come from the so-called periphery (the South and the former socialist world), the contemporary still has a certain utopian ring. For indeed, notwithstanding the cunning imbalances of power that prevail in the art world, the mere fact of intervening in the matrix of contemporary culture constitutes a major political and historical conquest' (Medina 2010). From this perspective, the recognition of Latin American — and on a lower level, Spanish — conceptualism after 'Global Conceptualism', if problematic, contributed to the deconstruction of the restrictive dimension of Western modernity and created a new point of entry into the contemporary for artistic contexts detached from the Western modern canon. This shift towards the South deeply affects the point of view from which the Reina Sofía tries to produce a decentred history (Borja-Villel 2008).

Opening of 'Pity and Terror. Picasso´s Path to Guernica', Museo Reina Sofía, April 2017. From left to right, TJ Clark, Anne Wagner and Manuel Borja-Villel. In the centre, King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofía.

Maybe, thanks to this strategic alliance with the Southern conceptualisms, Spanish conceptual — contemporary — art could take part in Global South art. Nevertheless, this operation clashes with the role of the museum in the consolidation of a 'democratic' cultural infrastructure. After Francoism, Spain came into the international arena from a kind of southern periphery. So, during the first years of the democracy, the state invested significant budget in the construction of a cultural system that tried to homologise Spanish art within Western art, without thinking of their own historic peculiarities and embracing a depoliticised contemporaneity. In the '90s, the Reina Sofía was an important part of this establishment. Its institutional position could help us understand its structural limitations in managing political issues, such as, for example, 'colonial guilt'. The current project for a Southern museum has to deal with its location in a state where the government — and their voters — be it conservative or progressive, tries to be part of a normative North.

REFERENCES

Barreiro López, P. 2016, *Avant-garde, Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool.

Bishop, C. 2014, *Radical Museology. Or What´s Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?* Koenig, London.

Borja-Villel, M. 2008, 'Museos del Sur', *El País*, 20 December.

Carrillo, J. 2008, 'Conceptual Art Historiography in Spain', *Papers d'art*, no. 83.

Davis, F. 2008, 'Entrevista a Luis Camnitzer', *Ramona*, no. 86.

Expósito, M. 2015, *Conversación con Manuel Borja-Villel*, Turpial, Madrid.

Fernández López, O. 2009, 'Uses of Conceptualism in Latin American Art Historiography', in Andrea Giunta (ed.), *Transnational Latin American Art from 1950 to the Present Day*, University of Texas, Austin.

Gintz, C. 1999, 'European Conceptualism in Every Situation', in L. Camnitzer, J. Farver and R. Weiss (eds). *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, exhibition catalogue, 28 April–29 August, Queens Museum of Art, New York.

Glusberg, J. 1972, 'Arte e ideología', in *Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano*, Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC), Buenos Aires.

Hontoría, J. 2010, 'Entrevista a Luis Camnitzer', *El Cultural*, 2 April.

Kolb, L. and Flückiger, G. 2013, 'New Institutionalism Revisited', *On Curating*, no. 21, pp. 6–17, viewed 11 September 2018, www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateiverwaltung/issue-21/PDF_to_Download/ONCURATING_Issue21_A4.pdf.

Marchán Fiz, S. 2012, *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto*, Akal, Madrid, original work published 1972.

Medina, Cuauhtémoc. 2010. 'Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Thesis', *e-flux journal*, no. 12.

Ramírez, M. C. 1999. 'Tactics of Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960-1980', in L. Camnitzer, J. Farver and R. Weiss (eds), *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s,* exhibition catalogue, 28 April–29 August, Queens Museum of Art, New York.

----,1993. 'Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America', in W. Rasmussen with F. Bercht and E. Ferrer (eds), *Latin American Artists of the XX Century*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Red Conceptualismos del Sur. 2010, 'Una denominación genérica. La proclama haitiana en la calle', *Carta*, no. 1.

----,2007, 'Founding Declaration', viewed 11 September 2018, https://redcsur.net/en/declaracion-instituyente/founding-declaration/.

Ribalta, J. 2009, 'Experiments in a New Institutionality', in M. Borja-Villel, K. M. Cabañas and J. Ribalta (eds), *Relational Objects. MACBA Collection*, MACBA, Barcelona.

Roma, V. 2013, 'A Critical Approach to the Project Desacuerdos', *Afterall*, no. 33.

NOTES

1   I would like to thank Antonio Mercader and Olga Fernández López for the information and remarks given during the research for this text. This work has been supported by the projects 'Decentralized Modernities' (HAR2017-82755-P) and 'Larga exposición' (HAR2015-67059-P).

2   In May 2009, the museum opened 'Collection 1: The Irruption of the 20th Century: Utopias and Conflicts (1900–1945)' where *Guernica* is framed and in November 2010, 'Collection 2: Is the War Over? Art in a Divided World (1945–1968)'.

3   Glusberg established contact with Marchán Fiz by 1967, and they met during the series of artistic meetings held under the title 'Los Encuentros de Pamplona' (The Pamplona Meetings) in 1972. Part of their correspondence is preserved in Marchán Fiz/Quevedo archive at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.

4   The show travelled from the III Bienal Coltejer de Medellín in 1972 to several venues around the world including Los Encuentros de Pamplona in 1972 and gallery Amadís in Madrid the following year.

5   Camnitzer explained he asked Gintz to participate in 'Global Conceptualism' so she could 'correct the mistakes' – the formalist approach – of the exhibition she curated in 1989, 'L'art conceptuel. Une perspective', Musée d´Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (Davis 2008).

6   These collaborations with activists had an important moment in the workshop 'Of Direct Action Considered as One of the Fine Arts', MACBA, October 2000.

7   This project was the point of departure for the exhibition 'Subversive Practices: Art Under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s–80s South America / Europe' (Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, May–August 2009), curated by an international team of researchers coordinated by Iris Dressler and Hans D. Christ.

8   In 2010, in collaboration with Red Conceptualismos del Sur the museum organised the seminar 'Disurptive Memories' around the *bicentenarios*. Red launched a call for a re-appropriation of the Haiti proclamation 'we're all Blacks now'.

9   From a different point of view, Olga Fernández López has stressed the need to think about the avant-garde category when theorising on Latin American conceptualism (Fernández López 2009).

10 The exhibition 'Provincia 53. Art, Territory and Decolonization of Western Sahara' curated by Juan Guardiola at MUSAC, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, 2017–18 addressed the Spanish policies in the Sahara and the uncompleted decolonisation of the territory.

VI
MATHIEU KLEYEBE ABONNENC

VI
Introduction
Mathieu Kleyebe
Abonnenc

Nick Aikens

In the final section, three papers focus on the work of Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc whose practice spans filmmaking, photography and installation. Often the outcome of long-term research projects and collaborations, his work engages with anti-colonial and liberation movements in 1960s Africa, as well as a number of cultural figures invested in forms of resistance. Abonnenc's approach to image, sound and form serve as a multifaceted investigation into how these figures and histories might be made either visible or manifest through the frameworks of art and art history. The decision to focus on Abonnenc's work within the context of the Black Artists & Modernism conference was an attempt to open up a cross-generational dialogue between practices and discourses and to see how some of the issues and strategies examined resonate in Abonnenc's work.

Art historian Sandra Delacourt opens the section by placing Abonnenc within the context of France's unresolved relationship with its colonial past, or what she terms its 'official praise' of its history. She argues that the artist instead invites us to consider this history from a multiplicity of perspectives and forms. Abonnenc employs a conceptual practice that negotiates the relationship, for instance, between the voice-over of two children in *An Italian Film (Africa Addio)* (2012) and the slow, long shots of a foundry in Sheffield, where copper Katanga crosses he purchased off eBay are melted down and recast. Delacourt examines the film, screened as part of the conference, explaining the copper used for making these crosses was mined aggressively in the Congo by the Belgians for whom the metal became a means to value labourers forced to work with it. The paired down forms Abonnenc produced as part of the installation *Untitled (Bodies in a Pile)* (2012), as Delacourt astutely analyses, mark

and make visible the lives lost through the extractive capitalism of colonial ruler, unravelling the complex set of relations between Minimalism, modernism and its forms of representation, and the violence of the colonial project.

Writer and curator Lotte Arndt similarly focuses on *An Italian Film* and *Untitled*, examining the film and sculpture as a 'Circular Critique of Colonial Modernity', pointing to the manner in which Abonnenc's works simultaneously disclose and shield the histories they address. *Untitled* is a reference to Minimalism's oblique, abstracted titles. The parenthetical addition to its title *(Bodies in a Pile)* names the bodies that have been forgotten or made invisible through colonial violence and renders this legible. That Abonnenc does this through basic forms of copper sculpture, themselves Katanga crosses melted down and recast, reveals the alchemical relationship the artist manages with his subject. As Arndt writes: 'The artist refuses on the one hand to reiterate violent representations of people, and on the other displaces his artistic gesture from living bodies to objects — a process that appears to be transformative as opposed to destructive.' Such an approach, she argues, successfully points to 'imperial entanglements of entire parts of a supposedly purely formalistic Western modernity'.

Curator Jennifer Burris offers a close reading of *Foreword to Guns for Banta* (2011) and *Song for a Mad King* (2012). Her account details the genealogy of the two projects: the slides and voice-overs of *Foreword to Guns for Banta* made following a series of interviews with Sarah Maldoror, director of the film *Guns for Banta* (1970) shot during Guinea-Bissau's fight for independence; and *Song for a Mad King*, a multi-screen installation made up of footage of three of composer Julius Eastman's compositions *Crazy Nigger, Evil Nigger* and *Gay Guerrilla*. Among detailed accounts of the works themselves, and the way in

which they have been presented in different contexts, Burris offers a sensitive and nuanced reflection on the unresolved relationship Abonnenc sets up with the figures and histories from which he draws. Tying this back to the conference she asks: 'How do overtly politicised questions of identity intersect with conceptual strategies of appropriation, re-presentation, context and siting, and homage?' In reflecting the wider issues at stake within 'Intersectional Readings, International Framings', we must consider what it means for aesthetic and discursive strategies to coexist across contexts and histories.

Back in Flow: Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's Inanimate Ancestors Get the Canonical Minimalists to Do the Twist

Sandra Delacourt

Over the past decade, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc developed a body of conceptual art practices that addresses visibility and presentness as discriminatory processes. The power differentials that shape our visual and conceptual world are the materials from which he intends to renegotiate our political inter-actions with what pre-exists, and thus to affect the conditions for the existing to emerge. In a French political context marked by official praise for national colonial memory with a law put into place on 23 February 2005 to provide recognition of the nation and national contribution in favour of French returnees, President Nicolas Sarkozy's 'Dakar Speech' on 26 July 2007 at the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar and the passing of selective immigration policies from 2006 to 2011 — Abonnenc re-injects our collective imaginaries with what had been made invisible, powerless and motionless throughout/by history. Breaking with the inertia to which countless lives are subjected, his works implement alternative politics for what kept moving without being seen or even allowed to move. Bodies that had been physically, socially or symbolically contained, reduced to insignificance or objectified are re-involved by the artist in a moving, growing and potentially shifting process. Theses 'bodies' play a decisive role in Abonnenc's art processes. Far from any naturalism, they are approached as a constructed materiality where the social and political order shapes, governs and moves the biological as much as the psychological. Apprehended from a Foucauldian perspective, they are regarded as possibilities of rethinking corporeality (Butler 2003; Fassin & Memmi 2004) and the frontiers between subjects and objects.
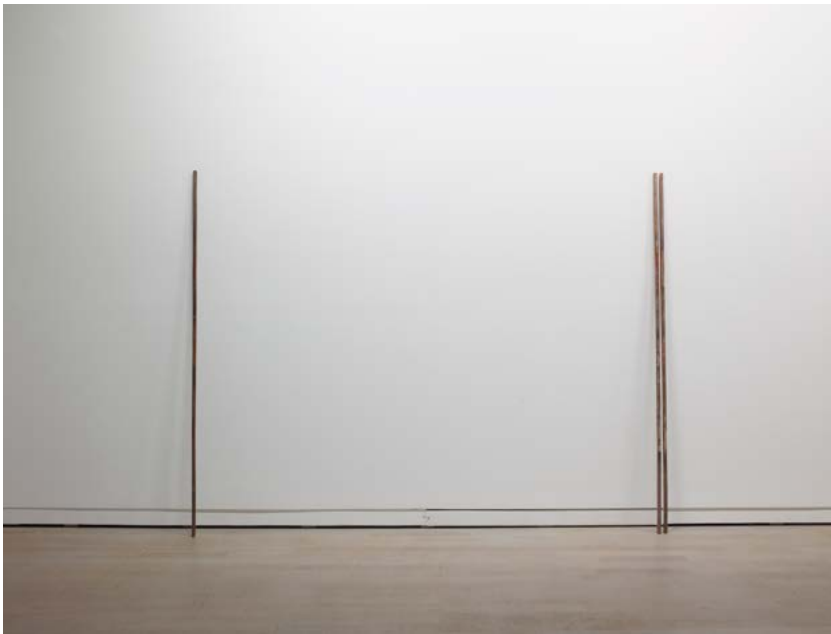
376

377

Back in Flow: Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's Inanimate Ancestors Get the Canonical Minimalists to Do the Twist - Sandra Delacourt

In his videos, photography, installations and drawings, Abonnenc embraces a multiplicity of intertwined histories — of capitalism, colonialism, racism, gender, medicine, science, rationality, valuation, arts, etc. — as well as his personal history. His conceptualism invests in the gap between such dividing lines. As the grandson of an entomologist in the French colonies, Abonnenc is keenly conscious of the historical and present conditions underlying the classification and ranking of the living. Considering himself as a relative of the *phlebotomus abonnenci*, an insect named by/after his grandfather, Abonnenc assumes a complex genealogy and dual relationship to the European history of taxonomy (Delacourt, Schneller & Theodoropoulou 2016, pp. 27–47). His artistic gestures disrupt accepted connections between words and images, narratives and power to confront theoretically absent discursive categories. To some extent, Abonnenc seeks the epistemological breaking point at which our access to unsayable or inaudible histories might be rethought. In this regard, his *An Italian Film (Africa Addio)* [fig. 1] and *Untitled (Bodies in a Pile)* [fig. 2], both 2012, deserve closer scrutiny. These two pieces develop a very specific dialectic between movement and paralysis, fruitfulness and sterility on a political, social, economic, historical and individual level. They show the artist's stake in using conceptual strategies to bring a multiplicity of inanimate ancestors back in flow.

BODIES OF COPPER: THE RISE OF AN INTERSECTIONAL SUBJECT

Born from a single gesture, this film and sculptural installation record the non-spectacular process of transforming copper ingots into thin bars at a human scale and formally close to Minimal art. Yet this conversion is not the usual or prosaic. The copper comes from antique Katanga crosses that turned up on eBay, exhumed from the Internet by the artist before being

Fig. 1 Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, *An Italian Film (Africa Addio). Part. 1: copper*, 2012, film still, HD film, colour, sound, 26 min. Courtesy gallery Marcelle Alix.

Fig. 2 Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, *Untitled (Bodies in a Pile)*, 2012, 3 of 11 copper rods 50 kg made from the melting of Katanga copper crosses. 180 x 1.5 x 1.5 cm, in 'Évocateur', Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard, Paris, 2012. Courtesy gallery Marcelle Alix.

378

379

Back in Flow: Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's Inanimate Ancestors Get the Canonical Minimalists to Do the Twist - Sandra Delacourt

Fig. 3 Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, *An Italian Film (Africa Addio). Part. 1: copper*, 2012, film still, HD film, colour, sound, 26 min. Courtesy gallery Marcelle Alix.

Fig. 4 Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, *An Italian Film (Africa Addio). Part. 1: copper*, 2012, film still, HD film, colour, sound, 26 min. Courtesy gallery Marcelle Alix.

entrusted to a British factory to be melted. For centuries these crosses embodied the wealth and socio-economic organisation of Katanga. As witnesses to precolonial and pre-industrial history, they were the object counterpart of the people who enabled their production. Their value has long been indexed to the actual lives of the 'copper eaters', a group of initiates who alone mastered the copper. They later became units for measuring the price of a slave and then forced labourers. With the policy of intensive exploitation of copper pursued by the Belgian colonial administration, these crosses calibrated in terms of human history began to disappear. Colonised bodies started mining in search of ore.

Diverting the codes of documentary film, *An Italian Film* shows labourers at work in a remnant of industrial capitalism, a bleak factory in Sheffield. In the workers' hands are the Katanga crosses purchased by Abonnenc. Their gestures are precise, calm, perfectly controlled and yet violent. What soon appears before our eyes is a transgenerational *danse macabre*, taking place in the antechamber of the visible [fig. 3]. Set somewhere between the bowels of the Earth and the heights of the copper's market value, Abonnenc's camera focuses on the logistics of exploitation that even today causes bodies to bend and yield. It lingers over the foundry workers' movements, and their relationship with absent bodies. As they hollow and shake out, pour in, punch and crush, a reply comes from the negative of their ancestors underground. The physical bodies of the 'copper eaters', the slaves, the forced labourers and the colonised, as well as their recent successors, have been largely swallowed up by the mines that turned Katanga into a voracious stomach of industrial capitalism. Many of them returned to the earth unnamed and without a burial ground. From generation to generation, they created fertile soil for Katanga malachite, as their bodies filled the holes that they wore themselves out digging [fig. 4]. Unlike visual regimes created by the
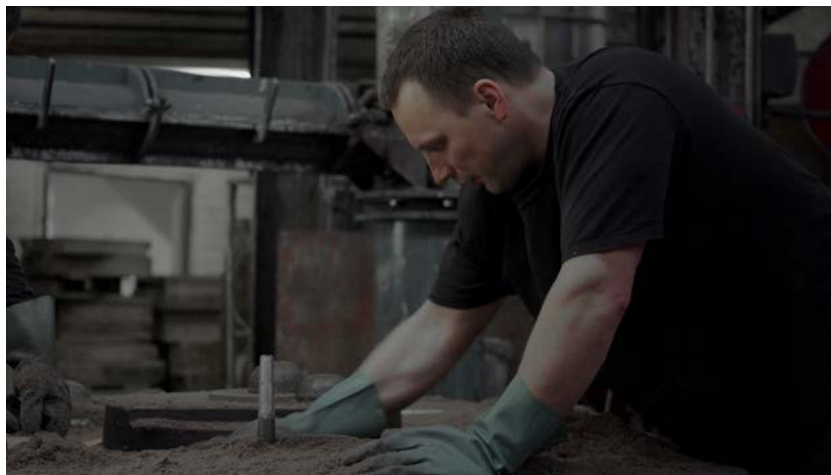
Fig. 5 Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, *An Italian Film (Africa Addio). Part. 1: copper*, 2012, film still, HD film, colour, sound, 26 min. Courtesy gallery Marcelle Alix.

Fig. 6 Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, *An Italian Film (Africa Addio). Part. 1: copper*, 2012, film still, HD film, colour, sound, 26 min. Courtesy gallery Marcelle Alix.

colonial imagination, *An Italian Film* translates deep layers of history without recourse to documentary images. Two off-screen voices alternately home in on and shift away from the workers' movements, and in doing so bring back to the surface of the visible lives erased from memory.

It is not insignificant that Abonnenc chose to tell their stories through the eminently metaphorical process of copper transformation. The workers who cast the copper have to separate the wheat from the chaff: they grind, sort and sieve the raw material until a powder is obtained onto which water is poured. The silt remains at the bottom. Only the finest parts of ore float to the top. *An Italian Film* shows this unique hierarchical process, the division between matter that is allowed to rise to the surface of the visible and the rest that is sent down into the depths of the Earth [fig. 5] – and between what is destroyed and returned to work. Abonnenc's visual strategies make real spaces for agency and action in the collective social body. As quasi-choreography, anonymous bodies set others in motion: some are melted down and others are protected, yet the instigator is never clear [fig. 6]. A redistribution of forces moves unpredictably into action. It is the space of such a reversibility that Abonnenc invests in and makes manifest.

CONCEPTUALISM AS A DEVICE OF CORPOREAL REPRESENTATION

An obvious issue raised by his work concerns how to render visible lives that thus far have been prevented, or have prevented themselves from appearing. How can their history be told without giving assent to their status as powerless objects or dominated subjects? In *An Italian Film*, and in *Untitled (Bodies in a Pile)*, Abonnenc stays away from any representation and assignment of identity. In doing so, he refutes the rank

and place attributed to one and all by history and collective imagination. As Judith Butler (2015) has pointed out, not everyone is able to assume a corporeal form. Anyone dispossessed of their body is necessarily excluded from social and political representation, as well as from representativeness. Butler's thinking is of great value in understanding what we witness in *An Italian Film*, a film that is first and foremost the history of a body, in itself intersectional, one to which genera-tions of declassified individuals have lent their features. This body needs other bodies to assert its right to corporeity. Though at first glance disconnected, the histories of British workers, Katanga copper eaters, American Minimalists and today's eBayers are physi-cally intertwined. As looking at one necessarily implies looking at the other, *An Italian Film* allows those absent to intrude into a familiar visual and narrative regime. These missing copper workers pervade a normative economy of the visible, thereby disrupting the meaning of what is seen, complicating what seemed legible and exposing transparency as a fraud.

It might seem paradoxical that Abonnenc should introduce subjects into the domain of the visible by industrially transforming them into sculptural objects [fig. 2]. Yet recasting them is an opportunity to provide them with lasting protection. Protected by their status as art objects, the copper ingots take their place in a museological institution, purchased in 2013 by the MAC/VAL, a contemporary art museum located in Vitry-sur-Seine. The work's entry as an inalienable part of French heritage is a belated recognition of the bonds of proximity, even kinship, with the copper eaters, of the colonised people of Katanga and the workers in Sheffield. Physically separate, but conceptually united, *An Italian Film* and *Untitled* silently occupy the museum that preserves them. Part of its rituals – if inert – exert influence over the museum's practices, actors and collection. Inscribing these sculptures in the direct line of Minimalism – an American art's heroic canon – is

also a way for Abonnenc to refuse to contribute to an asymmetric distribution of strength and weakness. Indeed, he makes no difference in his formal and processual treatment of the history of dominator and dominated. As he blends Katanga's colonial history with that of the United States, he redefines the axis of world trade, which, from the sixteenth century on, achieved a lasting alliance of colonialism with capitalism. Uniting these two sides of the history of cultural domination in one unsayable materiality is neither a caricature nor simplistic critique. This processual gesture reminds us that paradoxically both sides shared the common but unequal goal to put back in play the interrelation of power and knowledge, and dominant and minority narratives. As such, it is a precious prism through which to re-evaluate the ambiguous place of Minimalism in Western cultural history (Colpitt 1993). A turning point in the writing of art history, Minimalism was simulta-neously celebrated, as soon as the mid-1960s, as the climax of Modernism and overwhelming symptom of its brutal hegemony.

HISTORY AS A SPLIT BETWEEN POOR RELATION AND GLORIOUS RELATIVES

In 1966, Europe mourned the end of order in its former colonies. In *Africa Addio*, the original Italian 'mondo' movie by Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi that gave Abonnenc's film its title, Africa is shown as being given over to wild, anarchic hordes [fig. 7]. The bodies in the film are fragmented, disjointed, hysterical and out of control. That same year, the exhibition 'Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors' took place at the Jewish Museum in New York [fig. 8], presenting a first generation of US artists, later called Minimalists, celebrated for their highly rational and intellectual rigour. They used industrial manufacturing processes and materials, including copper. Their work featuring, in particular, perfectly controlled serial units,

Fig. 7 Poster for the film *Africa Addio* (1966) by Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi.

Fig. 8 View of patrons at the 'Primary Structures' exhibition at the Jewish Museum, New York, New York, April 26, 1966. Among the visible works are sculptures by Donald Judd (fore) and Ronald Bladen (rear). Photograph by Fred McDarrah.

saw them immediately acclaimed as heirs of the most prestigious Western art. Abonnenc's reference to Minimal art is much more relevant than what might initially be thought. Minimalism marked a profound paradigm shift in North American cultural history. Until then, US art history was based on a template of self-taught painters who set themselves apart from European aristocratic intellectualism. Despite the US's inter-national leadership, after the Second World War, North American art was still considered Europe's poor relation. The work of post-war artist-heroes such as Jackson Pollock was praised as primitivist. Since 1945, this situation appeared a narrative compromise allowing Europeans to acknowledge US art, whether they liked it or not, as a wild offspring training itself to perpetuate their glorious legacy.

With 'Primary Structures', American art was linked to the valorisation of order, clarity, impersonality, objectivity and control, both by its supporters and its detractors. Also in 1966, Lucy R. Lippard curated 'Eccentric Abstraction' as a response to the 'primary structurists' to re-inject sensual content into their rigorist voca-bulary. According to her, as Minimalists focused on structural concerns, they shrugged off any consideration for the living, personal and emotional. While her show addressed fundamental questions regarding gender and repressed feelings, it artificially widened the gap between Minimalism, perceived as strictly formalist, and post-Minimalism described as a desire to vivify inanimate shapes (Lippard 1966, p. 28). Although staged, this opposition of post-Minimalism to Minimalism has firmly taken root in the critical imagination (Fer 1999, pp. 27–36). If Lippard's work as an art critic and a curator has opened up alternative filiations and criteria for art practices, and has inscribed them in an explicitly politi-cal rather than self-referential history, it also made inaudible Minimal art an impure, subjectivised and subversive agent.

386

Back in Flow: Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's Inanimate Ancestors Get the Canonical Minimalists to Do the Twist - Sandra Delacourt   387

Associated with male domination, Minimal art was denounced from 1968 as the henchman of authoritarian history, and as the expression of established power and the strong arm of capitalism (Mellow 1968, pp. 21–6; Meyer 1969, pp. 20–2; Beveridge & Burn 1975, pp. 129–42; Levin 1979, p. 91; Foster 1986, pp. 162–83; Chave 1990, pp. 44–63; Reeves 1992, pp. 486–504; Buchloh 1992). It is interesting to note that, until then, Barbara Rose (1965, pp. 274–97), Mel Bochner (1966, p. 222), Lawrence Alloway (1966, pp. 36–60) and Wayne V. Andersen (1967, pp. 15–8) all viewed Minimal art as a means of salvation, emancipating artists from the wardship of Eurocentric, transcendent, essentialist and deterministic thinking. Minimalists – such as Donald Judd as opposed to Clement Greenberg – called into question the universal nature of narratives transposed onto North American art (Judd 1963, pp. 103–5). Though they strove to deconstruct Europe as the production centre for a 'hegemonic' rationality, and emphasised the importance of situated, territorialised thinking, their critical stance failed to undermine ambient universalism. During the 1970s, Minimalism became the symbol of international cultural domination. It was disinfected and void of all political and epistemological critique. Its neutralisation, immobilisation and sterilisation seem to have been the conditions on which it was authorised to enter art history. Separating the wheat from the chaff, the politics of the visible simply erased those whose work could not easily fit this rhetoric of rational order. Among the artists who took part in 'Primary Structures', British fellows and female artists such as Anne Truitt or Judy Chicago were soon ousted from this reductive canon of Minimalism.

CLAIMING PRESENTNESS

As Anibal Quijano has noted, decolonisation has in no way marked the end of coloniality as a matrix of power. Coloniality 'will remain unbeaten until the duality between "body" and "non-body" is ended' (Quijano 2007, pp. 111–18). In this respect, the virulent debate around the anthropomorphic dimension of Minimal art was significant. In the mid-1960s, the reception of Minimalism turned on a particularly thorny issue for critics: the problematic presence of inanimate objects that viewers were forced to face as equals. Although Minimalists rejected any notion of representation and any hidden, illusionistic or metaphorical content, overall their work was denied materiality and corporeity. In 1967, it was generically denounced by Michael Fried (1967, pp. 12–23) as empty presence that had to be filled with meaning by a gaze or a narrative. In 1972, Harold Rosenberg still viewed them as spaces onto which discourse was to be projected. Georges Didi-Huberman in *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (1992) spoke of interiority in search of a subject, and Thierry De Duve of specular devices in *Voici, 100 ans d'art contemporain* (2000). The great hostility shown towards the inanimate claiming to be a presence is of course reminiscent of the discourse that deprived colonised peoples of their corporeity and quality as subjects. It is worthwhile noting, as Gilles Manceron did in *Marianne et les colonies* (2005), that colonial discourse borrowed the vocabulary for its 'civilising mission' from that previously used for qualifying provinces and rural areas, as well as farmers, and later factory workers. The logic pertaining to such discourse is the same as the historical phenomena that appropriated the female body, and colonised body, for social reproduction as explored by Elsa Dorlin in *La matrice de la race. Généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la Nation française* (2006).

388

389

Back in Flow: Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's Inanimate Ancestors Get the Canonical Minimalists to Do the Twist - Sandra Delacourt

Using history to appropriate the power of procreation, the art historical rhetoric of the empty form highlights the strength of the control over what is allowed or not to fertilise the social body and collective imagination. While Minimalists garnered international recognition, they had little leverage over regimes and politics of the visible. They were either praised or disparaged by the Eurocentric discourses they denounced. In this light, it is not insignificant that the fight to claim presentness for inanimate objects – and moreover an active presentness – was so vehement. In the main, the discursive arsenal on domination, the dissociation of body and spirit, hierarchy and the legitimacy of what may or may not be seen, resisted any attack mounted by Minimalism.

It is not the purpose of *An Italian Film (Africa Addio)* or of *Untitled (Bodies in a Pile)* to rehabilitate Minimal art or to put it on trial. Yet these two works do seem to put Minimalism back in motion, to restore the complexity that had been removed. In Abonnenc's work, Minimal art clarifies forms of visual paralysis and the epistemic framework used to hold it in place. Apprehending it as such involves acknowledging the struggles mounted against the modern episteme as well as the gradual icy logic it used to systematically quash them. Variations in the degree of violence exerted for such repression are extremely significant: calibrated by the degree of dehumanisation applied in each case, its own hierarchisation of life is exactly reflected. The struggle of North American Minimalists was deemed reasonably rational and simply ignored. The struggles of colonised peoples were bestialised and punishable by death. Denying Minimal art its dimension as a strategy of resistance to a Eurocentric gaze only renders the mechanics of this implacable, repressive logic – as well as its intersectional nature – less perceptible. To some extent, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's two works under discussion here invite us to question the way in which the emancipation of ones becomes a factor both to

mash-up and render the others invisible. Even the title *Untitled (Bodies in a Pile)* draws our attention to the complex stratification of the crushing action. It refers us to absent bodies, and also to our own spectators' bodies crammed in, facing an empty frame [fig. 2]. Taking us back to our own ranking in human hierarchy, our physical presence before the work formalises the interconnecting positions of ascendancy and vassalage, and the fear of personal declassification that buttresses such positions in a perpetual return to order.

REFERENCES

Alloway, L. 1966, 'Systemic Painting', reprint in G. Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995.

Andersen, W. V. 1967, 'Looking Back From the Sixties', in *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, exhibition catalogue, 28 April–25 June, County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.

Beveridge, K. and Burn, I. 1975, 'Don Judd', *The Fox*, no. 2.

Bochner, M. 1966, 'Primary Structures', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 40, no. 8, reprint in James Meyer (ed.), *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, Phaidon, London, 2000.

Buchloh, B. H. D. 1992, *Essais historiques II*, in trans. C. Gintz, Art édition, Villeurbanne.

Butler, J. 1993, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge, London.

----. 2015, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Chave, A. C. 1990, 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 64, no. 5.

Colpitt, F. 1993, *Minimal Art: A Critical Perspective*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, original work published 1990.

Delacourt, S., Schneller, K. and Theodoropoulou, V. eds. 2016, *Le Chercheur et ses doubles*, B42, Paris.

Fassin, D. and Memmi, D. 2004, *Le Gouvernement des corps,* EHESS, Paris.

Fer, B. 1999, 'Objects beyond Objecthood', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 2.

Foster, H. 1986, 'The Crux of Minimalism', in Howard Singerman (ed.), *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art (1945–1986)*, exhibition catalogue, 10 December–10 January, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Fried, M. 1967, 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 10.

Judd, D. 1963, 'Kansas City Report', *Arts Magazine*, reprint in D. Judd, *Complete Writings*, NYU Press, New York, 1975.

Levin, K. 1979, 'Farewell to Modernism', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 54, no. 2.

Lippard, L. R. 1966, 'Eccentric Abstraction', *Art International*, vol. 10, no. 9.

Mellow, J. 1968, 'Everything Sculpture Has, My Work Doesn't', *New York Times*, March 10.

Meyer, U. 1969, 'De-objectification of the object', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 43, no. 8.

Quijano, A. 2007, '"Race" et colonialité du pouvoir', *Mouvement*, vol. 3, no. 51.

Reeves, C. 1992, 'Cold Metal: Donald Judd's Hidden Historicity', *Art History*, vol. 15, no. 4.

Rose, B. 1995, 'ABC Art' (1965), *Art in America*, reprint in G. Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995.

392

393

Back in Flow: Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's Inanimate Ancestors Get the Canonical Minimalists to Do the Twist - Sandra Delacourt

Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's Collected Fragments

Jennifer Burris

The beginning is a moment of great delicacy. I am speaking of a past shorn of meaning, of a story that has lost its shadow and can no longer claim a meaning. What follows here is a collection of fragments, of snatches of silence.
— Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc,
Foreword to Guns for Banta, 2011

The central element of Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's multinodal and research-driven artwork *Foreword to Guns for Banta* is a black and white slideshow of graphic images and archival photographs, on top of which is an audio track consisting of a three-part conversation between artist as interviewer, militant and director. Drawn from multiple archives concerning the making, and subsequent disappearance, of a liberation film shot in 1970 during Guinea-Bissau's fight for independence, this parafictional — 'real and/or imaginary personages and stories … oriented less towards the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust. … Fictions … experienced as fact' (Lambert-Beatty 2009) — text is based on a series of interviews that the artist conducted over the course of three years with *Guns for Banta's* director, Sarah Maldoror. Collating her stories — as recounted in person decades after the fact — with testimonies, narratives and archival documents, Abonnenc composes a polyphonic history that spools out the falsities of memory as they live in the present alongside the misperceptions of fact and the missing film reels themselves.

Organised by curator Anna Colin in 2011 as a solo exhibition at Gasworks in London, a presentation that incorporated archival documents alongside a screening

programme of Maldoror's films *Monangambéee* (1969) and *Sambizanga* (1972), Abonnenc's *Guns for Banta* was also exhibited at Manifesta 8 in Murcia that same year. Widely reviewed (Wilson-Goldie 2011; Teasdale 2011), this project in many ways established the frames by which his practice has since been known: an interest in anti-colonial liberation struggles and related militant movements of the 1960s and 1970s; multidisciplinary investigations that traverse sound, print material and film; the notion of 'minor' or under-recognised histories and similarly under-recognised historical figures from the mid-twentieth century; and the idea of the 'lost' or 'absent' document as the basis for a recuperative process of artistic research. The language to which Abonnenc gravitates in his titles and texts – a formalist reliance on fragments and forewords (an almost literal conflation of textual marginalia with marginalised histories) placed in dialogue with a conjuring of orphans, ghosts and shadows (fugue-like or otherwise fantasised memories of those people whose lives and experiences reside at the core of such inquiries) – further articulates the way in which his work imbues formal categories of academic inquiry with personalised longing.

It is this longing or desire, which appears to drive so much of Abonnenc's practice that – particularly when it is manifest *through* or *as* the Conceptual art gesture – both compels and concerns me. As artist Park McArthur said to me when describing her decision to reference the deceased writer Marta Russell, a person whom she had never met nor corresponded with, in her solo gallery exhibition 'Ramps' at Essex Street in New York:

> In a purely affective or charged way I imagined that she was very angry at injustice in the world, and that the installation is sort of like these two proposals that face one another. She did something with her anger, and led people through very specific kinds of analysis. [...] I respect and admire and value that channelling of anger. And even though your question

of context remains open for me – it is something I need to think more about – I guess I wanted to be close to her somehow, which I understand is an imposing of my own desires (Burris 2014).

Facing a choreographed field of collected, found and made handicap-accessible ramps from art spaces across New York, McArthur placed a large wall vinyl containing Russell's Wikipedia page entry. This mode of explicit referencing – a name, an adaptive and easily accessible site for collective knowledge, located in the world outside the gallery, but writ large across its white walls – to some extent shares an instinctive drive with many of Abonnenc's projects in that it manifests affective desire for connection with a lesser-known historical artist or writer through some combination of appropriation, incorporation and homage. What differentiates Abonnenc's works is that, unlike McArthur, who makes her deep personal engagement with these questions explicit, Abonnenc's own subject position remains deliberately ambiguous. The 'I' in his parafictional narratives and dialogues – both real and imagined – is a slippery sign that never quite coheres: a pulsing mode of enquiry (a line of desire or flight) with ambiguous intentions.

It is in this ambiguity of Abonnenc's subjective identification – relational structures and those inevitable power dynamics contained within – with his chosen community of artistic forerunners, people with whom the artist seems to seek a harmony or at least a means of cohabitation, that we find a relation with the ideas proposed by the Black Artists & Modernism (BAM) research group's inquiry into 'Conceptualism – Intersectional Readings, International Framings'. Namely, how do overtly politicised questions of identity intersect with conceptual strategies of appropriation, re-presentation, context and siting and homage? This tension exists in Abonnenc's chosen referents as well (the artistic legacy of mid-twentieth-century liberation movements)

through the question of how might the 'militant image' or the radical gesture – designed to advance a singular, ideologically determined meaning – intersect with the conceptual artistic gesture: defined by its ability to hold contradictory meanings, an explicit openness towards multiple interpretations? Are these two seeming polarities in the field of political and artistic discourse – both of which emerged most strongly in the 1960s and '70s – as divergent as has been traditionally presented? As written on the walls of a living room film set in Jean-Luc Godard's film *La Chinoise*, which addresses the pedagogical radicalisation of students in the '60s, what relationship do 'vague ideas' hold with 'clear images' and can this dialogue ever be non-confrontational? Curator Ricardo Nicolau cites the relationship between *La Chinoise* and Abonnenc's work as the aesthetics and techniques of pedagogy rather than 'militant image' (Nicolau 2012); in the second half of the 1970s, Godard was invited by the Mozambique government to participate in the creation of an independent state television and cinema (Gray 2011), beautifully explored by artist Angela Ferreira.

Abonnenc's work pertains to this discussion not just because he incorporates militant imagery or artistic histories associated with forms of radical protest alongside the recognisable strategies of Conceptualism, making a strong claim for the non-polarity of these two modes of art making in his own practice. He continually seeks out moments from the 1960s in which Conceptual strategies reside at the core of direct political action. He shows, in a way, that such oppositionality of the 'vague idea' and the 'clear image' was always only imagined. What further complicates his body of work, however, particularly in relation to a larger research inquiry into BAM, is the way in which, through artistic homage, Abonnenc places his own identity – a white European artist living in Paris, with ties to French Guyana – into histories of the black diaspora. He often uses invitations to exhibit as an opportunity to 'give the

space over', to lesser-known historical figures – either a white filmmaker who focuses on black liberation movements or a black American composer who explicitly plays with racist language. By doing so Abonnenc creates structures for veneration while appropriating histories from which he is personally removed. This complexity of referent is the second, frequently unseen, ambiguity or conceptual absence around which his practice revolves. This essay does not intend to provide fixed answers to the questions of who has the right to speak for whom and about what stories, and where the freedom of desire and affective affinity ends. Its focus on two of Abonnenc's multi-part works – the aforementioned *Guns for Banta* and 'Songs for a Mad King' – further question the place of identity within conceptual gestures of appropriation, creative pedagogy and homage.

FOREWORD TO GUNS FOR BANTA

In 1970, French filmmaker of Guadeloupian origin Sarah Maldoror spent three months on the island of Diabada in Guinea-Bissau to shoot a feature-length film focused on the liberation struggles of Portuguese-colonised Africa. Playing with the overlap between fiction and *cinema verité, Guns for Banta* told the story of a woman named Awa whose involvement in the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) was central to the decolonisation effort. Although this storyline is entirely imagined, all of the actors were actual members of the liberation army. After the film shooting, and disagreements around the editing process, the reels were confiscated by the Algerian army and to this day remain unseen. Reasons for this censorship remain murky. Maldoror has asserted that mainstream agents in the country's revolution movement were uncomfortable with the work's feminist argument. The general plot is as follows:
    [Awa] becomes an activist in her village, explaining

the need to form a party not only to defend the farmers but also to organize the resistance and prepare the first guerrilla actions. […] One day, in Awa's absence, Kurt, a Portuguese officer arrives in the village with his men … Kurt gathers the population in the central square and searches the villagers' houses for pamphlets, photographs, symbols, flags or any sign demonstrating their sympathy for the announced rebellion. Nothing is found. In a fury, he executes a number of randomly picked men in cold blood. At that moment, Awa returns to the village, carrying her sick niece on her back. As she sees the Portuguese she decides not to flee; on the contrary, she advances towards him thinking she might stop the massacre. But the officer Kurt … takes his weapon and shoots twice, killing Awa and her niece. Her death more than her former words and appeals emboldens the village to react (*Manifesta 8* 2010, pp. 208–9).

This narrative structure hinges not only on the importance of the 'militant image' – those rumoured photographs and pamphlets – but also on the *absence* of such imagery as the spark for contextual action. At the beginning of the independence movement, 99 per cent of the local population in Guinea-Bissau was illiterate (Lozano cited in Câmara Pestana 2012, p. 136). (Catalina Lozano curated a solo exhibition of Abonnenc's work at Museo Jumex in Mexico City titled 'Sobre la soledad' (12 May–24 June 2018) that delved into the histories of *Tricontinental* magazine, published in Cuba, and the influence of Frantz Fanon's writings on the decolonial movement.) In such an environment, the need for symbolic markers as pedagogical tools seems apparent: how might information concerning the structures of class oppression and the need for revolution be disseminated using a purely visual means? But what is interesting about Maldoror's film is that she attributes such reductive thinking (namely: that an illiterate population is only able to learn via graphic imagery and overt symbolism) to the Portuguese

colonisers. It is Kurt and his soldier thugs who initiate the search for material objects, and in so doing attribute an outsized value to such pedagogical mechanisms. In contrast, the villagers are stimulated to act not by words or images but by a series of relational actions that lay bare the uneven operations and abuses of power.

Maldoror's film embraces a conceptual gesture in that the absence of the work, or the lack of a tangible aestheticised object, catalyses an affective response that generates active resistance and social change. This absence is situated in a particular context and as a response to the immediate cultural and political environment. Such definitions follow Luis Camnitzer's articulation of conceptualism not as a style or a rupture away from mainstream modernism, but as a contextualised (in that it is dependent on specific ideological referents) collection of strategies coupled with creative pedagogy. Although conceptualism could be described as the emphasis on idea over craft or as dematerialisation, its core lies in 'an effort to seriously and radically change society, wherein museums and galleries are just small symptomatic manifestations of the problem' (Camnitzer 2007, p. 14). It is precisely such thinking that leads Camnitzer to claim the Tupamaro guerrilla movement in mid-1960s Uruguay as the proto-conceptualists of Latin America. Camnitzer's articulation, which draws on his knowledge of Latin America and is informed by the landmark 1999 Queens Museum exhibition 'Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s', disassociates conceptualism from a particular group of artists, a particular place or a particular time period (undermining the standard art historical framings of an '-ism' itself, which constantly seeks genealogies of influence and origin). This perspectival shift leads us to see the conceptual strategies Abonnenc uses in *Guns for Banta* as deriving from, rather than adding to, the conceptual nature of his source material.

The absence that is most frequently discussed in Abonnenc's multi-year project with Maldoror — the missing reels, confiscated by the Algerian army — points to a prior absence in the parafictional world of the film itself: the unfound, and likely never-existent, revolutionary images rumoured to be in the villagers' homes. Despite *Guns for Banta*'s manifest use of the styles and linguistic tactics associated with conceptualism — the essay-film; the installation of found objects; an enigmatic script — Abonnenc's work does not apply a 'conceptual' gloss to the graphic propaganda aesthetics sourced in archival photography and historicised pamphlets. Rather, by pointing out and thereby redoubling the manifold absences situated within and throughout this source material, he draws forward a conceptual strategy embedded in, rather than contradicting, the 1960s militant image. As 'Voice B (the interviewer)', i.e., the artist, says towards the end of the slideshow:

> At this point, the scripts diverge. We have three different potential endings. But while each of them varies in the detail, they all converge finally on the same point, like an empty space, a black hole swallowing up everything around it: the massacre of the villagers and the heroine's death. We have no images of this either, and we will not look for any images to substitute for this moment. Nothing could stand in for those missing images, in that place.

SONGS FOR A MAD KING

In 2012 Abonnenc premiered another multi-part body of work based on what, for a period of time, had been the 'lost' compositional legacy of minimalist musician Julius Eastman. First presented by curator Okwui Enwezor at the Palais de Tokyo as part of the 'Intense Proximity' triennial, this series of piano concerts and open rehearsals highlighted three of what are arguably Eastman's most iconic compositions, all from 1979:

Crazy Nigger, Evil Nigger and *Gay Guerrilla*. The following year at Kunsthalle Basel, this four-piece piano installation and performance schedule was restaged as part of Abonnenc's solo show, 'Songs for a Mad King'. In some ways functioning as public memorial, the exhibition's title refers to a 1973 recording, 'Eight Songs for a Mad King', by Peter Maxwell Davies, in which Eastman's powerful baritone occupies the title role as an eccentric king endeavouring to teach a group of caged birds to sing.

Born in 1940, Julius Eastman studied first piano and then composition at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute, a leading music school, before joining the Creative Associates programme at the State University in Buffalo. While in residence at this locus for avant-garde music in upstate New York, he began to develop conceptual compositions in the style of John Cage. Eastman soon acquired a reputation for provocation, unintentionally offending his teacher by incorporating a male striptease into a performance of 'Song Books', a move that Cage incorrectly interpreted as a mockery of his own sexuality. Relocating to Manhattan by 1970, Eastman performed both 'uptown' with classic ensembles like the Brooklyn Philharmonic and also 'downtown' with artists like Meredith Monk and Arthur Russell. After achieving a relatively brief period of professional success in the late 1970s and early 1980s with performances at established venues like Northwestern University in Chicago and The Kitchen in New York, Eastman's final decade was marked by increasingly difficult financial circumstances. Evicted from his apartment in the East Village and dependent on homeless shelters and the generosity of friends — circumstances through which he lost all of his recordings, music and archival material — Eastman died in 1990 at the age of forty-nine.

In 1998 the composer Mary Jane Leach, a friend of Eastman's from the downtown music scene, began what she describes as the unintentional and exhaustive process of rescuing this dispersed and forgotten body of work. Much like Abonnenc's archival research into Maldoror's filmmaking history, Leach's retrieval process focused on personal networks and informal interviews: seeking audio tapes, written scores, interviews and photographs scattered across private file cabinets, basements and institutional repositories. In 2005, seven years after her initial inquiries, Leach had gathered enough original recordings to release a three-disc box set titled *Julius Eastman: Unjust Malaise*. Coinciding with what music historian Alex Ross describes as the growing veneration of composers like Steve Reich and Philip Glass, *Unjust Malaise* forced this ever-narrowing minimalist canon to recon with his music's use of uncontrolled, delirious romanticism, anarchic dissolution and a 'hint of disco' (Ross 2017). In addition, Eastman's often-dramatised display of his subject position as a black, gay man — roles he foregrounded in his work's titles — similarly forced this often-homogenous field of academic serialism and atonal progressions to pay attention to its relationship with the forceful charge of identity politics; not to mention the central role that jazz — and in particular John Coltrane's influence — played in the early development of Minimalist music (Leach 2005).

In his introduction to the 1990 Northwestern performance, Eastman describes his thinking behind the use of these racist epithets as titles for a series of compositional works as seeking, a 'basicness... that person or thing that is fundamental... something that attends itself to the ground'. He traces the term to those first enslaved peoples forcibly brought to the United States to work in the 'field'. When used to describe progressive sonic structures, in which, the 'third part has to contain all the information of the first two parts... an attempt to make every section contain all of the

information of the previous sections', we see how this overtly *American* music, an elegant frame reflective of academic training in serialism, is grounded — as are all things American — by the systemic dehumanisation of people through processes of naming; the 'field nigger', as Eastman says, residing at the basis (again, that *basicness*) of America's 'great and good' economic system, creating those conditions of possibility for his music to be made and presented. In New York at the time of these works' composition (1978–9), the use of this epithet in relation to abstract artworks and the question of who has the right to it, was under intense debate. In 1979 at the downtown exhibition venue Artists Space, a little-known white artist called Donald Newman exhibited a series of abstract charcoal drawings/photography triptychs (1976–9) that he called *The N*gg*r Drawings*. This show initiated widespread debates, protests, sit-ins and open letters.

If Eastman's titles speak to systems of progressive oppression and both social and political whitewashing, his third — *Gay Guerrilla* — renders even more personal the derogatory uses to which language, or naming, is put by reframing a term that can be used to marginalise as a call to revolutionary action instead:

> The reason I use 'gay guerrilla' is because these names either I glorify them or they glorify me... a guerrilla is someone who is sacrificing his life for a point of view... If there is a cause and if it is a great cause, those who belong to that cause will sacrifice their blood because without blood there is no cause... That is the reason I use gay guerrilla, with the hopes that I might be one if called upon to be one (Eastman 1980).

The university concert that followed this spoken introduction figures largely in Abonnenc's 'Songs for a Mad King'. To begin, out of a known corpus of over fifty works, the performances at Palais de Tokyo and Basel present the same three works performed at

Northwestern. Eastman scored each so that multiple instruments of the same kind could play them: a compositional strategy drawing on conceptualism in its de-emphasising of the significance of any particular object. Yet despite this openness of interpretation, Abonnenc chose to present the three pieces as an arrangement for four pianos in a manner almost identical to the Northwestern staging (the one difference is that the pianos are arranged as a cross another rather than in a row, perhaps a concession to the different spatial requirements of a gallery versus a concert proscenium).

Abonnenc's artistic gesture thus rests not so much in archival research – the major part of it was already completed by Leach and others – or in an adaptive re-use of the found material, but in straight re-presentation. A secondary question concerns what differentiates this work from a curatorial gesture. Eastman's resurgent influence has been exhaustively presented by exhibitions and music venues in recent years – at the Kitchen building on four years of research by Tiona Nekkia McClodden and Dustin Hart (*Julius Eastman* 2018) and in large-scale surveys that seek to articulate new canonisations (*Minimalism* 2018–19). While the line between art and curatorial practice is less interesting to me, what does remain compelling is whether Abonnenc's decision to transform his invitation to exhibit to homage is an act of needed historical recuperation, or one of appropriation. Here, the artist's conceptual strategy seems to be wholly about contextualisation: a drawing of attention to ideological and formal precursors by shifting the frame of an existing work. His intervention is two, seemingly straightforward, acts of transposition: bringing a concert intended for a theatre to an art gallery and a black American composer's music to a European institution, where it is publicised in conjunction with the name of a European artist.

But what does it mean to thus re-present another artist's existing body of work, as though it were a urinal? In this act of stated homage (the 'Songs for...' of Abonnenc's exhibition title containing the double referent of Davies's recording and music played *in honor of*...) the absence, or ambiguity, of Abonnenc's personal investment becomes even more apparent than in prior works. The blood that Eastman speaks of – signifying both his desire to inhabit a mode of personal sacrifice so complete that it physically injures, as well as his need to find a language that somehow encapsulates such desire for such martyrdom – when transposed to the Kunsthalle Basel (unlike at Palais de Tokyo, where surrounding, politically charged artworks reinvested the performances with further layers of meaning) begins to feel like an intellectual exercise of in-the-know fandom. This is not a critique of Abonnenc's work in particular, but a way of articulating, through his practice, those inherent risks in conceptual gestures that revisit the histories of black artists in modernism and play with the parafictional in order to establish affective, imagined, affinities. When systemic oppression and the abuses of power surround and submerge the simplest gestures of everyday life, the easiness by which homage might become another European *Wunderkammer* of 'otherness', its primary difference being that conceptualism is now the driving feature, becomes critically suspect.

REFERENCES

Burris, J. 2014, 'Park McArthur by Jennifer Burris', *BOMB Daily*, 19 February, viewed 31 October 2019, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/park-mcarthur/.

Camnitzer, L. 2007, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation*, University of Texas Press, Austin.

Gray, R. 2011, 'Cinema on the cultural front: Film-making and the Mozambican revolution', *Journal of African Cinemas*, vol. 3, no. 2.

Eastman, J. 1980, 'Spoken Introduction to The Northwestern University Concert', on *Unjust Malaise*, New World Records, New York.

Julius Eastman: That Which Is Fundamental. 2018 [exhibition], The Kitchen, New York. 19 January–10 February.

Lambert-Beatty, C. 2009, 'Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility', *October*, no. 129, Summer, pp. 51–84.

Leach, M.-J. 2005, 'In Search of Julius Eastman', *NewMusicBox*, 8 November, viewed on 31 October 2019, http://www.newmusicbox.org/article.nmbx?id=4411.

Lozano, C. 2012, 'Defining Freedom to Become Free', in M. K. Abonnenc and T. Câmara Pestana (eds), *To Whom Who Keeps A Record*, Serralves, Porto.

Manifesta 8. The European Biennial of Contemporary Art. Region of Murcia (Spain) in dialogue with Northern Africa, 2010, Silvana Editoriale, Milan.

Minimalism: Space. Light. Object, 2018–19 [exhibition], The National Gallery Singapore. 16 November 2018–14 April 2019.

Nicolau, R. 2012, 'Cinema and School', in M. K. Abonnenc and T. Câmara Pestana (eds), *To Whom Who Keeps A Record. Serralves*, Porto. Manifesta 8. The European Biennial of Contemporary Art.

Ross, A. 2017, 'Julius Eastman's Guerrilla Minimalism', *The New Yorker*, January 23, viewed on 31 October 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/23/julius-eastmans-guerrilla-minimalism.

Teasdale, P. 2011, 'Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc', *Frieze*, no. 139, May.

Wilson-Goldie, K. 2011, 'Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc', *Bidoun*, no. 24, Spring.

Fissuring the Erasures of Historical Violence:

Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's Work as a Circular Critique of Colonial Modernity

Lotte Arndt

The future is now dead,
the past unimaginable.
–*An Italian Film (Africa Addio)*, 2012

As the status quo of an aesthetical practice that is surrounded by its liberty, it remains nevertheless mainly art, that can provide the starting point for overcoming its limits, because its possible self-abolition can only start from within art itself.
–Stakemeier, 2017, p. 9[1]

Over the past decade, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's work has ceaselessly interrogated aesthetic and political hegemonies and Eurocentric narratives from the perspective of postcolonial critic. Born in French Guyana and living in continental France, for over a decade the artist has been conducting an engaged conceptual practice dealing with the possibilities of addressing colonial power relations, present-day racism in the aftermath of the French colonial empire and modernity's binary divisions. Frequently, his work creates intersections between autobiographical reference points and wider shared historical events. Getting involved in chosen lineages, Abonnenc places himself in troubled zones where a sense of belonging is rarely easy. He uses family archives, builds on work of black modernist and conceptual artists (Sarah Maldoror, Adrian Piper, Julius Eastman, Aaron Douglas and others), and interrogates the art field's inherent mechanisms to exclude and assign, and to unmark and neutralise, the work and its maker.

Important parts of his work deal conceptually with representation strategies that celebrate the legacies of anti-colonial practices and discrepant modernities in the art field. But the works I am concerned with here focus on the economy and material procedures used to whitewash forms and materials, to strip them of their (hi)stories, to isolate and decontextualise them. Abonnenc critically engages with the history of minimalism by connecting it to raw material exploitation in the colonies, and the images that correspond to it: colonial revisionist, white supremacist filmmaking. The two works I discuss turn the gaze around to focus on imperial violence rather than resistance, on the expropriations conducted in the frame of colonialism and global capitalism, and on the — direct or indirect, historical and present — complicity of the art field.[2]

AT THE WORKSHOP AND BEYOND

At first glance, none of the above-mentioned topics appear to be treated in *An Italian Film (Africa Addio)* (2012), which shows, in carefully shot images, the cutting, melting and reshaping of half a dozen copper crosses. Bodies of white British craftsmen are at work, executing their gestures with professional precision. The focus is on the working process, the cutting and the steady pace and gestures made in no rush. Further, the film captures the material work on objects that undergo a transformation, rendering their previous appearance unrecognisable. The images are calm, the frame is stable, close-ups follow on from wider-angle views; the camera observes the foundry peacefully, where the working process unfolds in an experienced, skilful and concentrated manner.

The images of working bodies in the foundry are accompanied by a voice-over that introduces another narrative level spoken by two children or adolescents voices. They read a text with strong accents from the

formerly industrial region of Leeds, underscoring the geographical inscription and cultural specificity of the foundry. The heavy, often nightmarish narrative far exceeds what the children reading it might understand, beginning with a deeply pessimistic reflection on time — the death of future and the vanishing of the past; it ends on the same theme, inverting the temporal succession to suggest a circular historical movement in radical opposition to the idea of progress as one of the grand narratives of modernity.

The second part of the work, *Sans titre (des corps entassés)* comprises a group of light copper sculptures leaning upright against a wall. The work can comprise between three and eight fine copper ingots depending on the installation; the material connects the sculptures to the production process shown in the film. Abonnenc suggests they be shown separately from the film, avoiding a common view axis between the film and the sculptures; they can even be displayed independently. Isolated, the sculptures appear as minimalist artworks. Nevertheless, a formalist gaze is irritated quickly by their title translated into English as *Untitled (Bodies in a Pile),* pointing to an absent referent. The work quotes the frequent use of *Untitled* in minimal art, refusing a reference beyond the physical presence of the work. The second clause amends this immediately in evoking the violent image of piled-up bodies, breaking with the minimalist idea of the artwork referring to nothing other than itself. Nevertheless, the figurative expectation raised by the title is undercut by the upright position of the sculptures. While they allude to human bodies, as their height is roughly that of a person standing up, their position is vertical. Their material, even if finely sculpted, is resistant. If the object represents the unrepresented, it also stands, as a negative reference, against the depiction of violated bodies, and the voyeurism that this frequently entails.

fig. 1 Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, *An Italian Film (Africa Addio), First Part: Copper*, 2012, HD video, still, colour, sound, 26 min. Courtesy the artist.

fig. 2 Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, *An Italian Film (Africa Addio), First Part: Copper*, 2012, HD video, still, colour, sound, 26 min. Courtesy the artist.

An Italian Film (Africa Addio), the title of the film equally includes a reference to an absent object: *Africa Addio*, a 'shockumentary' made in 1966 by the Italian filmmakers Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi. The film condenses white supremacist, afro-pessimist and colonial revisionist discourse, referring to the African continent in the immediate post-independence years. The apartheid society in South Africa is pictured as a positive social model, while the film shows slaughtered animals, images of war and execution scenes, arguing that independent African states are incapable of governing themselves peacefully. One of these scenes shows the execution of three Congolese fighters. Shortly after the release of the film, the directors were legally persecuted for having consented with the execution by agreeing that the shooting commando wait before firing the deadly shot until the camera had adjusted its position, but no condemnation was pronounced.

Africa Addio is mentioned in a manifesto by Latin American filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 'Hacia un Tercer Cine' (1969), as the infamous example of fascist image production, the fierce opposite of a progressive, militant cinema.[3] It becomes the shared negative starting point for both Abonnenc's project and the leftist manifesto. Solana and Getino's seminal text published by the Organization of Solidarity of the People of Africa, Asia & Latin America's journal *Tricontinental* (with which Abonnenc has worked intensely) was highly influential in internationalist filmmaking in the 1970s. The manifesto rejects Hollywood cinema as much as individualist arthouse films. It proposes a militant aesthetics that relies on its own distribution, production and active reception circuits, overcoming the separation between passive consumer/spectator and producer. The text calls into question the autonomy of art as a separate social sphere, and fully articulates it within the struggle for Third World Liberation movements and anti-capitalist critique (Hadouchi 2012).

In Abonnenc's film, no documentary material is included; only the title alludes to *Africa Addio*. Neither the film nor the sculptures show piled-up bodies. The contested denigrating imagery is invisible and refuses to reproduce what Susan Sontag has described as the eyes' indiscriminate lust, claiming 'the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked' (Sontag 2006, p. 33). Abonnenc's aesthetic strategy to speak back to the representation of colonial violence and its prolonged impact, systematically refrains from displaying murdered, tortured or suffering people (a strategy also described by hooks 1992). Rather, he transposes the destruction onto the objects.

In her book *Queer Art: A Freak Theory*, recently translated into French and published in a series edited by Abonnenc, writer and artist Renate Lorenz introduces the idea of abstract drag, i.e., the abstraction of the human body in an artwork. Abstract drag cuts ties with 'representational conventions of human bodies', notably suffering and dying bodies. 'This abstraction produces a gap or a deferral; it impedes identification, just as it impedes the possibility of immediately averting one's eyes from the work in a counter-identificatory act [...] and this way suggests new ties to bodies' (Lorenz 2012, p. 133). What Lorenz develops in regard to queer aesthetic strategies finds a parallel in Abonnenc's artistic gesture. The artist refuses on the one hand to reiterate violent representations of people, and on the other displaces his artistic gesture from living bodies to objects – a process that appears to be transformative as opposed to destructive. As I show further on, it is precisely this supposed innocence of the artistic work that Abonnenc questions, in order to point to the imperial entanglements of entire parts of a supposedly purely formalistic Western modernity.

Beyond the titles, the anxious narration of the voice-over is a central element troubling the seemingly local

character of the work, with its British foundry and the sound of Sheffield accents. The text being narrated comes from mainly three sources: the Belgian imagination of precolonial copper extraction according to the voluminous *Union Minière du Haut Katanga (Mining Union of High Katanga)* (Cuypers 1956), predecessor to the huge state-owned and later Public Private Property mining company that still holds a monopoly on subsoil exploitation in the Congo; a scientific study by ethnopsychiatrists Virginie Degorge and Olivier Douville (2012) on child soldiers in the Congo and their persecution as sorcerers; and a speculative study on the origins of genocide by Sven Lindqvist in his *Exterminate All the Brutes* (2007). Lindqvist's book borrows its title from Joseph Conrad's canonical novel that imagines an imperial explorer's journey along the Congo River as a trip to the *Heart of Darkness* (1899), contributing thus to the European imagination of Central Africa as the location of the deepest repressed desires of Western civilisation. In parallel to Hannah Arendt's tracing back the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) in the imperial conquest and colonial policies, the total erasure of cultural otherness in addition to economic squeezing and maximal exploitation is described as at the root of extermination.

Sound and image interconnect, complexly entangling the materiality of the working process, the narrative of colonial exploitation and the horror of genocide. Through the systematic separation of connected elements (ingots and film, production and product, raw material and commodity, voice and image, etc.), the work engages critically with abstraction in modern art and capitalist production. The images focus on a concrete working process with specific gestures, and transform specific objects. Nevertheless, as *abstract labour*, described by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital* as 'productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands, etc.', this work is capitalist value production (Marx [1867] 1990, p. 134). Resulting

from this working process, Marx conceptualises the double character of the commodity: its concrete appearance as use value with a physical body and a specific history, and its abstract dimension that makes it part of capitalist production, regardless of its material qualities. Commodities still dispose of material characteristics and are tied to specific bodies, but they count in the economic sense only in their abstract dimension. The ideological forms that this relation brings about, and its complicity in the destructive and degenerative tendencies of modernity, have been described by writers from Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1972) to Jean and John Comaroff (1999). The latter argue in their analysis of rural post-apartheid South Africa that the dialectical interplay of millennial capitalism and the culture of neoliberalism at the crossroads of 'the global' and 'the local' produces contradictory effects that hide their capitalist origin. As a consequence, occultism can be understood as an expression of the enchantments of modernity — displacing the violent transformations of society to symbolic relations between people. Positioning himself precisely in this relation (the persecution of child soldiers for sorcery in the Congo as described by Degorge and Douville, which Abonnenc pulls on in his script in a symbolic transfer with murderous consequences) the artist's work turns around the ideological effects of capitalist competition in times of crisis: he 'secures' symbolically the bodies and channels the violence towards the objects.

In the discussed work, Abonnenc addresses abstraction in several intersecting ways: it is invoked in its economical and ideological dimension as the form that exploitation takes in capitalist economies, *invisibilising* the mechanisms of value distribution by making apparent the social character of the production as an inherent property of the commodity. While the film shows the concrete working process, engaging with

specific bodies, in a defined locality, dealing with particular objects, the final result are abstract ingots, a shape that seem to have ripped off the totality of its historicity and material specificity. Abstraction here refers to the voracious intrusion of capitalist production modes in precolonial economies, the ongoing raw material exploitation, and the proxy wars that accompany it (as the Kivu and Katanga region in the Congo with their rich subsoil and long-lasting murderous wars offer sad examples; or also abstraction's destructive effects when capital leaves a no longer profitable region (as with Sheffield). None of these forms are separated from ideology and hatred. As Ghassan Hage brilliantly discusses in a 2017 essay, both racism and the destructive relationship with the environment emanate from the same mode of inhabiting the world: capital as determining force that imposes its infinitely expanding logic as law, subordinating others and everything for the extraction of value, eradicating or exterminating what gets in the way.

Abonnenc addresses the conditions in which African cultural artefacts are appropriated by looting or exchange in unequal power relations with the state, by private European collecting missions, or by Western travellers. He chooses a loaded artefact as his point of departure: the copper crosses cut into pieces and melted in the film were used in the precolonial economy of the Katanga region. They date back to at least the thirteenth century, and were used in the mineral-rich region as currency, women's adornment and talismans buried with the deceased. They have been objects of the voracious hunger for precious metals that Belgian King Leopold II conducted in the Congo, while the Free State was his private property (1885–1908). They have been melted in high numbers, transformed into massive bars and exported to Europe during Belgian colonialism, rendering their cultural specificity invisible. In their new abstract shape, they travelled as pure matter, of which apparently every trace of history had been erased.

Fissuring the Erasures of Historical Violence: Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's Work as a Circular Critique of Colonial Modernity - Lotte Arndt
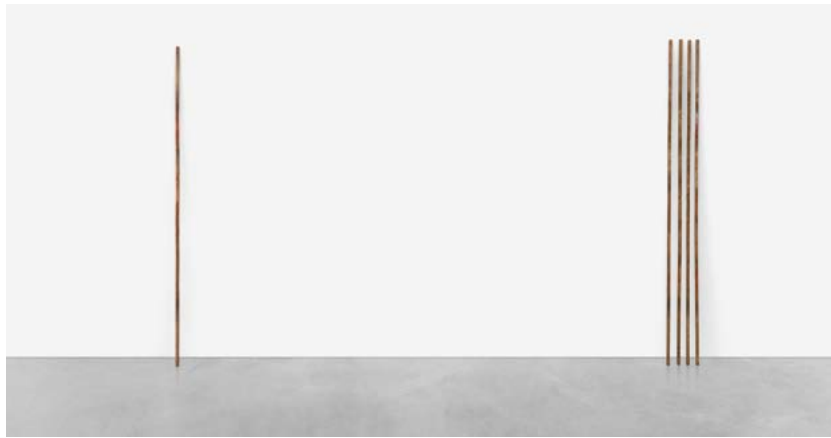
419

fig. 3 Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, *Sans titre (des corps entassés)*, 2012, copper ingots. Courtesy the artist

fig. 4 Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, *An Italian Film (Africa Addio), First Part: Copper*, 2012, HD video, still, colour, sound, 26 min. Courtesy the artist

fig. 5 Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, *An Italian Film (Africa Addio), First Part: Copper*, 2012, HD video, still, colour, sound, 26 min. Courtesy the artist

A division takes place here, as not all the crosses have been transformed. Some have been brought to European museums, where they are attributed to an ethnically categorised cultural group. (At the Musée du quai Branly, Paris, the caption reads: 'Luba culture, currency, 19th century'). As museum artefacts, they keep the indicators of their provenance, only to find that provenance reified as among the stable properties of a defined group. Following the Congo's independence from Belgium in 1960, Katanga briefly seceded from the newly formed republic. On its flag were drawn three crosses. On the currency edited by the state, the crosses also appear as a symbol. Their importance as a now nationalist marker of cultural identity has thus been reaffirmed. The 'social life' (Appadurai 1996) of these artefacts is complicated. By choosing the crosses, Abonnenc refers to multilayered use, as much as to a long history of violent expropriation, raw material extraction and theft, and subsequent cultural recontextualisation.

The crosses are not preserved but transformed, losing their recognisable shape and becoming abstract minimal sculptures. Given their initial form, the transformation alludes to primitivist incorporations of objects from African origin in the renewal of European formal languages in the early twentieth century, but also to the absence of the tracings of the provenance, history and working processes in the use of metals in minimal art.

As Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush underline, colonial collecting and the rise of primitivism are contemporaneous. While the African continent was widely plundered by European collecting missions that integrated museums and their taxonomic classifications, objectifying the representation of societies, and denying them co-temporality with the modern West (Fabian 2014) primitivism fantasised about an untamed 'Africa' to escape from European constraints (Barkan

& Bush 1995). In primitivism, Africa functions as an 'imaginary agency that made the West look more distinct and Occidental; the sorry outcome of progress gone wrong or failed morality. This artificial Africa, in all senses of the term, helped […] to better attack and reject the idea of Europe' (Mikkonen 2009, p. 406). Nevertheless, '[t]he primitivism of the historical avant-garde and modernism did not dismantle the traditional opposition between the civilised and the primitive – based on late 19th-century evolutionist ideas of the progress of human societies from the primitive to the modern – although it aimed to disempower and redesign these categories' (Mikkonen 2009, p. 391). Complex cultural entanglements (as one finds them prominently in the Benin ivories that result from reciprocal trade relations between Western African shores and Portugal, to give but one example) are not taken into account in these reifying approaches (Kravagna 2017). The long discussion that has been initiated over the Museum of Modern Art's 1984 exhibition '"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern' (curated by William Rubin) has confirmed the pitfalls of creating affinities while relying on binary oppositions (Flam & Deutch 2003).

While primitivism appropriated artefacts produced on the African continent without crediting or recognising its authors and socio-cultural contexts (Archer-Straw 2000; Clifford 2003), in post-war minimalism the erasure of Euro-African entanglements operate on a material level, and through a monocultural Eurocentric view of minimalist practices. Over the last thirty years, writers like Kobena Mercer have struggled for a decentring of the boundaries 'that separate "art" from common-place definitions of what it is not' (Mercer 2006, p. 8) and artists like Rasheed Araeen have developed sharp minimalist positions, claiming that modernism is not restricted to Europe and the US. The point is to call into question an exclusively Western conception of abstraction as it has widely been promoted in art history. From this perspective the global entanglements of the used materials, the formal appropriations and the absence of recognition of what Mercer calls *discrepant abstractions*, i.e., multiple innovative practices developing in opposition to or at a distance from to a 'teleology of progress in which abstract art was regarded as the highest achievement of modernism' (Mercer 2006, p. 11), are not taken into account. In opposition to that approach an alternative 'understanding of abstraction and modernity [is promoted] by acknowledging the impure, imperfect and necessarily incomplete agency of an elusive phenomenon whose very openness resists the narrative impulse towards closure' (p. 10).

Choosing another entry point to the same question, Abonnenc's work critically interrogates the blind spots of Eurocentric modernism. He tackles the conception of minimalist and abstract art as defined by 'purity', a lasting idea shaped by highly influential curators and critics such as Alfred H. Barr, Jr and Clement Greenberg. Opposed to this hegemonic point of view, the stake is in showing that the formalist consensus that placed abstraction in a sphere 'beyond' the realm of material interest hides its own imbrications in global raw material extraction and the quest for cultural hegemony. This is precisely where Abonnenc's work positions itself and examines the ideological foundations of the formalist grand narrative of Western art.

By destroying and transforming cultural artefacts from the Congo and reshaping them as minimal sculptures, Abonnenc speculatively casts doubt on the provenance of the materials used in minimalist works of artists like Carl Andre, Robert Morris or Richard Serra (Chérel 2012). He shows that neither the apparently purely formalist artwork, nor the white cube as the presumably neutral space for displaying art, are separated from social relations on a global scale. While they are rendered invisible, the artworks and their modes of presentation

Fissuring the Erasures of Historical Violence: Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's Work as a Circular Critique of Colonial Modernity - Lotte Arndt

423

participate in very material entanglements with the 'dirty outside world' (Hall 1990). Sculptures are never only masses with matter as their single subject, as Andre put it. They are political objects in a specific time and space, presupposing a viewer with an embodied point of view that is far from universal. Feminist and institutional critics have shown for decades that formal issues are not exclusively the reserve of white-male-middle-class approaches, but that this requires a break with the implicit norm that keeps situated and minoritarian approaches at a distance.

In the past decade, new materialisms and object-orientated ontologies have stressed the capacity of matter for carrying history (Witzgall & Stakemeier 2014). The positions in the debate are multiple and impossible to reduce to a single argument: for the present context, it is important to recall the anti-humanist contributions to the debate that valorise non-human agency and blur the modern nature-culture divide (as they have been developed by Bennett 2010; Latour 1993; Braidotti 2013). Starting from object-subject-agency in assem-blages, relational- and network-based approaches become possible, going beyond an instrumental hierarchy of animate and inanimate matter. But it is also necessary to be attentive to the uneasy encounter of these neo-materialist approaches with mystifying ideas of 'material speaking for itself' as they were to be found in post-war minimalism.[4]

In *An Italian Film* and *Sans titre* this presumption is complicated by showing that a decontextualised artwork can easily remain mute about its history and trajectory, and needs to be mediated and articulated with supplementing elements in order to activate and translate the potential stories that the material carries. Pointing out the multiple asymmetrical appropriation processes, Abonnenc chooses not to remain external to the chain of expropriations and transformations, acquiring the crosses on eBay and determining whether

they be cut or smelt. The artist participates thus in the commercialised chains of erasure and reshaping. The economic power to buy enables him to destroy. By exposing the work in galleries and museums, Abonnenc actualises his critique of seemingly pure formal art and neutralising displays. It is only when the materiality is articulated within specific contexts – including the white cube and related to documents and narratives that allow for the troubling of formalist appearance – that the purely formal character of the work becomes doubtful.

DISPLAY/CONTEXTS

The context of its display is therefore extremely important. Abonnenc consciously works with it. Two exhibitions at Pavilion, Leeds and at Fondation Ricard, Paris, both in 2012, are good examples of this. In Paris, only the copper ingots were shown in the exhibition space. Meanwhile, in a former cinema situated in an office building nearby, Abonnenc showed three documentary films by East-German filmmakers Gerhard Scheumann and Walter Heynowski, who had for decades been in charge of pointing out and analysing imperialist practices in the Third World. The films focus on the figure of 'Kongo-Müller' a former commander of the national-socialist Wehrmacht and later mercenary in the secessionist part of the Congo under the leadership of Moïse Tshombé, after the murder of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and the brutal end of his progressive government in the Congo in 1961 (Bandel 2005).

The exhibition of the isolated copper sculptures fully corresponds with the absence of this information in the white cube context, in which numerous spectators familiar with Abonnenc's works were highly irritated about the seemingly formalist sculptures.

fig. 6 View of exhibition site, *Tower Works*, Leeds. Photograph by Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, 2012.

fig. 7 Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, *An Italian Film (Africa Addio), First Part: Copper*, 2012, HD video, still, colour, sound, 26 min. Courtesy the artist.

A physical displacement to a location not identified as an art exhibition space is here imposed as necessary in order to link the sculptures to the history of Western imperialism in post-independence Congo. As an indication to make the link, Abonnenc published a two-page spread in the small catalogue referring to Heynowski and Scheumann's book *Kannibalen* (Filipovic 2012). He adds to the critique of the Eastern German filmmakers who accuse Western mercenaries of cannibalism — the term is used here without any transgressive dimension, unlike Oswald de Andrade's suggestion of anthropophagy as a counter-hegemonic cultural strategy in the 1920s — and symbolically cuts off the heads in the photographs that show the mercenary troupe.[5]

At Pavilion, Leeds, an art space that co-produced the work, both parts have been displayed together in the space of a former foundry. The ingots were presented leaning on white walls, built for the exhibition and bringing the white cube into the industrial workshop environment. Nevertheless, the workshop remained very much present. The brick walls included nineteenth-century stone portraits of the main figures of the industrial revolution that calmly 'overlooked' the exhibition space, a scene from which the references to exploitation have disappeared. The vestiges of the de-industrialisation of the region were thus overtly present, and called on to engage inquiry into the ambiguous role occupied by cultural institutions, stepping into the space left empty in former industrial architecture. The economy of the art field was directly addressed.

The film starts and ends with a reflection on time: while the opening sentence ('The future is now dead, the past unimaginable') deduces the impossible reconstruction of history from the obstruction of a time to come, the final phrase inverts the temporal order ('The past is now dead, the future unimaginable').

The action and narration of the film are thus enclosed in a temporal frame that does not allow for escape. It is pure present and contains all times simultaneously. While this structure can be read as a pessimist Benjamanian refusal of the linear progression of time, it is shared by surprising companions: as Chris Kraus analyses in her writing about Paul Thek, the artists' work shares the structure of suspended time with his 'enemies, the minimalists. In 1966, the artist Robert Smithson described his friend Dan Flavin's monuments as objects in which "both past and future are placed into an objective present.... Time breaks down into many times... a million years is contained in a second"' (Kraus 2013, p. 87). Far from sharing a universalist stance that claims catastrophe as an inevitable constant within the abstract idea of the absolute present of a material sculptural presence, Abonnenc speculatively articulates specific times and places that resonate in the 'now' of the embodied working process. For brief instants, the *here and elsewhere* connect through the resonance between image and text. The intersections occur in the bodies and their very carnal and concrete presence. In one scene, the voice-over describes how the soldiers and civilians in the Second Congo War (1998–2003) frequently tattooed their names on their skin, in order to be recognisable when they were killed. Insisting on having a name is a gesture that opposes their being reduced to lives the loss of which no one would grieve (Butler 2009). Simultaneously, the image shows the tattoos on the bodies of British industrial workers, connecting the post-industrial region of Leeds to the murderous Congolese war and its ongoing aftermath that has resulted in up to ten million deaths rarely mentioned in the newspapers. In the resonance created between image and text, the geographical distance of industrial work in Great Britain from raw material exploitation in the Congo is bridged for a moment. The destructive effects of raw material extraction, its links to the global economy, and its colonial foundations become

apparent. The sequence condenses time and links the capitalist present to the colonial past, showing the resonance of historical forms of imperial control over a region that has frequently been described as a 'geological scandal' given its rich subsoil and murderous state of war (Seibert 2009). It is in these ephemeral connections that the pessimist time-frame opens up to a speculative evocation of transnational subaltern solidarity (Chérel 2012).

In the complex relations with each other and their changing environments, *An Italian Film* and *Sans titre* elaborate in concentrated and precise forms a strident critique of the erasures enacted in the frame of Eurocentric modernism and global exploitation in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Abonnenc's sly operation involves inhabiting a 'guilty' position of enunciation by repeating the destructive gesture that he criticises, and symbolically transferring it onto objects, thus rendering the art institutions that acquire or show the work complicit, obliging them to reflect on their implication in the destructive gesture.

The critical gesture is circularly tied to the art field. By remaining within the frame of the museum or gallery exhibition, both works are far off from collective, militant cinema with non-artistic audiences, and produced in activist economies, which Getino and Solanas claim. Instead, transnational solidarity and militant image production are evoked negatively, as unrealised possibilities, history in suspension. The work inhabits the dialectical tension that Kerstin Stakemeier (2017, p. 9) conceptualises in her book on anti-modern aesthetics as the necessity to initiate the self-abolition of art (as a separated social sphere) from within art itself. It is in the realm of art that the possibility of its realisation and thus overcoming can be evoked. In that sense, Abonnenc's work can deploy its corrosive strength precisely where it participates in a chain of problematic economical and symbolic transactions

that it renders visible. As such it is a powerful critical lever — but it also encounters its limits as a conceptual gesture, obliged to signify in the very same field that it self-reflectively dissects.

REFERENCES

Adorno, T. W. and Horkheimer, M. 1972, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming, Herder and Herder, New York, original work published in 1944.

An Italian Film (Africa Addio), First Part: Copper. 2012. Directed by Abonnenc, M. K. [Film]. Leeds and Nantes: Pavilion Leeds and Beaux Arts de Nantes.

Appadurai, A. 1996, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Archer-Straw, P. 2000, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s*, Thames and Hudson, London.

Arendt, H. 1951, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Meridian Books, Cleveland and New York.

Bandel, J.-F. 2005, 'Das Malheur. Kongo-Müller und die Proteste gegen "Africa Addio"', *iz3w*, no. 287, pp. 37–41.

Barkan, E. and Bush, R. eds. 1995, *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, pp. 1–22.

Bennett, J. 2010, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Braidotti, R. 2013, *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Butler, J. 2009, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso, London.

Chérel, E. 2012, *Rompre le sort de l'histoire (ou l'inconnu du monde qui vient)*, Beaux Arts de Nantes, Recherche, viewed 8 November 2019, http://recherche. beauxartsnantes.fr/sites/recherche.beauxartsnantes. fr/files/Dos_MKAbonnenc.pdf.

Clifford, J. 1988, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Comaroff, J. and Comaroff, J. 1999. 'Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 26, no. 2., pp. 279–303.

Cuypers, L. 1956, *Union Minière du Haut Katanga*. 1906–1956, 2nd edition, Editions L. Cuypers, Brussels.

Degorge, V. and Douville, O. 2012, 'Les enfants-sorciers ou les rejetons de la guerre en Afrique Équatoriale. Un défi pour l'anthropologie Clinique', *Figures de la psychanalyse*, vol. 24, pp. 233–51.

Fabian, J. 2014, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects*, Columbia University Press, New York, original work published 1983.

Filipovic, E. 2012, *Évocateur*, exhibition catalogue, 12 October–17 November, Fondation d'entreprise Ricard, Paris.

Flam, J. and Deutch, M. eds. 2003, *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, University of California Press, Berkeley, pp. 315–413.

Hadouchi, O. 2012, 'Cinéma dans les luttes de libération. Genèses, initiatives pratiques et inventions formelles autour de la Tricontinentale (1966–1975)', PhD dissertation, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle–Paris 3.

Hage, G. 2017, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Hall, S. 1990, 'The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities', *October*, vol. 53, *The Humanities as Social Technology* (Summer), pp. 11–23.

hooks, b. 1992, *Black Looks. Race and Representation*, South End Press, Boston.

Kannibalen. 2013 [exhibition], Kunstverein Bielefeld, Bielefeld, 9 February–28 April.

Kraus, C. 2013, *Aliens and Anorexia*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Kravagna, C. 2017, *Transmoderne. Eine Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts*, bbooks, Berlin.

Latour, B. 1993, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Lindqvist, S. 2007, *'Exterminate all the brutes': One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide*, trans. J. Tate, New Press, New York.

Lorenz, R. 2012, *Queer Art: A Freak Theory*, Transkript, Bielefeld.

Marx, K. 1990, *Capital A Critique of Political Economy*. Volume 1. Book 1, Penguin, London, original work published 1867.

Mercer, K. ed. 2006, *Discrepant Abstraction*, Iniva, MIT Press, London.

Mikkonen, K. 2009, 'Artificial Africa in the European Avant-Garde: Marinetti and Tzara', S. Bru, J. Baetens, B. Hjartarson, et al. (eds), *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, De Gruyter, Berlin.

Seibert, N. 2009, *Vergessene Proteste. Internationalismus und Antirassismus. 1964–1983*, Unrast, Münster.

Slobodian, Q. 'Can You Be in Solidarity with a Dead Body? African Activists in West Germany's 1968', *Regarding Spectatorship*, viewed 3 November 2019, http://www.regardingspectatorship.net/solidarity-with-a-dead-body/.

Sontag, S. 2003, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York.

Stakemeier, K. 2017, *Entgrenzter Formalismus. Verfahren einer antimodernen Ästhetik*, bbooks, Berlin.

Witzgall, S. and Stakemeier, K. eds. 2014, *Macht des Materials/Politik der Materialität*, diaphanes, Berlin.

430

431

Fissuring the Erasures of Historical Violence: Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's Work as a Circular Critique of Colonial Modernity - Lotte Arndt

NOTES

1 Original German: 'Als der Status quo einer von ihrer Freiheit umzingelten ästhetischen Praxis ist es nicht-destotrotz weiterhin vor allem die Kunst, die den zentralen Ausgangspunkt einer solchen Entgrenzung bietet, da nur aus ihr heraus ihre mögliche Selbstab-schaffung angesetzt werden kann.' Translation by author.

2 I would like to thank Sophie Orlando, susan pui san lok and Nick Aikens a lot for the invitation to the conference and the book, and Jantine Claus, Ron Eijkman, Naomi Bulliard and Eloise Cameron-Smith for running things so smoothly. I am very grateful to have had the chance to listen to so many brilliant contributions, and to elaborate my text further through your critical comments. Many thanks also to Regina Barunke and Susanne Leeb for having taken the discussion further. This text is the result of a long-lasting conversation with Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, whom I warmly want to thank for sharing with me his insightful reflections and complex research over the past years.

3 The protests against the film have been a major moment in the constitution of internationalism in Germany, as they mobilised African, Jewish and white German students in a transversal intersectional solidarity movement that crossed the experience from national socialism with anti-racist, and anti-colonial motivations (Slobodian).

4 I thank Susanne Leeb for her insightful critique on this.

5 This critique is further developed in Abonnenc's exhibition 'Kannibalen' curated by Thomas Thiel at Kunstverein Bielefeld, Bielefeld, 9 February–28 April 2013.

432   433

Fissuring the Erasures of Historical Violence: Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's Work
as a Circular Critique of Colonial Modernity - Lotte Arndt

Contributors' Biographies

NICK AIKENS

Nick Aikens is research curator at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (since 2012) where he leads the research programme Deviant Practice. Recent exhibition projects include 'The 1980s. Today's Beginnings?' (Van Abbemuseum, 2016 co-curated with Diana Franssen), 'The Place Is Here' (Nottingham Contemporary, co-curated with Sam Thorne; Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art and South London Gallery, 2017) and the touring exhibition 'Rasheed Araeen: A Retrospective' (Van Abbemuseum; MAMCO, Geneva; BALTIC, Gateshead; and Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, 2017–19). He is the co-editor of *The Long 1980s* (2018) and *The Place Is Here: The Work of Black Artists in 1980s Britain* (with Elizabeth Robles, 2019) and monographs including *Rasheed Araeen* (2017) and *Too Much World: The Films of Hito Steyerl* (2015). He is a PhD candidate at Valand Art Academy, University of Gothenburg and Research Affiliate of the CCC Research Master Program, HEAD - Geneva School of Art and Design. He is also a member of the editorial board for L'Internationale Online. He is a tutor at the Dutch Art Institute (since 2012) and was recently a tutor at the Design Academy Eindhoven (2014–16).

JUAN ALBARRÁN

Juan Albarrán is an assistant professor at the History and Theory of Art Department, Autonomous University of Madrid. His research and teaching focus on contemporary art practices and theories. Specific research topics include the relationships between art and politics in Spain since the transition to democracy, performance art, photography theories and the representation of torture in contemporary visual culture. He is the author of *Disputas sobre lo contemporáneo. Arte español entre el antifranquismo y la postmodernidad* (2019) and *Performance y arte contemporáneo. Discursos, prácticas, problemas* (2019), and he has edited the books *Arte y Transición* (2012/2018), *Llámalo Performance: Historia, disciplina y recepción* (2015) and *Miguel Trillo. Double Exposure* (2017).

LOTTE ARNDT

Writer and curator Lotte Arndt (Paris) lectures at École supérieure d'art et design, Valence Grenoble, and accompanies the work of artists who critically interrogate the postcolonial present and the blind spots of modernity. She co-curated 'Sammy Baloji: Extractive Landscapes' (with S. Rudolph, Museumspavillon, Salzburg, 2019; with P. Pirotte and L. Morin, Portikus, Frankfurt/Main, 2018; and with L. Morin, Bétonsalon, Paris, 2017). Recent projects include: Summer Akademy Salzburg (with Sammy Baloji, 2019); 'L'intrus'. Curatorial Intensive (with N.M. Llorens, Tabakalera, Donostia, 2018); 'Tampered Emotions. Lust for Dust', Triangle France (2018); 'One Sentence Exhibition', Kadist (2018); and the research programme 'The Vacation of the Museum. Decolonize Ethnographic Collections with Cinema' (2016–2018). In Winter 2016, she was Goethe fellow at Villa Vassilieff, Paris and subsequently guest editor of the online magazine *Qalqalah* (2017). Her PhD is dedicated to postcolonial negotiations in Paris-based cultural magazines related to Africa (2013). She is a member of the research group Global Art Prospective (INHA Paris), publishes on artistic strategies that aim to subvert eurocentric narratives and institutions, and co-organises cultural programmes, screenings and discussions in artistic and academic spaces. Major publications include *Magazines Do Culture! Postcolonial Negotiations in Paris Based Periodicals Relating to Africa* (French, 2016), *Crawling Doubles. Colonial Collecting and Affect* (with Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc and Catalina Lozano) (2016) and *Hunting & Collecting. Sammy Baloji* (with Asger Taiaksev) (2016).

EVA BENTCHEVA

Eva Bentcheva is an art historian and curator with a focus on transnational performance and conceptual art. She completed her PhD at SOAS University of London. She is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Paul Mellon Centre in London, writing a monograph on cultural politics and transnationalism in performance art in Britain since the 1960s. From 2018–19, she was the Goethe-Institut Postdoctoral Fellow at Haus der Kunst in Munich. Her previous appointments have included Adjunct Researcher and Visiting Research Fellow for the Tate Research Centre: Asia, and Senior Teaching Fellow in Art History at SOAS.

SONIA BOYCE

Sonia Boyce (OBE, RA) came to prominence in the early 1980s during the burgeoning Black-British art scene, with paintings that spoke about race and gender in Britain. Since the 1990s her practice has taken a more multi-media and improvisational turn by bringing people together to speak, sing or move in relation to the past and the present. Recent works question the production and reception of unexpected gestures that highlight the intersection of personal and political subjectivities. Significant exhibitions include 'Five Black Women', Africa Centre, London (1983); 'Sonia Boyce: For you, only you', Magdalen College Oxford and tour (2007–8); 'All the World's Futures', 56th Venice Biennale (2015); 'Sonia Boyce: We move in her way', Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2017); and 'Sonia Boyce', Manchester Art Gallery (2018). She is currently Professor of Black Art and Design at University of the Arts London and was the Principal-Investigator for Black Artists & Modernism (2015–18).

JENNIFER BURRIS

Jennifer Burris is an Assistant Professor in Curatorial Practice and Museum Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore and an independent curator. She has organised solo and group exhibitions at the Museo de Arte Moderno, Bogotá; Brooklyn Museum, New York; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Haverford College, Philadelphia; and The Kitchen, New York. Burris holds a doctorate from the University of Cambridge and an undergraduate degree from Princeton University. She was a 2010–2011 Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program and the 2011–2013 Whitney-Lauder Curatorial Fellow at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania. On an advisory level, she is currently a resident tutor at FLORA ars + natura, Bogotá and curatorial advisor to the PEW-funded research initiative 'Digging Deeper: Field Studies Made Possible by the Waste Stream' at Recycled Artist in Residency (RAIR) in Philadelphia. She is director of Athénée Press, an independent publishing initiative that develops books in close collaboration with contemporary artists. She lives and works in Singapore and Bogotá.

VALERIE CASSEL OLIVER

Valerie Cassel Oliver is the Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Prior to her position at the VMFA, she was Senior Curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston where she worked from 2000–17. She has served as director of the Visiting Artist Program at the School of the Art Institute Chicago (1995–2000) and been a programme specialist at the National Endowment for the Arts (1988–95). In 2000 she was one of six curators selected to organise the Biennial for the Whitney Museum of American Art. During her tenure at the CAMH, Cassel Oliver organised numerous exhibitions including the acclaimed 'Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970' (2005), 'Cinema Remixed & Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the Moving Image Since 1970' with Dr Andrea Barnwell Brownlee (2009), a major retrospective on Benjamin Patterson, 'Born in the State of Flux/us' (2010) and 'Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art' (2012). She has also mounted significant solo exhibitions for Donald Moffett, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Jennie C. Jones, Angel Otero and Annabeth Rosen. Cassel Oliver is the recipient of a Getty Curatorial Research Fellowship (2007), the David C. Driskell Prize (2011) and the Goldberg Foundation-to-Life Fellowship at Hunter College (2016). She was a 2016–17 Senior Fellow in Curatorial Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Cassel Oliver holds an MA in art history from Howard University in Washington, DC and BS in communications from the University of Texas at Austin.

LAURA CASTAGNINI

Laura Castagnini is Assistant Curator, Modern and Contemporary British Art at Tate. Her research interests lie at the intersections between feminism, performance, video and the politics of race in modern and contemporary art. At Tate she has curated monographic displays on Lubaina Himid and Liliane Lijn as well as assisted on major exhibitions including 'Frank Bowling' and 'All too Human: Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life'. She previously worked as Programme Coordinator at Iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts) and, prior to moving to London, as a freelance curator in Melbourne for exhibitions and live events such as 'Backflip: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art' at Margaret Lawrence Gallery (Victorian College of the Arts) in and 'Memory Screens' at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. She holds a Master of Art (Art History) from the University of Melbourne, for which her thesis was titled 'Parafeminism and Parody in Contemporary Feminist Art' and was published as articles in *On Curating*, *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* and *Philament journal of art and culture*. More recently she has contributed to the exhibition catalogues *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on Art and Feminism* (2017) and *The Place Is Here: The Work of Black Artists in 1980s Britain* (2019).

ALICE CORREIA

Alice Correia received her doctorate in Art History from the University of Sussex and is a Research Fellow at the University of Salford. She is a specialist in late twentieth-century British art, with a particular focus on feminist and post/de-colonial practices. Her current research project is titled 'Articulating British Asian Art Histories', which examines the work of South Asian diaspora artists active in Britain since the 1950s. Her articles and reviews have appeared in *Art History, British Art Studies*, *Journal of British Visual Culture*, and *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*. She is a Trustee of the journal *Third Text*.

SANDRA DELACOURT

Sandra Delacourt holds a PhD in contemporary art history and is an associate researcher at HiCSA (University of Paris 1-Sorbonne). After teaching at Paris 1 and University of Nantes, she now heads the master programme in art of the ESAD TALM-Tours. Especially concerned with the emergence of phenomena operating in the field of art history, her works deal with the processes of artistic recognition, policies of the visible and construction of historical narratives. Focused on the 'academic turn', her doctoral research shed light on the unprecedented intellectual authority accorded to American minimalists while cognitive capitalism and creative research imposed themselves as a new epistemological horizon. In 2016, she co-authored *Le Chercheur et ses doubles*. Through Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, Kapwani Kiwanga and Otobong Nkanga's works, this book questions the role and uses of art in the production of knowledge. Untitled *L'artiste-chercheur. Un rêve américain au prisme de Donald Judd*, her new book was published in 2019 by B42. Delacourt is based in Paris where she also works as an independent art critic.

DR DAVID DIBOSA

Dr David Dibosa is a Reader in Museology at the University of Arts London (UAL) with responsibility for leading the MA in Curating and Collections. He is co-author of *Post-Critical Museology: Theory and Practice in the Art Museum* (2013). His other published work on museum culture includes: *Fugitive Direction: Reflections in the Tropenmuseum* (2015) and *Engaging Reciprocity, Exhausting Critique, Countering Spectacle* (2017). Dibosa trained as a curator, after receiving his first degree from Girton College, University of Cambridge. He was awarded his PhD in Art History from Goldsmiths College, University of London. During the 1990s, he curated public art projects. He was Senior Lecturer in Fine Art Theory at Wimbledon College of ARt, UAL from 2004–8. He was formerly Co-Investigator on the AHRC project, Black Artists & Modernism.

IRIS DRESSLER

Iris Dressler studied art history, philosophy and literature in Marburg and Bochum. In 1996, she founded, with Hans D. Christ, the Hartware MedienKunstverein in Dortmund, which she directed until 2004. From 2002–4, she also worked as curator at the Museum am Ostwall Dortmund. Since 2005, she is co-director of the Württembergischer Kunstverein (WKV) Stuttgart with Hans D. Christ. One of the main focuses there is to explore collaborative, transnational and transdisciplinary forms of curating. At the WKV Dressler and Christ have presented solo exhibitions of artists such as Stan Douglas (in collaboration with Staatsgalerie Stuttgart), Anna Opperman (curator Ute Vorkoeper), Antoni Muntadas, Daniel G. Andújar, Teresa Burga (curator: Miguel López), Michael Borremans, Pedro G. Romero (co-curator: Valentín Roma), Ines Doujak and Alexander Kluge. They realised collaborative exhibition projects such as 'On Difference' (2005/2006), 'Subversive Practices' (2009), 'Acts of Voicing' (2012) and 'The Beast is the Sovereign' (2015).

FABIENNE DUMONT

Fabienne Dumont is an art historian, art critic and professor at the National School of Fine Arts and Design in Nancy. She is the author of *Des sorcières comme les autres - Artistes et féministes dans la France des années 1970* (2014), based on her PhD, the editor of the anthology *La rébellion du Deuxième Sexe - L'histoire de l'art au crible des théories anglo-américaines (1970-2000)* (2011) and the co-director of *L'histoire n'est pas donnée - Art contemporain et postcolonialité en France* (2016) and *À l'Ouest toute! Travailleuses de Bretagne et d'ailleurs* (2017). She has written numerous articles (www.archivesdela-critiquedart.org/auteur/dumontfabienne). She has recently published two books about Nil Yalter, both in French and English: *Nil Yalter – Where the memories of migrants, feminists and workers meet mythology* (edited by the MAC VAL Museum to accompany the exhibition she co-curated there in 2019) and *Nil Yalter – Interview with Fabienne Dumont* (2019).

E. C. FEISS

E. C. Feiss is a critic and PhD candidate in the History of Art department at the University of California, Berkeley. Her work has appeared in *Afterall*, *Camera Austria*, *Little Joe*, *Radical Philosophy* and *Texte zur Kunst* among other places. Recent essays have appeared in *White Paper: On Land, Law and the Imaginary* (2017) and *Wendelien van Oldenborgh: Cinema Olanda* (2017.) Prior to moving to California, she was a resident at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht and an instructor at the Sandberg Instituut, Amsterdam.

CHRISTA-MARIA LERM HAYES

Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes is Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History, University of Amsterdam and academic director of the Amsterdam School for Heritage, Memory and Material Culture. Until 2014 she was Professor of Iconology in Belfast, where she led a Research Graduate School. She studied in Heidelberg, London and Cologne. Her PhD was researched as James Joyce Foundation Scholar, Zurich. She held an Irish Research Council Post-Doctoral Fellowship, UCD. Her books include *Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland: Word, Image and Institutional Critique* (2017), *Post-War Germany and 'Objective Chance': W.G. Sebald, Joseph Beuys and Tacita Dean* (2011), *James Joyce als Inspirationsquelle für Joseph Beuys* (2001) and *Joyce in Art* (2004). She has curated at: Royal Hibernian Academy and Goethe Institut, Dublin; Tolstoy Estate, Russia; MoA, Seoul National University; Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast; LCGA, Limerick; CCI, Paris; Maagdenhuis, University of Amsterdam; M HKA, Antwerp; and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

ALEXANDRA KOKOLI

Dr. Alexandra Kokoli is Senior Lecturer in Visual Culture at Middlesex University London and Research Associate at VIAD, University of Johannesburg. An art historian and theorist originally trained in comparative literature, Kokoli curated 'Burnt Breakfast' and other works by Su Richardson (Goldsmiths, 2012) and, with Basia Sliwinska, Home Strike (l'étrangère, 2018), and has published widely on feminism, art and visual culture in journals including *Art Journal*, *Women and Performance*, *n.paradoxa*, *Performance Research*, *Oxford Art Journal* and *Hypatia*. Her books include *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice* (2016) and (as editor) *Feminism Reframed: Reflections on Art and Difference* (2008) and *The Provisional Texture of Reality: Selected Talks and Texts by Susan Hiller, 1977-2007* (2008). Kokoli is a Paul Mellon mid-career fellow (2020) for her research into the legacies of the women's peace camp at Greenham Common and, more broadly, the aesthetics and politics of feminist anti-nuclear activism.

CHARL LANDVREUGD

Charl Landvreugd is as an artist and researcher who grew up in Rotterdam in an environment and time when many different migrant communities were making the Netherlands their home. Being part of this vibrant space, he advocates for local conti-nental European concepts and language coming out of these spaces, that have the potential to speak about the sensibilities specific to the area. Using a broad range of artistic disciplines, he applies the results of his research to think about citizenship and belonging and how this is expressed in the visual arts in continental Europe. As a Goldsmiths (BA), Fulbright and Columbia University (MA) alumnus he completed his PhD in Curating Contemporary Art at the Royal College of Art in London. Landvreugd is on the supervisory board of the Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst and the board of the Akademie van Kunsten (Dutch Society of the Arts). He is also a member of the Commissie voor de Tekeningen (Drawing Committee Amsterdam). He has been a fellow at BAK – basis voor actuele kunst (2018–19), Utrecht, the Van Abbemuseum (Deviant Practice, 2017–18) and the Tholenaar van Raalte at the Research Center for Material Culture (2015–16). Next to that he advised the Raad voor Cultuur (Dutch Council for Culture) and was an advisor to the Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst among other activities. Besides his practice he is the core tutor at the Masters Institute of Visual Cultures AKV| St. Joost and is a regular tutor at Dutch art academies. Landvreugd's work has been published by: *Open Arts Journal*, *Small Axe Magazine*, *ARC Magazine*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, CBK Rotterdam, *NRC Handelsblad*, *De Ware Tijd*, KIT Publishers, KadE Amersfoort, De Unie Rotterdam, TENT Rotterdam, *Volkskrant*, *HYCIDE Magazine*, *Metropolis M*, *Antilliaans Dagblad* and NTR Kunststof among others.

ELISABETH LEBOVICI

Elisabeth Lebovici (PhD in Aesthetics) is an art historian and art critic living in Paris. With Catherine Gonnard, she wrote a history of women artists in France between 1880 and today (*Femmes/artistes, Artistes/femmes, Paris de 1880 à nos jours*, 2007). Her latest book: *What AIDS Has Done To Me. Art and Activism at the End of the XXth C (*2017) received the Prix Pierre Daix in art history 2017. Since 2006, she cocurates (with Patricia Falguières and Natasa Petresin-Bachelez) a weekly seminar at the L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris titled 'Something You Should Know: Artists and Producers'.

SUSAN PUI SAN LOK

susan pui san lok is an artist and writer based in London. Her work ranges across moving image, installation, sound, performance and text, evolving out of interests in archives, notions of nostalgia and aspiration, place and migration, translation and diaspora. Solo exhibitions include *seven* at Glasgow International Festival (2020); *A COVEN A GROVE A STAND* at FirstSite, Colchester (2019); *RoCH Fans & Legend*s at CFCCA, Manchester (2016) and QUAD, Derby (2015); *Faster Higher* at MAI/Montreal Arts Interculturels (2014), Winchester Discovery Centre (2012) and BFI Southbank Gallery (2008); and commissions for Film and Video Umbrella, De La Warr Pavilion and Cornerhouse / BBC Big Screen. Group exhibitions include Diaspora Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017) and Diaspora Pavilion at Wolverhampton Art Gallery (2018); the 1st Asia Biennial and 5th Guangzhou Triennial (2015-2016); and shows at SITE Sante Fe, Hong Kong Art Centre, Shanghai Duolun MoMA, Beijing 798 Space and Gallery 4a, Australia. Artist books and multiples include *RoCH Fans and Legends* (2017, freee-book); *RoCH Fan* (2015); *Faster, Higher* (2009); *Golden (Notes)* (2007); and *NEWS* (2005). Recent writings include visual/video/text essays for *The Place Is Here* (2019), *Deviant Practice* (2018) and *Contesting British*

Chinese Culture (2018). Forthcoming publications include contributions to 'Voice as Form in Contemporary Asian Art', a special issue of *Oxford Art Journal* (2020) and 'Remapping British Art: Three Moments of Modernism', a special issue of the journal *Art History* (2020). She is a Professor in Contemporary Art at University of Arts London (UAL), Director of the UAL Decolonising Arts Institute (launching 2020) and she was a Co-Investigator on the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project, Black Artists and Modernism (2015–18), led by UAL in partnership with Middlesex University.

DR SOPHIE ORLANDO

Dr Sophie Orlando is an Art Historian based in Paris. She was Researcher for Black Artists & Modernism (UAL/Middlesex University, London) and Associate Professor of Theory and Contemporary Art History at the National Art School, at the Villa Arson, Nice. Working in the field of Conceptualism, Black Studies and Feminist Studies, she has been writing on the British art scenes and on Black Art in Britain in a series of academic papers in *La revue de l'art*, *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne, Critique d'art and Critical Interventions*. She has also published a book *British Black Art: Debates on the Western Art History* (2016) and is the editor of the monograph *Sonia Boyce, Thoughtful Disobedience* (2017).

SUMESH SHARMA

Sumesh Sharma (1983) is an artist, curator and writer. His practice is informed by alternate art histories that often include cultural perspectives informed by socio-economics and politics. Immigrant Culture in the Francophone, Vernacular Equalities of Modernism, Movements of Black Consciousness in Culture are his areas of interest. His artistic practice seeks layers through political materiality and art historical and theoretical failures while discussing the visual.

SARAH WILSON

Sarah Wilson is Professor of the History of Modern and Contemporary art at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. Recent publications include *The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations* (2010) and *Picasso / Marx and socialist realism in France* (2013). From 2012–13 she held a Chair of Excellence at the Centre for the Cultural History of Contemporary Societies at the University of Versailles, Saint Quentin, where she launched the project 'Globalisations before globalisation: avant-gardes, academies, revolutions' focusing on international exchange and artistic mobility including 'Black Paris' and Paris's long relationship with Eastern Europe, Russia, Asia and recently India. She has published on Saleem Arif, Yinka Shonibare, Amrita Sher-Gil and Fahrelnissa Zeid. She is an active member of the Cambridge Courtauld Russian Art Centre. She was principal curator of 'Paris, Capital of the Arts, 1900-1968' (Royal Academy London, Guggenheim Bilbao, 2002–3) and *Pierre Klossowski* (Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2006, touring to Cologne and Paris) and co-curator of the first Asian Biennale/Fifth Guanghzou Triennale, 2015. Wilson was appointed Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres by the French government in 1997 and in 2015 was given the AICA International award for distinguished contribution to art criticism. Her former students hold curatorial, university and other art world positions in many different countries.

WEI YU

Wei Yu obtained his MA in Art History and Art Criticism from Tainan National University of the Arts in 2003, and has served as an editor for Artco magazine in Taiwan from 2005–7. Covering Taiwan's art scenes and visual culture in the post-war era, he has written articles for various art journals and exhibition catalogues and participated in the exhibition 'View--Point: A Retrospective of Li Yuan-chia' (2014) at Taipei Fine Arts Museum as the UK research coordinator. In 2015, he curated 'Shoot the Pianist: The Noise Scene in Taipei 1990-1995', at Peltz Gallery (London). He is currently a PhD candidate in Humanities and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck (London Consortium), University of London. His PhD research project focuses on Taiwanese avant-garde and counterculture from the 1980s to the mid-1990s.

BLACK ARTISTS & MODERNISM

VAN
ABBE
MUSEUM
EINDHOVEN

BLACK ARTISTS
& MODERNISM

VAN
ABBE
MUSEUM
EINDHOVEN