

VIGNETTES RASSEMBLAGÉES
TO REHEARSE RE-FUSAL

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VIGNETTE 1

From where I stand, fall, crawl, sleep, eat, walk, weave, quiver, stumble, mumble, I can hear the whispers, scrubs, steps and cracks of the books, podcasts, movies and videos that have spent time with us throughout this year. I can hear them having conversations and confusions of many styles and textures with one another but not only. It's a montage room, where the voices seem to come out of each other and get lost together but not only, and I'm not going to worry too much about what would be a certain iconisation of the borrowing. *Faut pas dorer sur tranche*, no need to embellish the fact of quoting, writes Nathalie Quintaine (or something like that) in the preface to *Chaosmogonie*, by Nanni Balestrini (2020) – *fumant la forme libérée du marécage de la syntaxe par intermède de Balestrini*. A swamp of syntax, *à ne pas imaginer qu'on puisse faire sien à un tel point un discours théorique qu'il en devient une partie intime*.¹ That's how it goes, dissolves. Rereading *The Hundreds* at around 6 p.m. last summer, close to *apéro* time, it got me to recite *our citations are dilations, not just memories we have fidelity to*, especially the page that starts with 'The Things We Think With'.² Dilated quotes, you go, dissolve, say you're not an author, artist, researcher, all that shit meant to determine (and terminate) you as an identified entity, as if it were possible to separate those things that you do and the supposed (your)self from the planet; to separate what I *is* and what I *does* (or not) from other animals, things, non-things, 'things-in-themselveslessness' (as Fred Moten writes so beautifully in *The Universal Machine*, something like: 'the internal and external sociality of things-in-themselveslessness'). Lose composure, you go babe, try to detach that bloody (my)self from the forms of imperialism and policing naturalised in the institutions where you work, and in this body that supports, holds, transports, reports you indefinitely (*rehearsals of disengagement*, writes Ariella Aïsha Azoulay in the book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, in 2019, somewhere around the pages 43–45).

1

'smoking the form freed from the swamp of syntax
thanks to Balestrini; hard to imagine that
you can adopt a theoretical discourse to such
an extent that it becomes an intimate part of yourself.'
Free translation.

2

The Hundreds is a book that gathers many voices
in 100 hundred words vignettes, written by
Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart (Durham,
CN: Duke University Press, 2019).

‘Paula, drop the work and come fly again.’ Holly crap... Easyjet now addresses me as if we had been to kindergarten together, after I’ve been actively avoiding its company for years. The injunction came packaged in the subject of an email I received on 15 June 2021 at 4.01 p.m.. At that exact time, I was working against the clock, editing a video-graphic Mute Poem (for entangled reading – the thing we have been doing within Noa & Snow), which was going to be presented at the Institute of Art History in Paris a few days later. Feeling a little stunned, because on the morning of the same day I was vaccinated in a cultural centre on rue Merlin (Salle Olympe de Gauges) which had been transformed into a vaccination centre with live soundtrack. Mindboggling. Believe it or not, we the people were being offered the gentlest service adorned with a xylophone soundtrack played by smiling teenage pupils, an interval of paradisiacal *bien-être* in *we care so much* mode, ideal prelude to a night of delirious fever, effects of Pfizer on top of AstraZeneca, and me so grateful *je vous jure*. Talking about mirages and paradises, TAP (the Portuguese airline) had already informed me a few days before: ‘Paula, paradise exists and it’s right in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.’ Not that surprising after all, for the day before yesterday it had wisely advised me: ‘Paula, extend your summer.’ There’s no denying it, the algorithm sometimes hits the mark with a certain poetry. But please give me a break, I’m drowning here. Please stop addressing me as if we were best friends. Then again... we surely are and I’ve just been slow to realise it. You’re absolutely right: we are certainly more intimate than I will ever be ready to admit: You do know me better than I will ever ever ever.

Terminal 2E at Paris Charles de Gaulle airport has recently been equipped with an Espace Musées. In 2019, sometime between 30 April and 6 October, I came across a large poster proudly announcing that they now had on display *Voyages d’Explorateurs*, from Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac. Will you please enjoy such a cultural capital, dear cosmopolitans, fond of discoveries and cultivated culture, worshipers of art and vertiginous movements, *we love you so much we travel all the way with (in) you: ‘Une invitation au voyage, un appel à la découverte, c’est l’engagement de Paris Aéroport à ce que le meilleur de la culture parisienne et française s’invite partout dans ses aéroports pour que l’art fasse aussi partie du voyage.’*³ As if that wasn’t enough to make any passer-by feel woozy, the poster also said that ‘the exhibition contains multiple objects, iconographic pieces and works of reference’, and that ‘its collection is dedicated to the arts and civilizations of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, and the objects in exhibition stem from the great voyages, from the time of the kings of France to commercial, diplomatic or exploration voyages’. A very peculiar form of dedication. There is no mention of European invasions, expropriation, genocide and massive looting. People in charge, public powers and their communication bureaus, patience has run out. Stop euphemisms, stop watering the plantation as if you were truly cultivating diversity and inclusion, beyond your psycho-tacky images of multiculti duty free. I have to think of Hito Steyerl’s book, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, which came out in 2019. As a prelude to the book, it’s worth reading the text ‘Duty-Free Art’ published on *e-flux journal* in 2015.

Ah. It's becoming hard to bear. Are we consigned forever to tell and retell the same kinds of stories until the end of time (saying this with the mouth of Saidiya Hartman, in an interview)?⁴ Keep the No at hand. 'Imagine Going on Strike: Museum Workers and Historians', writes Ariella Aisha Azoulay in *Potential History*. Imagine a strike not only as a protest against a specific situation of oppression, not only against a particular institution and not only as a way of demanding better conditions and wages, but as a general rejection of the logic of capital deeply embedded in museums and their shamelessly illusory inclusion of diversity, along with their missions to produce cultural exchange. A strike like that, extensive to all professions and not just those directly linked to institutions such as museums or universities, would help us stop conceiving of our professional activities as productive activities whose value can be measured according to results that fit in a progressive linear history, to conceive them instead as modes of enmeshment with the world, which recognise our radical inseparability. Imagine the details of this.

Imagine experts in the world of art admitting that the entire project of artistic salvation to which they pledged allegiance is insane and that it could not have existed without exercising various forms of violence, attributing spectacular prices to pieces that should not have been acquired in the first place [Note: See the BBC film *Bankers Guide to art* (2016), in which art is presented as an exceptionally stable asset, worthy of investment: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Lzr4Ntws-g>]. Imagine that all those experts recognise that the knowledge and skills to create objects the museum violently rendered rare and valuable are not extinct. For those objects to preserve their market value, those people who inherited the knowledge and skills to continue to create them had to be denied the time and conditions to engage in building their world. Imagine museum directors and chief curators taken by a belated awakening – similar to the one that is sometimes experienced by soldiers – on the meaning of the violence they exercise under the guise of the benign and admitting the extent to which their profession is constitutive of differential violence. Imagine them no longer recognising the exceptional value of looted objects, thus leading to the depreciation of their value in the market and the collapse of the accumulated capital. Imagine these experts going on strike until they are allowed to open the doors of their institutions to asylum seekers from the places from which their institutions hold objects, inviting them to produce objects similar to the looted ones, and letting the 'authentic' ones fade among them.⁵

Ah. Imagine sending this excerpt to the 'Museu do Oriente' in Lisbon, whose mission is to shamelessly boast about the 'Portuguese presence in Asia', the 'multiculturalism' of the 'secular relationship that was established between East and West' through Portugal. With an introductory speech that speaks of supposedly magnificent 'trade, cultural, experiential, scientific, technical and religious exchanges that made possible the knowledge of hitherto unknown worlds' between Portugal and Asia. Not a peep about violence(s) perpetrated all along that past and continued today and tomorrow in various manners and shapes, in magnificent museums of this kind. Its main sponsor is Novo Banco, which, like any other self-respecting bank, has a strategy of cultural patronage and is a benevolent agent interested in contributing to 'the creation and education of new audiences', namely 'invigorating the existing cultural offer'.

Speaking of this museum, it dawned on me that Oriente Foundation is part of the Lisbon Consortium, the pompous collaborative network between the Master's and Doctoral Programme in Cultural Studies at the Catholic University, the Lisbon City Hall, the Portuguese Cinematheque, the National Museum of Theatre and Dance, Gulbenkian Foundation, Culturgest, the Nacional Centre for Culture, EDP Foundation, Lisbon Oceanaire and Sintra Parks – Monte da Lua. Ah. Sparkling network, which organised, in 2021, the XI Lisbon Summer School for the Study of Culture under the promising title CONVIVIAL CULTURES. Wonderful conviviality, if we believe the self-laudatory way in which they describe themselves. Not to be missed, the introductory video, conviviality obliges (a certain kind of 'conviviality' at least): www.lisbonconsortium.com. Not that shocking after all. Though it remains puzzling (does anyone believe, or even enjoy this). Puzzle. Keep the No at hand. Shout in all possible directions: research and art must remain fugitive (not necessarily fugitive from something but towards something, like Fred Moten would say, if I'm not confusing things again). Keep a pronounced and nuanced inclination (altered daily) towards stuttering, the vertigo of failure, practice the non-performance of literal performance: refuse to meet the demand. Unbook your body from the globally programmed programme. Don't show up where it expects you. Become deaf to the call. Caress indeterminacy. Who says we have to (know how to) perform research, art, work, the university, the museum, me, you, the slogans of their conviviality, everything, in the a-socially connected economy of performance and knowledge. Keep the NO at hand. Re-say: It's Not Research. It's Not Theory. It's Not Art. With these three NOs, Hito Steyerl prefaced 'Withdrawal from Representation', the lecture she gave at the symposium *Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism*, in 2013. I wasn't there, but the triple negation addressed to research, theory and art (which I came to read shortly after in a text by Rike Frank) now comes to mind as a (re)generative adage. Ah.

Inclusion *sous vide*?⁶

We have been attentive to the politics of cultural appropriation for quite a while now, we have long been suspicious of the ways in which institutions of power are attracted to ‘diversity’. We have learned not to underestimate the speed at which capital can absorb relevant notions and turn them into empty slogans. Fact is, funding is allocated to exhibitions on the issue of ‘housing’, while people continue to be massively ejected from the various shelters they call ‘home’.⁷ It has become obvious that there is a lot of curatorship out there that consists of neutralising art, which is the art of neoliberal inclusion, of the multiple exhibition regimes that subjugate and colonise, always well-intentioned, always racist. Excellent in demonstrating and performing a certain image of democratic inclusive goodwill. But what to (not) do of so much art that doesn’t want to be ‘cured’, neither in this nor in any other way?⁸ In fact, at this moment it seems it’s no longer a question of fighting the exclusionist structures of institutions (at this point we could even call them ‘inclusionist’), since what has to be fought against are the constant modalities of incorporative extraction, nothing new after all, just an update on new and old technologies, says Fred Moten in conversation with Sandy Grande, Stefano Harney, Jasbir Puar and Dylan Rodríguez, about the action carried out by ‘Strike MoMA Working Group of IIAAF’.⁹ In this conversation, Stefano Harney compares museums and universities to vast ‘shredding machines’, which shred and digest a wide range of modalities of social aesthetics and study that people practice all over the place in indeterminate ways, to transform them into identifiable individualised entities.

The business of these institutions is to go around identifying those who are trying to lead aesthetic lives and autonomous collective forms of study, and send patrols of curators to capture them, under cover of ‘inclusion’. Indeed, the main reason why artworks are kept in museums, says Harney, is to pretend there is indeed something individualised that we can call a ‘work of art’ – in addition to the reasons we already know, namely: to keep these art objects in security, so as to make them inaccessible to anyone who wants them back; to rent them, which means that every time we pay to go to the museum, we are renting the art we are going to find; to commodify them and speculate on their value. That there is something that we can call a ‘work of art’ is therefore a fact that needs to be subjected to a consequent anti-colonial attack.

6

The translation of *sous vide* is ‘vacuum packed’. The expression in French is used internationally, especially in haute cuisine contexts. But vacuum packaging is currently very present in many supermarkets worldwide, much loved because it allows cooking and/or heating food without removing it from the plastic.

7

See Giulia Palladini, ‘On co-existing, mending and imagining: notes on the domestics of Performance’, in *A Live Gathering*, edited by Ana Vujanovic and Livia A. Piazza (Berlin: b_books, 2019).

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See André Lepecki, ‘Decolonizing the curatorial’, in *Theater 47*, n.º 1 (2017).

9

Strike MoMA Working Group of IIAAF: ‘A Conversation with Sandy Grande, Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, Jasbir Puar, and Dylan Rodríguez’, took place on 27 May 2021, now on YouTube.

What does it mean to decolonise *sous vide*?
What can we (refuse to) do?

In times of global warming and climate devastation, I can no longer conceive of my research for itself as a distinct productive activity to be assessed by its outcomes, can I (how could I ever, could it). The things I do for a living and to live in bearable terms are indeed a worldly activity, a mode of engaging with the world that seeks to impact it and be impacted in return, a vital formulation I learned from Azoulay. Research, choreography, teaching, reading, non-reading, pre-reading, learning, unlearning (you name it) are fellow embodied devices of re/trans/mediation that act ashore and aground subjectivation and governance, not confined to knowledge and/or artistic composition and production, but embedded in everyday life and death. I’m interested in embracing rough and fuzzy intersections between the choreographic, the cinematographic, the digital and the decolonial, in a quest to re-imagine forms of complicated collective freedom and care (including ‘aesthetic care’ as such), away from frantic productivity-performance-oriented demands. Something we’ve had the immense pleasure (and sometimes pain) to co(re)imagine, pre-post-trans-study together in many ways within Noa & Snow. But what does it mean to decolonise, in situations where the ‘colony’ as we historically know it may not be explicit?

Sigh. We live in a time/place where institutions stage and reenact their criticality, their diversity, their intermediality, their post-coloniality and their conviviality, but very little changes. It’s more than obvious that the bloody capital is perfectly capable of incorporating the idea of decolonization and decoloniality. That’s why we need to consider the endurance of the ‘colony’ beyond the historically situated colonial political regime. Capital is always colonising, the colony is therefore consubstantial with capital; it moves amongst us, across every inch of our bodies. To understand how it persists, we have to get rid of the approach that can only see the colony in the form that Europe gave it in the nineteenth century, and not confuse colonisation and colonialism. Without the colony, writes Françoise Vergès (2019) – including *la colonie de vacances* – there would be no countries with structurally racist institutions.¹⁰

Ah. It’s not certain that there is a decolonising life beyond the wonderful economy of knowledge and performance that globally rhythms our days and nights, which is so generous and creative to the point of having said ‘let artistic research be in universities’.¹¹ Nor is it certain that the classes I gave this semester – with the title ‘Practices of resistance, co-imagination and everyday decolonial action in the age of digital

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See Françoise Vergès, *Un féminisme décolonial* (Paris: La fabrique, 2019).

11

Note this is said by someone who loves a wide range of research practices and in particular artistic research; someone who is passionately involved in the composition (as collective as possible) of Practice as Research classes in a PhD Programme in Theatre Studies; someone who thoroughly enjoys the time spent with people in the context officially called ‘class’. And yet, being an agent of this knowledge economy doesn’t flow without pain. What gives me strength is to believe in contradiction, in the need to keep things and (hi)stories complicated, indetermined, incomplete (still learning a lot from the practices of ‘general antagonism’ woven by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney).

performance’ – are capable of decolonising anything beyond the metaphorical sense in which the term has been proliferating on our screens. Yet I still believe in the love of contamination between materials, through which I feel like bringing people together. A *(r)assemblage* that makes me feel poetry on the page and ignites a strong desire to think collectively, who knows.

Le Passeur (installation, 2008) / *Mined Soil* (film, 2015) / *Spell Reel* (film, 2017) / *Cotton Algorithms* (installation, 2019) – all by Filipa César. *Imagine Going on Strike: Museum Workers and Historians*, in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Azoulay, 2019). *The Hundreds* (Berlant & Stewart, 2019). *Revolutionary Feminisms: Conversations on Collective Action and Radical Thought* (Bhandar & Ziadah, 2020). Conversation ‘On Fugitive Aesthetics’ (with Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, Michael Swayer, 2021). ‘Unshrinking the World’ (Avery Gordon, ‘An interview with Woznicki on the book she edited *The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins*’, 2019). *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* and *All Incomplete* (Harney & Moten, 2013 and 2020). *Wayward Lives: Beautiful Experiments* (Hartman, 2020). *Exterminate All the Brutes* (essay film by Raoul Peck, 2021 – borrowing from the work of historian friends Sven Lindqvist, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz). *How Not to Be Seen* (video art by Hito Steyerl, 2013).

From the materials gathered here, I dare hope they can bring some air to the ground that supports us. That they may unwrap unsuspected forces that may help us disengage from what, in our lives, professions and everyday positions, continues to perform the implicit pedagogy of capitalism and its extended family. It’s no coincidence that the texts, films, interviews, conversations and installations in case have almost all been produced in collaboration, and that several of them experiment with formats that bend and distort existing genres. They promise nothing other than what may (or not) arrive as they encounter the people that will (time and again) gather to spend time with them; nothing other than what can (or not) be rehearsed with many hands, textures, images, affects, rhythms, in a practice of study that mingles and impurifies everything (art and theory, critique and poetry, times with spaces, *still-moving-images*, everything with nothing). A study as practice that doesn’t begin or end in the concept, and disconfirms all the principles of the onto-epistemological separation that Western modernity produced with so much devotion. And if all this remains hard to believe, listen to Avery Gordon: ‘I tried to follow Monique Wittig’s instruction in *Les Guérillères* (1969): “There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.”’¹²