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Archive Mania

If the past insists, it is because of life's unavoidable demand to activate in the present the seeds of its buried futures.
—Walter Benjamin, *Psychography*¹

There is culture, and that is the rule. There is exception, and that is art. Everything tells the rule: cigarettes, computers, T-shirts, television, tourism, war. Nothing says the exception. That is not said. It is written, composed, painted, filmed. Or it is lived. And it is then the art of living. It is of the nature of the rule to desire the death of exception.
—Jean-Luc Godard, *Je vous salue, Sarajevo*²

The globalized art world has been overtaken in recent decades by a true compulsion to archive—a compulsion that includes anything from academic research into preexisting archives or those still to be constructed, through exhibitions fully or in part based on them, to frantic competition among private collectors and museums in the acquisition of these new objects of desire. Without a doubt, this phenomenon is not the result of chance.

In view of this, it is urgent that we problematize the politics of archiving, since there are many different ways of approaching those artistic practices that are being archived. **Such politics should be distinguished on the basis of the poetic force that an archiving device can transmit rather than on that of its technical or methodological choices.** I am referring here to their ability to enable the archived practices **to activate sensible experiences in the present, necessarily different from those that were originally lived, but with an equivalent critical-poetic density.** Facing this issue, a question immediately emerges: **How can we conceive of an inventory that is able to carry this potential in itself**—that is, an archive “for” and not “about” artistic experience or its mere cataloguing in an allegedly objective manner?

This distinction can be explored according to at least two sets of questions. The first refers to the kind of poetics that are being catalogued: Which poetics are these exactly? Do they share common traits? Do they originate from similar historical contexts? What does it mean to catalogue poetics, and how is this operation different from the cataloguing of objects or documents? The

1 | “Psychography” refers to the reception of written messages through a medium, guided by “spirits,” as practiced by the spiritualist movement, which is still very popular in Brazil. The reference to this term in the form of the Walter Benjamin quote as the epigraph of this essay is a humorous way to affirm that what matters in the theories to which we refer is their resonance with what we are trying to elaborate, collaborating as such to make it sayable. In this case, to quote is to refer to the archive of living effects, of ideas inscribed in our body’s memory, in order to actualize them in new ideas, instead of a sterile scholarly archive inscribed in our representational memory that we reproduce in order to authorize our writings.

2 | Video directed and edited by Jean-Luc Godard in 1993. Short version, 2’15”, 2006, France, available from www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU7-o7OKuDg. Voice-over written and narrated by Godard.

second set of questions refers to the situation that has given rise to the current archive fever: What is the cause of the emergence of such desire today? What different politics of desire has given impulse to the many initiatives focused on archives, their emergence and means of production, presentation, circulation, and acquisition? In what follows, I aim to propose some clues to answering these questions.

Let us begin with the undeniable fact that there exists a privileged object of this yearning for the archive: the broad spectrum of artistic practices framed by the label “Conceptualism,” which were developed throughout the world during the 1960s and 1970s. Such practices, as well as others that shared a similar daring attitude in relation to the standards of their time, are the result of a phenomenon that starts at the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth: **an accumulation of imperceptible tectonic movements within the art world that reached a threshold during those years and resulted in works that, by making such movements sensible, completely reconfigured the artistic landscape.** This is the context in which the artists subsequently referred to as “Conceptual” emerge, adopting as the subject of their research the way in which the “art system” determines their creations. **Their focus is on the diverse levels of such a system: from the spaces where the works are exhibited, to the categories and genres that the (official) history of art uses to qualify them, and to their media, supports, etc.** The making critically explicit of such limitations within the artworks themselves provided at that moment in history a key orientation to artistic practice in search of lines of flight from such established boundaries. This operation provides the core to the poetics of those artistic proposals, and the conditions for the potency of their thinking—here **resides the vitality of those artworks and the virus that they carry.**

But the compulsion to archive hasn’t extended to every artistic practice that emerged during those decades. **The compulsion’s main focus is on artistic proposals made outside of the axis formed by Western Europe and the U.S.—especially proposals originating in Latin America, in countries then under military rule.** Such practices have been incorporated into the art history that has been written from within the Western Europe–U.S. axis—an art history that has become the hegemonic discourse and defines the boundaries of the international art context. This is the perspective from which artistic production made elsewhere is interpreted and categorized today, which tends to distort the reading of such practices and generate toxic effects in their reception and dissemination.

The Spell Is Broken

For the past few decades, due to the advance of globalization, a demystification of that art history has been taking place. Such a phenomenon is part of a broader one, a process by which the previously idealizing view of the dominant culture that was held by other cultures—cultures that were until then under its influence—progressively fades. The spell that kept them captive has been broken, and with it the impediments it set to the possibility of elaborating their own experiences, with their own texture and density, and with the peculiarity of their own politics of production of knowledge.

A whole world, instituted by that hegemonic thought, is being destabilized. Its territory is being transformed from underground, its cartography modified, its limits redrawn. A process is beginning in which the cultures that until then had been suffocated are being reactivated, and new sensibilities introduced in the construction of the present, giving a cue to different modes of response. If we consider exclusively the two extreme positions, at the most reactive pole we find all kinds of fundamentalisms—movements that create the fiction of an originary identity that is lived as truth and that shapes subjectivity. In the hegemonic countries, this movement manifests itself in the form of xenophobia. In the specific case of Western Europe, the tendency has intensified in recent years to a dangerous degree, like a swan song responding to the announced death of such hegemony. Behind this mirage of an identitarian essence there is a denial of the experience of a multiple and variable alterity, and of the subjective and cultural flexibility that such alterity demands—phenomena that are the result of globalization. Simultaneously, at the most active pole, a whole range of inventions of the present are being produced. They are motivated, in contrast, by an opening up to the plurality of cultural others, and to the brushes and tensions that result from the collision with the new panorama in each particular context, chiefly with the cultural experiences inscribed in the bodies that inhabit it. As either one of these two positions advances, its opposite gains in intensity. Evidently, these two extremes do not exist in a pure state—what actually exists are different types of forces that manifest themselves in a range of different shades between the active and reactive poles, interacting in a vast cultural melting pot. Through this dynamic, the forms of transnational society are shaped.

Archive mania appears within a context shaken up by these contending forces regarding the definition of the geopolitics of art. But why were certain artistic practices that took place in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s especially embraced by this obsession

with investigating, producing, exhibiting, and acquiring archives? And why especially those that took place in the Latin American countries that were under dictatorial regimes? There is, in fact, a shared element to all these practices, which nevertheless adopts distinct forms in each case: the problematization of the political dimension of the institutional territory of art was added to its other dimensions whose excessive influence on artistic creation was criticized during those years. Politics, which permeates art in its transversality, regardless of the context, becomes more explicit in authoritarian states—both Left and Right—because its effect on artistic actions is more violent.

However, it is necessary to differentiate between two modes of politics present in the Latin American artistic practices that are the object of this archive mania: macro- and micro-politics. Artistic actions of a macro-political nature basically transmit ideological content, and this brings them closer to activism than to art. In contrast, in the second type of action the political constitutes an element that is intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, to poetic investigation. Independent of the value that might be assigned to each of these types, unfortunately, the macro-political tendency has been taken by hegemonic art history as a general interpretive tool for all Latin American artistic practices from those decades, through the label of “political” or “ideological” Conceptual art. This category was established by certain texts and exhibitions in the mid-1970s within the Western Europe–U.S. axis—texts and exhibitions that have since become canonical.³ It contributes to the denial of micro-political artistic actions, hindering both their recognition and their expansion. The invention of this mistaken category can be interpreted as a symptom of reactive forces, and it demands urgent redress in order to counter its effects. With that in sight, it is necessary to focus on the difference between the two modes in which politics is present in artistic practices, especially in contexts affected by state terrorism.

While the effect of totalitarian regimes on culture manifests itself most clearly through censorship—its macro-political face—its micro-political, imperceptible effect is much more subtle, but no less nefarious. It consists in the inhibition of the emergence of the creative process, even before artistic expression begins to take shape. Such inhibition is the result of an inexorable trauma caused by the experiences of fear and humiliation inherent to dictatorial regimes. Those experiences, which are the product of the tactics of imprisoning, torturing, and killing applied by authoritarian governments to those who oppose them, impregnate the atmosphere with a terrifying sensation of imminent danger. The situation affects desire at its core and weakens it, shattering the potency of thinking that desire summons and releases, and emptying subjectivity of its consistency. Since art is the privileged territory for exceptions within the rule of culture, it is especially affected.

3 | I will mention just the key authors in the establishment of this reading: the Spanish author Simón Marchán Fiz (*Del arte objetual al arte del concepto* [Madrid: Comunicación, 1974]), the British author Peter Osborne (“Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy,” in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, ed. Michael Newman and Jon Bird [London: Reaktion Books, 1999]), and the Colombian author Alexander Alberro (*Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999]). Key among the exhibitions is “Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s,” organized in 1999 at the Queens Museum by a group of eleven curators led by Jane Farver, at the time director of exhibitions at the museum, Luis Cannitzer, and Rachel Weiss. The exhibition traveled to the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, U.S.), Miami Art Museum (Miami, U.S.), and Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (Ghent, Belgium).

Experiences of this kind are inscribed in the immaterial memory of the body, the physical and affective memory of sensations, different but inseparable from the memory of the perception of forms and facts, with their respective representations and their connective narratives—in this case, conventionally led by the figure of the victim, who interprets them by appealing to a purely ideological discourse. The unraveling of desire, the attempt to free it from its impotence, constitutes a task as subtle and complex as the process that caused both its unconscious repression⁴ and the figure of the victim that results from it. Such a task can endure for thirty years or longer, and may take shape with the second or third generation. The special vulnerability of some artists to this experience in its bodily dimension (regardless of whether or not they are aware of it or of its ideological interpretation) is what drives them to seek the micro-political potency that is immanent to artistic practice—an attitude that is very different from the use of art as a vehicle for macro-political information.

But it would be absurd to think that the micro-political power of art can be summoned and revealed exclusively on the basis of experiences of pain, fear, and anguish—especially when these are prompted by situations of macro-political oppression, whether in totalitarian regimes or in relationships of domination and exploitation through class, race, religion, gender, etc. We must free ourselves from the romantic trap that binds creation to pain. Any situation in which life is constrained by forms of reality and their description creates estrangement. And this estrangement is followed by a malaise that creates the need to express what does not fit into the current map, creating new meanings that are the condition for life to flow again. That is precisely what the *aesthetic experience* of the world is about. This experience depends on the ability of the body to become vulnerable to what surrounds it, to let itself be taken over by the sensation of disparity between the forms of reality and the movements that fluctuate underneath its apparent stability, which set it in a “state of art.” Such experience of the world goes beyond the apprehension of mere forms, as practiced by the perception associated with representations through which they are assigned meaning. The tension created by the paradoxical dynamic between these two modes of apprehension of the world makes maintaining the status quo intolerable—this causes estrangement and is what drives us to create. The body is not appeased until what is demanding to come into existence is brought to the surface of the current cartography, piercing what encloses it and changing its contours.

The malaise caused by such estrangement is not necessarily generated by fear or anguish. These are ego-conscious feelings, the product of impotence in the face of specific circumstances, including but not restricted to authoritarianism and social inequality. In extreme situations,

4 | “Unconscious repression” is my chosen translation of the Freudian notion of *Verdrängung*: a remove from consciousness as a defensive psychic strategy counteracting the affects of traumatic experiences. In English the concept was translated as “repression,” a word that usually refers to a conscious mechanism. But it is not by chance that Freud named this concept *Verdrängung* instead of *Unterdrückung*, as “repression” would translate in German: his choice indicates the unconscious dimension of this operation. This is the reason why in Portuguese and French this concept was translated respectively as *recalque* and *refoulement* instead of *repressão* and *repression*.

feelings like these, as we have seen, bring with them the risk of inhibiting the power to create, and with it the replacement of thought by phantasms and projections. This is the way in which the trauma that results from dictatorial contexts can cause the substitution of ideology for thought. As a consequence of this, the artist becomes an activist, and his or her work a pamphlet expressing the sad affect of the victim, or his or her resentment and desire for vengeance—affects that are also mobilized in the artwork’s reception, with only two possible outcomes: the hope of redemption or the hopelessness fueled by the hallucination of an apocalypse. Covered by the screen of ideological projections, woven with the threads of romantic desire and religious emotion, experience is clouded and its tensions become inaccessible. Such tensions retain an unconscious power over subjectivity, which is led to adopt defensive strategies aimed to protect it but that at the same time limit it. At this juncture, a misunderstanding about the relationship between art and politics tends to emerge—a misunderstanding that, because it has its origin in this unconscious defensive operation, is not easy to undo.

In order to perceive that operation in more detail, it is worth remembering that sensation operates in the unconscious, corporeal realm, while feeling or emotion operates in the psychological realm. The object of sensation is the process that unmakes worlds and generates others, which happens, as we have seen, in any context in which life’s power is diminished. This is the process that moves us to artistic creation. Sensation therefore voices the power of creation and differentiation that defines the essence of life, a type of “vital emotion” distinguished from feelings and psychological emotions that merely voice the I and its consciousness. However, contexts that mobilize exacerbated feelings of anguish can impregnate those sensations to such an extent that they tend to become confused with one another. This confusion must be overcome: even though there is in fact a malaise caused by the disparity between the current forms of reality and the forces that aim to destroy them in order to create something new, and this malaise is difficult to sustain when what pushes through is not yet actualized in a new form of living or in an artwork, this state also results in a strange joy, because life is germinating. Artistic creation opens life-affirming channels and promotes a confidence in its ability to triumph even in extreme situations such as contexts of macro-political oppression, as was the case with the artistic practices under discussion here. Because of that, despite the fact that what spurs artistic action in dictatorial regimes is precisely the brutal presence of macro-politics in the process of creation, the nature of its strength is still micro-political. What guides artists is listening to the intensive reality that spurs them, and this reality can only puncture its boundaries if it is made concrete within the artist’s poetics.

This ability makes art a powerful chemical reactive that, propagating through contagion, can interfere in the molecular composition of the environments it enters, dissolving its toxic elements.

This specific political dimension characterizes the sharpest artistic practices developed in Latin America during the dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s. In the face of the omnipresent, diffuse experience of oppression, the activation of the power of invention embodied in those works points out that it is possible to maintain the exercise of thinking even in this kind of situation, which can have effects against the tendency to defensive reactions of voluntary blindness and deafness as a matter of survival. Because of this, such artistic actions are of a completely different kind from the pedagogical or doctrinaire sort of action that aimed to increase awareness and communicate an ideological content, as well as the social and educational actions of “inclusion.” Because they do not take place within the realm of aesthetic experience, the latter lack the power over the weakening of desire and subjectivity.

Another misunderstanding that tends to emerge in this situation is the assumption that within the artistic practice in which political potential is affirmed, form is irrelevant. The political and form are not opposed; on the contrary, in such practices, the formal rigor of the work—whether painting, sculpture, urban intervention, installation, or performance—is more important and often more subtle than ever. In this case, forms are not powerful and seductive in their own right, or autonomous from the process that gives birth to them; form here is inseparable from its role as an actualization of the sensations and tensions that force the artist to think-create. This is an aesthetic rigor, but it is also and inseparably an ethical one—*aesthetic*, because it renders sensible what is announced by the affects of the world within the body; *ethical*, because it implies taking charge of the demands of life to remain in process. In this sense, the more precise and in tune the artistic language, the more vigorous its intensive quality and the stronger its seductive power—this is what provides it with the energy that enables it effectively to influence the contexts through which it circulates. When it reaches this degree of rigor, art becomes a sort of medicine: the experience it promotes might intervene in the subjectivity of those who come close to it, precisely at the point when desire tends to become trapped and to lose power. When this happens, the exercise of thought is reanimated, as well as other types of perception—but also, and above all, of invention and expression. A new politics of desire and its relationship to the world is then drawn—new diagrams of the unconscious in the social field, actualized through reconfigurations of the current cartography. In conclusion, it is a vital rigor that opposes those forces that draw maps in order to cripple life

at its core, and that consists, as we have seen, in a persistent renewing of itself in the permanent creation of the world.

The specific political character of the artistic practices that we are considering here lies, therefore, in what they can give occasion to in the environments that are affected by them. The issue is to be aware not of the tensions (their extensive, representational, macro-political face), but of the experience of this state of things within the body itself, and of the effects mobilized by the forces that make them up (their intensive, unconscious, micro-political face). In this manner, focus is increased—the same focus that is lost when what is related to the social life of art is exclusively reduced to a macro-political approach, which, as we have seen, tends to be fostered by situations of state oppression or extreme social inequality. Such was the case with certain artistic practices during the 1960s and 1970s in South America, as well as with certain contemporary practices, mainly since the 1990s (and not only on that subcontinent). These artistic practices, and only these, can truly be called “political” or “ideological.”

Here resides the unfortunate misunderstanding promoted by (official) art history, which ignored the essence of the actions on which we are focusing here. By acting on the affective-resonating nature of subjectivity, and not only on consciousness, such actions began to overcome the split between the poetic and the political. This split used to be actualized in the classic figures of the artist and the activist: the first dispossessed of the micro-political dimension of his practice, and the second dispossessed of the ethical dimension of his subjectivity and dissociated from the body as a vital compass in the interpretation of the world and the actions that result from it. This conflict extricates from art the micro-political energy that is immanent to it, and in that case when politics is introduced within artistic practices it is reduced to the macro dimension and gives rise to a third figure: the militant artist. From this figure’s perspective, artistic practices that do not directly and literally tackle the macro-political dimension are dismissed as formalist. While it is true that the overcoming of this split between the poetic and the political was already in process within the artistic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, and that it was developed and disseminated during the first half of that century—and more intensively in the postwar period—it was during the 1960s and 1970s that this connection acquired the consistency of a vast movement in art, influencing culture in a broader sense, which includes modes of existence. These changed irreversibly during that period, when the exception of art proved to be stronger than the rules of culture—hence the name it has been given: “counterculture.”⁵ Such reactivation, when it suffered a military coup, tended to retreat back to the silence of unconscious repression.

5 | The idea that counterculture has failed, quite common among the generation that lived this movement, is the result of a melancholic politics of desire that has stuck to the forms that the power of creation invented during the 1960s and 1970s, and ignores the forces that caused them and that keep on inventing new landscapes. That such forms must die when they do not correspond to the forces that come through in a new state of things mobilizes the power to create new forms. What does not die is this power, precisely what produces the exception within the rules of current culture. The sad affects of guilt, resentment, and regret hinder the invention of new constellations, rare moments of victory for the active forces in social life. The same could apply to another plaintive choir from the same generation dedicated to macro-political activism during the 1960s and 1970s in Brazil (as in other countries in South America that were under dictatorships in that period), whose constant litany is the alleged failure or mistake of the militant forms put into practice. The figure of the victim in which they are trapped prevents them from seeing that the active forces that animated their practices prepared the ground for the undeniable political, social, and economic advances that Brazil has achieved during the past decade. The recent election of Dilma Rousseff, a woman and a former guerrilla activist, as president of Brazil is a symptom of the destiny of the powerful macro-political experience that characterized that period.

Colonial Unconscious Repression

For this picture to gain precision it is necessary to point out that the joint articulation of the poetic and the political does not start with the historical avant-gardes; it actually starts much earlier. We could go as far as to say that such articulation is one of the fundamental aspects of the politics of cognition that, in different ways, characterized a great part of the cultures dominated by Western European modernity. This cultural regime is inseparable from its counterparts in the field of economy (the capitalist system) and in the field of desire (the modern individual, source of bourgeois subjectivity, and whose psychic structure Freud framed under the concept of “neurosis”). Let us not forget that this cultural mode was forced on the world at large as a universal paradigm through colonization, targeting not only other continents (America, Africa, and Asia) but also the different cultures that were smothered within the European continent.

Among these are the Mediterranean cultures, especially the Arab-Jewish culture that was dominant on the Iberian Peninsula prior to the intercontinental travels that launched colonization in the late fifteenth century. As is well known, from then on those practicing this culture suffered the violence of the Inquisition, and many of them took refuge in the “New World” that was being built in America.⁶ Such violence was perpetrated throughout the same three centuries when Africa suffered the assault of slavery, and when indigenous American cultures suffered the assault of near extinction—a triple foundational trauma in some Latin American countries, among them Brazil. But there is more: the forms of violence that characterized the colonial period left active scars on the collective body’s memory of American societies after they had secured their independence, starting with deep-rooted class and racial prejudices. Remnants of a politics of colonial, slavery-inflicted desire, such prejudices generated, and still generate, the worst kind of humiliation and probably the most serious traumas, hard to overcome due to the persistence of the stigma and its recurrence in social life. Reinforcing and prolonging this process, other evils in the macro-political context—such as poverty, social exclusion, external domination, and authoritarian regimes—started to mix with the above, and this, in the micro-political dimension, has worsened the preexisting traumas and created new ones, in the past and still today. We can assume, therefore, that the unconscious repression of the immanent articulation of the poetic with the political has its origins in Western modernity, and culminates today with the cognition politics

6 | It has been estimated that 80 percent of those arriving in Brazil from Portugal at the beginning of the colonization process were Jews and Arabs, refugees from the Inquisition, the so-called New Christians. These data, however, have not been confirmed by historical research. Historian Anita Novinsky has noted in this respect that “despite diverse documents confirming the arrival of many New Christians to Brazil, in the frame of an ongoing process of migration that lasted for three centuries, there are no reliable data to specify the percentage. The research of my team at the University of São Paulo suggests that 30 percent of the white population of Rio de Janeiro had this origin. In the states of Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, and Ceará (northeast of Brazil), the number could be much higher. More than half of the white, middle-class population were Portuguese Jewish.” E-mail to the author from Anita Novinsky, December 14, 2010.

of transnational financial capital. We could even risk stating that, from a micro-political perspective, such an operation had a central role in the foundation of Western culture and its imposition on the rest of the world, and because of this I will refer to it as “colonial unconscious repression.” If we consider colonization from this perspective, we might conclude that this has perhaps been its most effective device.⁷

It is worth returning to the description of the politics of cognition, which is the object of colonial unconscious repression, in the framework of our historical horizon. It is characterized by three aspects: the vigor of the body’s capacity to resonate in the face of the forces that agitate in the intensive plane (the aesthetic experience of the world), the sensation mobilized by the tension of the paradoxical dynamics of this experience and that of perception, and the power of the thought-creation that is activated when such tension reaches a certain threshold. The object of this kind of repression is precisely this strength of inventive imagination and its capacity to resist the desire to maintain the familiar forms of life—a desire that is characterized by a politics that adopts perception as the exclusive means of knowing the world. Unconscious repression makes subjectivity unable to support itself on such tension, the engine of the thought machine that produces the actions in which reality is reinvented. In conclusion, the object of this type of repression is the body itself, and the possibility of inhabiting it. In this operation what is repressed is its ability to listen to the diagram of forces of the present, as the key compass for the exercise of the cognitive production and its interference in the world—a compass that is meant to guide us not in the visible space, but in the invisible states of life-pulse. The activation of the bodily ability that was repressed by modernity constitutes an essential dimension for any poetic-political action. Without such activation, the only possibility is to produce variations around the modes of production of subjectivity and of cognition that found us as colonies of Western Europe—precisely the condition from which we want to escape.

Unconscious repression functions through complex procedures that have been transformed throughout history. Here, we are examining only the most recent experiences. In totalitarian regimes, as we have seen, the exercise of thought is concretely hindered, and this ultimately leads to its inhibition, threatened by fear and humiliation. In contrast, in the context of financial capitalism, the unconscious repression operation is much more refined. The goal is not to prevent such exercise, or to aim at its partial or full inhibition, but to foster it, even to celebrate it, in order to place it at the service of the purely economic interests of the regime, voiding it of the immanent disruptive force of its poetics. This is what drives many thinkers to conclude that contemporary capitalism finds its main energy source in the power of

7 | After reading this text, historian Maria Helena Capelato suggested to me that we should call this phenomenon “historical unconscious repression,” in order to point out that it is not limited to colonization—it took place in innumerable configurations over the five centuries of Brazil’s history and continues today. This suggestion seems pertinent, but I would choose to adopt a politics of concepts that is based on their affective-resonating force. In this sense, the term “colonial” reminds us of the mode of existence that founds us culturally and still structures our subjectivity, and thus contributes to the recognition of its active presence in our subjectivity and allows us to shift from it. We must insist on a micro-political vision in the debate that has taken place during recent decades about what has been called “postcolonialism.”

thought-creation, and has led them to call it “cultural,” “cognitive,” or “informational” capitalism—an idea that is common currency today.

This regime takes advantage of the fragility caused by the tension between the two vectors of experience of the world, through the promise of an instant appeasement. The desire to confront this pressure and the energy of creation that it mobilizes tend to be channeled exclusively to the market. This takes place in several modes, among which perhaps the most obvious is the move to push subjectivity toward images of ready-made forms of life, such as the ones that populate mass culture and publicity, tirelessly spread by the mass media and offering a diverse range of possibilities of identification. These ready-made forms of life also include luxury cultural offers that are equally homogenized. In this area, some museums of contemporary art, with their ostentatious architecture, fulfill a privileged role, as does the proliferation of biennials—a phenomenon that has been critically referred to as the “biennialization” of the planet. Both currently work as facilitators of cultural tourism for the middle and upper classes and shape a shared international language that is considered “high culture,” made up of a few words and ornaments taken from the dominant rhetoric—the names of artists and curators fleetingly celebrated by the media—and a certain “style” of behavior that includes elements of fashion, design, gastronomy, etc. Desire is trapped by some of the images it selects through a process of symbiotic identification, triggering a compulsion to consume the products associated with them, with the goal of reproducing the world that they propose in everyday life, deceived by the promise of admission to a paradise on earth. What attracts desire and traps it within this dynamic is the mirage of being recognized and recognizing ourselves in one of the *mise-en-scènes* that this operation offers. The intention is to free ourselves from the distressing sensation of one’s emptiness, and to recuperate, as if by magic, a social value that seems to have been lost. However, in order to maintain this illusion, a price must be paid: with the instrumentalization of desire, the flair to track the vital pulse and its obstacles is lost; our capacity for invention is diverted from its primordial focus, which consists of opening up new roads for life to flow.

The Return of the Repressed

However, there is a reverse side to this dynamic: the memory of the bodies that inhabit the regions controlled by the dominant culture is not only inscribed with the trauma of the articulation of the poetic and the political that causes its unconscious repression. It is also

inscribed with the experience of that articulation, which waits for the right conditions to reactivate itself and escape from its confinement. These conditions are caused by social situations that favor the neutralization of the pathological effects of the trauma, in the way it shapes existence and its destinies.

A situation of this kind can be found in the experience of the state of things today. The proliferation of world-images that incessantly appear and disappear at a blinding speed, promoted by the development of communication technologies, will not just result in the instrumentalization of our subjective forces by the market. If we add to this situation the polyphony of cultures that can be heard and experienced at any time and in any place, we can see that their effect is also to make it impossible for any repertoire to have a stable or absolute power. This impossibility is one of the reasons for the decline during recent decades of the fascination and seduction of European and North American modernity, now in its neoliberal version. Today is no longer a time of opposition and resentment, or of its flip side—the identification and demand for recognition, which means the demand for love that is in this case the symptom of a humiliated subjectivity that idealizes the oppressor and depends on his perverse desire. The current movement consists precisely in major or minor displacements out of humiliation, and the subsequent submission to the oppressor, with the goal to reactivate what has been repressed in our bodies.

It would be mistaken to think that the objective of this return to the past is to “rescue” a supposed lost essence from African, indigenous, or Mediterranean forms of existence that were in place before the fifteenth century, or in the countercultural shift of the 1960s and 1970s. This movement was characterized by a tendency to idealize an alleged lost origin, and this led part of the generation that created it on a treasure hunt in those regions, as if their past remained there in its “pure state” and could be “revealed.” Instead, the object of reconnecting with that past is to engage in the ethics of desire and of knowledge that was practiced in those cultures and in their actualizations—their effort to ensure the preservation of life, which depends on the fact of the aesthetic experience, in order to listen to life movements and adopt them as orientation points for existence. (This ethics, it must be said, is also repressed today in those regions.) Getting back in touch with this exercise does not demand the reproduction of the forms that such ethics generated in the past; it demands the activation, in today’s context, of this ethics as a way in which to reorient the new inventions of the cartography of the present, against the operations that aim to secure their unconscious repression.

In this context, the will to return to existing archives emerges, as does the will to create new ones from the traces of the artistic practices

produced in South America in the 1960s and 1970s—a will that is today almost epidemic. With the dictatorships, the experience of the fusion of poetic and political forces put forward by such practices remains veiled in the memory of our bodies. We could only access it through the exteriority of the forms in which it was manifested, and always in fragmentary form. As we have seen, its disruptive power—and what this power triggered and could continue to trigger—was buried by the effect of the trauma that the military governments caused, and this was followed by their perverse reanimation by the cognitive capitalism that followed it.

The Toxic Misunderstanding of the (Official) History of Art

This major aspect of South America's artistic production in the 1960s and 1970s seems to have escaped art history. Even if this production could perhaps be labeled with the umbrella term "Conceptualism," it is unacceptable to call it "ideological" or "political" in order to characterize a peculiarity that in practice has widened its limits and potentially transformed its surroundings. While it is true that we find in these proposals a seed of the integration of the political and the poetic, as experienced and actualized in artistic practices and in the modes of existence that emerged at that time, such a seed was fragile and unsayable. To call it "ideological" or "political" is a symptom of the denial of the exception that this radically new artistic experience introduced into culture and the state of estrangement this caused in the subjectivities. The defensive strategy is simple: if what we experience there is not recognizable within the realm of art, in order to protect ourselves from the bothersome noise we place it within the category of macro-politics, and everything is then in place. The micro-political dimension that is immanent to art is therefore denied, its process of germination is interrupted, and what is to come remains incubated at best.

The seriousness of this operation is undeniable, especially if we remind ourselves that the state of estrangement to which the exception of art gives rise is a crucial experience—one that results from the reverberation of the plastic multiplicity of the forces of the world on our bodies, picked up by its resonating capacities. This is a space of alterity that opens up within subjectivity, destabilizes it, disturbs it, and demands a reworking of its boundaries and the map of its connections in order to achieve a new equilibrium. Ignoring it demands blocking the thinking life that gives an impulse to artistic actions, and that allows it to have a potential influence on the forms of the present. Such denial is the toxic element

contained in the sad categories mobilized by art history to interpret the artistic practices under discussion here; such is the reactive force that its misunderstanding reveals and that at the same time hints at its goal.

In this state of things, it becomes urgent to activate the intrinsic articulation between the poetic and the political, and the life-affirming force that depends on it. This is the condition for desire to free itself from its defensive weakening, in order to allow for a vital expansion on the basis of the experience lived by the resonating body in the present. Here is the context that, in different ways, has triggered a series of initiatives generated by the fever to investigate, create, exhibit, and own archives that has taken over the domain of art.

However, this situation also mobilizes a politics of desire that is diametrically opposed to the above: at the exact moment in which those initiatives appear, and before the seeds of the future that they brought with them emerge, the global art system incorporates them in order to transform them into fetishized objects, plundered in a cognitive war among the major museums and collectors of Western Europe and the U.S. Such operation risks sending back those seeds to oblivion and makes it an efficient device of cognitive capitalism. As Jean-Luc Godard suggests, "It is of the nature of the rule to desire the death of exception." While the movement of critical thought that took place in such an intense manner in the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America was brutally interrupted by the military governments, at the exact moment its memory begins to be reactivated this process is again interrupted, now with the glamorous refinement and seduction of the art market—a market with interests that have too much power over artistic creation and tend to ignore its thinking poetics. This operation is very different from the atrocious actions exerted against artistic production by dictatorial regimes: it is a new chapter in history, yet much less postcolonial than we would wish.

The politics of the production of archives and the need to distinguish its multiple modalities become relevant here. The challenge of the initiatives that aim to unblock the necessary access to the seeds of the future, hidden in the poetics that they address, is to activate their critical acuteness in order to guarantee the conditions of an experience of the same caliber when facing the questions that are posed today. The critical-poetic force of these archives can in this manner come together with the forces of creation active today, adding to their power in the fight against the effects of the toxic vaccination of cultural capitalism, which neutralizes art's virus and makes it work only for its own purposes. This operation is not only taking place in the context of art-making; it happens through the market and, as discussed earlier, includes, among its key instruments, many museums of contemporary art and the proliferation of biennials and art fairs.⁸

8 | While they act as tools in an initiation rite for the middle and upper classes who aim to gain access to the VIP areas of the global economy, museums of contemporary art, biennials, and art fairs have become privileged power instruments for cities to enter the stage of transnational capitalism. We should differentiate these from historical biennials like those in Venice and São Paulo, as well as documenta in Kassel, which predate this phenomenon. The last two were begun in the 1950s as a result of forces that are very different from the ones that have in recent times been "biennializing" the planet. The Bienal de São Paulo is one of the devices that gave support to the rich artistic production of Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s, and documenta was born from the demand to reopen Germany's social pores to breathe the critical-poetic oxygen that was suffocated by Nazism. Wounded by the blow that Brazil suffered at the hands of the dictatorship—a blow from which it is still trying to recover—the Bienal de São Paulo finds itself at an impasse: it must either reawaken the seed that founded it and escape from the process of biennialization by aligning itself with the vectors that are promoting a displacement from this sad landscape, or submit itself to this process, identify with its reactive vectors, and maintain the denial of its origins.

The point is not to demonize the art market, collecting, or commercial galleries, since artists must make a living from their work, and collectors should not repress their desire to live with artworks and enjoy them. Nor is it to demonize museums, which play an important role in the building of archives of artistic production, preserving them, and making them available to the public. The market and the museums are not external to art, but an integral part of its dynamic. Life cannot be ruled by Manichaeian morals that distinguish between good and bad human activities; what counts is the struggle between active and reactive forces in each field of activity, at different times and in different contexts. This is also the case in the domain of art: artistic, critical, curatorial, museological, and archiving activities must be thought through the forces that determine them at each moment, in their complex transversality and not as if in an idealized, imaginary territory. From an ethical perspective, what matters is if they are driven by the desire to inscribe the exception of art in a globalized culture, contributing to preserving the polyphonic exercise of the “art of living.”

If there is a micro-political achievement after the 1960s and 1970s that differentiates that time from ours, it is the possibility of abandoning the old romantic dreams of “final solutions”—be they utopian or dystopian—that have always resulted in totalitarian regimes. The process of reactivation of the resonating capacity of our body that is currently taking place, even if it is only just beginning, allows us to glimpse the fact that there is no other world but the one in which we live, and that only within its dead ends can other worlds be invented at each moment of human experience. This is the work of thought, in art or in other languages: to draft cartographies while new existential territories are taking shape and others are vanishing.

But let us not be naive: nothing guarantees that the critical-poetic virus carried by the seeds we have discussed will effectively spread as a world epidemic, not even the virus carried by work from our own time, no matter how powerful it might be. There will always be culture as rule and art as exception. What art can do is release the poetic virus out into the open air. And that is at least something, in the midst of the struggle between the different forces that shape the provisional forms of reality in their never-ending process of construction.

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Suely Rolnik

Archivmanie

Wenn die Vergangenheit insistiert, dann auf-
derung des Lebens, in der Gegenwart seine I
aktivieren.

– Walter Benjamin, *Psychographie*¹

Die Kultur gehört zur Regel, und die Kunst z
Regel: Zigarette, Computer, T-Shirt, Fernseh
hört zur Ausnahme. Die kann man nicht sager
sie ... malt sie ... filmt sie. Oder man lebt sie
Lebens. Es gehört zur Regel, den Tod der Aus
– Jean-Luc Godard, *Je vous salue, Sarajevo*²

In den letzten Jahrzehnten wurde der g
dezu von einem Archivierungszwang (e
alles von wissenschaftlichen Untersucht
noch aufzubauender Archive über Aus
oder teilweise aus deren Beständen g
Wettbewerb um den Ankauf dieser neu
schen privaten Sammlern und Museer
dieses Phänomen kein bloßer Zufall ist.

Es ist unabdingbar, in diesem Zusammenhang die Archivpolitiken zu hinterfragen, da es verschiedene Herangehensweisen für den Umgang mit den zu archivierenden künstlerischen Praktiken gibt. Diese Politiken sollten anhand der poetischen Kraft, die die archivierende Einrichtung zu vermitteln vermag, unterschieden werden, anstatt anhand deren technischer oder methodologischer Vorgehensweise. Ich beziehe mich hier auf ihre Fähigkeit, archivierten Praktiken dazu zu verhelfen, auch in der Gegenwart sinnliche Erfahrungen zu aktivieren, die notwendig anders als die ursprünglich erlebten sind, jedoch den gleichen Gehalt an kritisch-poetischer Dichte aufweisen. Hier stellt sich sofort folgende Frage: Wie könnte ein Inventar aussehen, das diese Kraft in sich selbst trägt, das heißt, wie könnte ein Archiv »für« und nicht »über« eine künstlerische Erfahrung oder deren bloße, vorgeblich objektive Katalogisierung entstehen?

Diese Unterscheidung kann im Zusammenhang mindestens zweier Frageblöcke untersucht werden. Der erste bezieht sich auf die Art der zu katalogisierenden Poetiken: Um welche Poetiken handelt es sich?

von lebenden Eindrücken, von im Gedächtnis unseres Körpers eingeschriebenen Ideen zu beziehen, um sie in neuen Ideen zu aktualisieren, anstelle eines sterilen wissenschaftlichen Archivs, das in unser repräsentatives Gedächtnis eingeschrieben ist und das wir reproduzieren, um unsere Schriften zu autorisieren.

2 | Video, Regie und Schnitt von Jean-Luc Godard, 1993. Kurzfassung: 2'15", 2006, Frankreich, verfügbar auf YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU7-g7OKuDG). Text von Jean-Luc Godard, vom Regisseur selbst gesprochen.