



machete

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MARGIN OF UTILITY

Introductory Comments

In the name of opening the Margin of Utility to important alternative voices, I have decided this month to turn the column over to a quintessential dissident and one of Europe's foremost thinkers: Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997). Please find below an excerpt from an interview that is forthcoming in the journal *Epoché* as well as in the book *Postscript on Insignificance*.

- Etienne Dolet

"Terrorism of Conformist Thought, Or the Ideological Exhaustion of Our Age"

Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis

Translated by Gabriel Rockhill and the Villanova French Translation Workshop

[...]

Cornelius Castoriadis: What characterizes the contemporary world is of course crises, contradictions, oppositions, fractures, etc., but what strikes me above all, is precisely *insignificance*. Let's take the quarrel between the right and the left. Presently, it has lost its meaning. It's not because there's not anything to fuel a political quarrel, and even a very extensive political quarrel, but because both sides say the same thing. As of 1983, the socialists established one policy; then Balladur came along. He had the same policy. Then the socialists returned; they had, with Bérégovoy, the same policy. Balladur returned; he had the same policy. Chirac won the elections saying, "I'm going to do something different," and he had the same policy. This distinction lacks meaning.

Daniel Mermet: By which mechanisms is this political class reduced to powerlessness? It's a buzzword today, powerlessness.



C.C. No it's not a buzzword; they are powerless, that's for sure. The only thing they can do is swim downstream, which is to say apply the ultraliberal policy that is in fashion. The socialists haven't done anything different, and

To be or not to be international?

The structure is simple. There are three diminutive bronze sculptures and a short animated video, with an eerie piano and a ghostly conversation as the soundtrack. The video is made of photographic stills, and occasionally an unnatural animated truck rolls through the forest. That is all.

The content is not so simple. The sculptures are a truck, Friedrich Hayek and George R. Brown. The conversation touches on economy, abstraction, business and government, the field of sensation and cartography. The stills show the Hôtel du Parc in Mont Pelerin, a shipping channel outside of Houston, a dam on the Texas Colorado River. That is not all.



The words and images have been carefully chosen by Joshua Mosley for his video *International*, currently on display in the "Live Cinema/Histories in Motion" rotating exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Hayek, the Austrian-born economist, was one of chief architects of neoliberal economic theory. Brown, the American-born businessman, played a central role in forming the military-industrial complex and in crafting the relation of business to politics in the United States, especially through his patronage of Lyndon Johnson. The dam on the river started Brown's involvement with LBJ. The Hotel was the original meeting place of the Mont Pelerin society (of which Hayek was the principle member), which, as David Harvey has recently argued, was the founding site of neoliberalism.

The "conversation" never took place. Hayek and Brown never met, and Mosley has composed their interaction solely through recorded archives. The conversation perhaps appears stilted but this is as much because of the fact that it did not take place as because, had it taken place, it would have done so between the smooth accented English in which Hayek pronounces on philosophy and economy and the guttural, occasionally stuttered statements of the Texas businessman.

Indeed, the transition between concept (Hayek) and reality (Brown) is never so smooth. This is a clear point of Mosley's work, and it is there even within the men's own words. Hayek discusses the principles of abstraction and the autonomy of the economic and political, though he himself was deeply involved in policy matters. Brown, similarly, praises the free market at the same time that he notes the importance of Johnson's involvement in business.

But that there is a difference between thoughts and actions is a rather banal point. There seems to be more happening both formally and thematically in the video. When the animated truck (modeled on the 1937 International D-50 flatbed truck) first begins to roll through the Oregon forest, it is Hayek's voice we hear in the background:

"When you pass from this concrete society, where we are guided by what we see, to the abstract society, which far transcends our range of vision it becomes necessary that we are guided not by the knowledge of the effect of what we do but by some abstract symbols. Now this only symbol which tells where we can make the best contribution is profit and in fact by pursuing profit, we are as altruistic as we can possibly be, because we extend our concern to people who are beyond our range of personal conception."

It is a rather remarkable quote. Relations, real and immediate, are denied. Losing the immediate, we are said to pass into the abstract, and not just any abstract, but profit as the abstract. In abstraction we go beyond our immediate interest into the altruism beyond. It is baffling, perhaps, but one can understand structurally Hayek's point. It is no different from some contemporary visions of cosmopolitanism. Although the

end is different (justice and not profit), these forms of cosmopolitanism would make a similar move: denying the immediate relation in order to see a broader set of concerns and guided by abstractions such as "human rights," "individual freedoms," or "international law."

Mosley does not seem to be taking a position here (indeed the video is more suggestive than demanding for the viewer), but the title *International* invokes at once cosmopolitan internationalism and the world market. It has, since at least the *Communist Manifesto*, been the gamble of certain sectors of the left that the internationalism of the world market could be transformed into the internationalism of global justice. If new voices – and Harvey is perhaps foremost among them – are challenging such a conception, it is because of a move from time (conversion) to space (realization). In other words, it is not a matter of converting the world market into perpetual peace, but rather developing a set of practices which keep their real and immediate relations to both space and time while *simultaneously* attempting to build broader connections.

It is here that Mosley's animated truck moving through the Oregon forest is so interesting. What, after all, is the relationship between space, time, and the virtual? How do basic cognitive frames such as space and time translate into a media world whose coordinates seem different from everyday life (albeit not necessarily in a way all that different from how the painting, as a frozen moment, ever was)?

Two interpretive options present themselves. First, that the truck represents a form of abstraction which leads not to profit but to destruction. The pristine forests through which the truck rolls are perhaps condemned to the same fate as the Colorado River or the Swiss mountains – they will be destroyed, hijacked, privatized and converted from real entity to abstract-profit relation. The truck would then represent the ghostly presence of early international exploitation of resources, reduplicated and enhanced by the power of modern technologies.

The second is a more sanguine reading. Network theorist Alex Galloway has suggested that the terrain of activism is changing its dimensions. The historical-temporal Marxist model (four dimensions) acceded to the 3D spatial model (situationism, radical cartography, etc.) which in turn is leading us to a two-dimensional space of appearance/non-appearance, as signaled, for example, by the rise of anonymous communities on the web and growing political demands for things like opacity, invisibility, and so on. The model is not perfect, but it is still suggestive for considering Mosley's animated truck. Under this reading, then, the animation would not signal the continuation of domination and abstract profit, but rather the invention of a new practice which allows for the erasure of such pernicious histories.

This is utopian and ungrounded, perhaps, but consider the close of the video. We return to a wooded path similar to the one in which the animated truck first appeared. There the woods were dark and the sky overcast. In the final segment, some light is showing through. The animated truck which the viewer expects never appears. We are left only with the image of the woods, standing free of the truck and its connotations of logging. The damage cannot be erased; but the continuation can be.



Similarly, the truck appears with Hayek's thoughts on abstraction. The truck does not appear when Brown discusses his first forays into military contracting (his company would for a time be a subdivision of Halliburton). And the video closes on his words, "until the war was over." From the abstract profit and coincident destruction to the concrete end of the war: A false promise? An empty utopian gesture? Perhaps. On the other hand, a critique of such beliefs? A mocking of the idea that the war ended, that wars are not still fought in the name of exploitation and cruelty? Equally plausible, and, historically, more accurate. But, still, sometimes it helps to remember that the path of history is no more guaranteed than the appearance or non-appearance of an animated truck, although perhaps it will be more difficult to change.

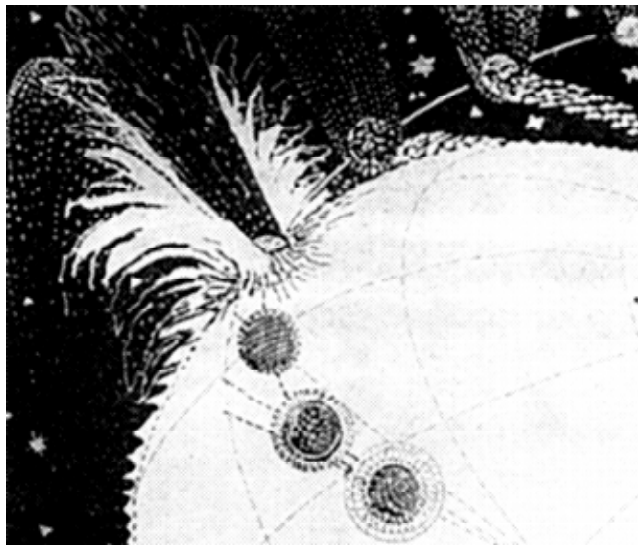
-Avi Alpert

The Hot Wet Breath of Extinction

Hans Hörbiger's *Welteislehre* (World Ice Theory), known previously as *Glazial-Kosmogonie* (Glacial Cosmogony) before he felt the need to further Germanize it, is an extravagant, crystal bleak, obstinately unfounded, and gorgeous theory. In short, the basic substance of the solar system is ice: ice moons and ice plants move through global ether made of... ice. The frosty, scraping motion of winter rendered infinite. No big bang, just the wet *thwup* of a sodden dead star smacking into a immense burning sun, sizzled vapor spray, splattering out into empty space. Radially drifting slow, freezing into elementary matter.

It is, of course, a theory with no ground, a thought cut loose and resutured to the apparatus of looking-like-science, even as it purports to be a *kosmotekhnische Weltanschauung* (a cosmotechnical world view). (And then there's its nasty introduction to the ranks of melancholic Nazi pseudo-science. It was employed both as a counter to the "Jewish" science (of things such as experimental verifiability and observable phenomena) and as a cosmically grounded racial climatology. Hörbiger followers heckled other astronomers ("Out with astronomical orthodoxy! Give us Hörbiger!") and made the racial associations of the theory unmistakable: "Our Nordic ancestors grew strong in ice and snow; belief in the Cosmic Ice is consequently the natural heritage of Nordic Man".)

Hörbiger's whole enterprise (an "astronomy of the invisible") is speculative thinking reaching its peak, beginning from a near lyric moment of potential misprision - *weird, I just realized that the moon looks like a bunch of ice stacked together* - that unfolds. Rather than saying *yes, many things look like ice when the sunlight hits them correctly, yet I know not to be eternal, order-founding ice*, the cosmological is built teetering, toppling out, telling science to fuck off while clinging to its hems, all to bind the universe as such to a solitary judgment. Like the pendulum of which Hörbiger dreamt, growing longer and longer until it broke, the world ice theory lengthens from an utethered fulcrum, an instance of total intentionality (all must be objectively as it seemed to me at that moment), produces an entire system, and consequently threatens such a first thought, such a cosmopolitics, such a nostalgia, such a fading illumination.



How does it threaten it?

Halted, gloomy, and falsely eternal as it is, the system undoes its apparent stasis - *be ever faithful to the originary ice!* - on its own terms: as an instance of the accelerating motion of thought itself, as a fantasy cosmopolitics, and as an acceleration which cannot be contained by the trappings of eternity. The gap between a frozen thought and a thought to which clings the aura of frozenness, with fallout on all sides. In this system, matter (the matter we access and see, of this solar system, of what binds our experience) takes form in accordance with the action of condensation and freezing. The ground of our experience is the crystallization of a flung chunk of that "first" wet star, some foundation granule around which vapor can recondense, harden, and become the Earth.

Two things from this. First, the binding is temporary and dependent on the coldness as a negative value: the basic condition for this genesis of what knowably exists is passage through what it is not and what threatens it. The cold is not flaming gas or the friction of impact, and this not alone gives shape to the scattered material. And what is it giving shape to? Not the genesis of all form out of what could be, but this particular arrangement, this solar system. There lies the second point: this is not an origin story of the universe. The universe prefigures, predates, and exists independently of our ice-worlds. Stars burn and die,

stones melt into liquid and cool again. And the rules still apply here, in this corner of it, even as the order is exceptional, founded through a confrontation with the prime figure - a gigantic star - of that other order. The dominance of ice, as organizational and generational principle, of hardening into shapes solid enough to stand and think on, comes about through the collision with the exorbitant, auto-consumptive, heat-producing center of simultaneous expenditure and transfer. (And we then ask: what happened to that other star, the one slammed with the wet dead sponge? Does it keep burning a little quieter now, by the vaporization that made all this possible? Was it fully consumed and splattered in that instant, now part of the rain of ice across the dark? Or did it matter not a whit? Its scale so large: like spitting in the desert, a soft hiss and nothing is changed? Except for Hörbiger, who could see in that petty drool's evaporation the possibility of crystal spheres, dark masses racing toward other collisions...)

To take on its related politics, in spite of the founding of a total correlation (people from "pure" icy lands = "pure" icy solar system), the event that makes it come into being is entirely opposed to this: a violent, annihilating confrontation that results not in the arid cold shards of Northern sentiment, but a warm, wet spray of filth that can only take pure ice shape because it is not pure, because there are particles around which the water can form. (Or worse, for the Nazis, god forbid that water picked up some other dirt floating around: what if the ice moons and ice planets aren't even direct, clean descendents of that first dead star!) At once the sense that this white ice is the rule of the cosmos and that it must be asserted as such because it clearly isn't. Born of the possibility of its own undoing, the exceptional ice gathers its forces to reconvene a first moment dark to it, when ice as dominant principle was not there. It aims to produce new, icier dead stars, far colder than that damp becoming, so the next time, the gigantic star, center of exorbitancy and threat to white eternity, wouldn't survive. The dead white sun returns home harder, and the outcome is the snuffing out of light and heat itself.

Of course, such a confrontation, doomed to fail, dimly aware of such as it speeds headlong toward the apathy of total negation, is only local. A further lengthening of the pendulum, then, toward general law of entropic distribution: the heat death of the universe.

Two options.

The flourishing and buttressing of ice worlds into bridged, halted shapes, a dead city of the solar system, an extension of its logic out to other parts of the universe. Tenuous, spider-silk thin linkages, previously too weak to hold now bind harder into connective glacial tissue. The storms of icy ether firm up, become blocks. Negative space itself becomes whitely solid, oceans of milky nothing with no room for movement. The general thermodynamic rules still apply, and so the principle that brings life to an end, the promise of extinction, becomes the guarantor of the extension of this other lifeless way of being. The reign of ice spreads wider. The frozen decay that that sustains, that spins beneath us, is not a hold out against what may come but a precursive image, the eye of the permafrost ice storm.

Unless it's all inverted. Taking on Hörbiger's speculative gesture, as it inverts known laws in order to occasion that moment of the pendulum's snapping off, deserves an impossible, thermodynamics in reverse, the extropic swelling of heat. As if cold was a positive value, leached away to nodes of thermal energy.

Starving, consumptive anti-suns that suck the cold right out of it all.

And everything will melt. All the shapes on which our knowing seemed possible, which we thought formed in our judgment, we thought guaranteed by warmth and light, finds itself betrayed. The opening all out to non-form. It's back to vapors one and all, across the board flung and drawn. Being becomes a fogged and inconstant hothouse. Those ancestral bacteria buried deep in the ice are warmed, by the theft of cold, and woken. They come to be, teeming, at the very moment that there is no ground to stand on, as the globe ends, just a trailing trail of steam. The wet, hot, panting breath of unformed life as the solar system falls apart. Existence's last collapse, the slow hissing gasp of all that is solid melting into fuming slush.

- Evan Calder Williams

I don't think they would do anything different if they returned to power. They are not statesmen [*des politiques*], in my opinion, but politicians [*des politiciens*] in the sense of micro-politicians [*micropoliticiens*], people on the hunt for votes by any means.

D.M. Political marketing?

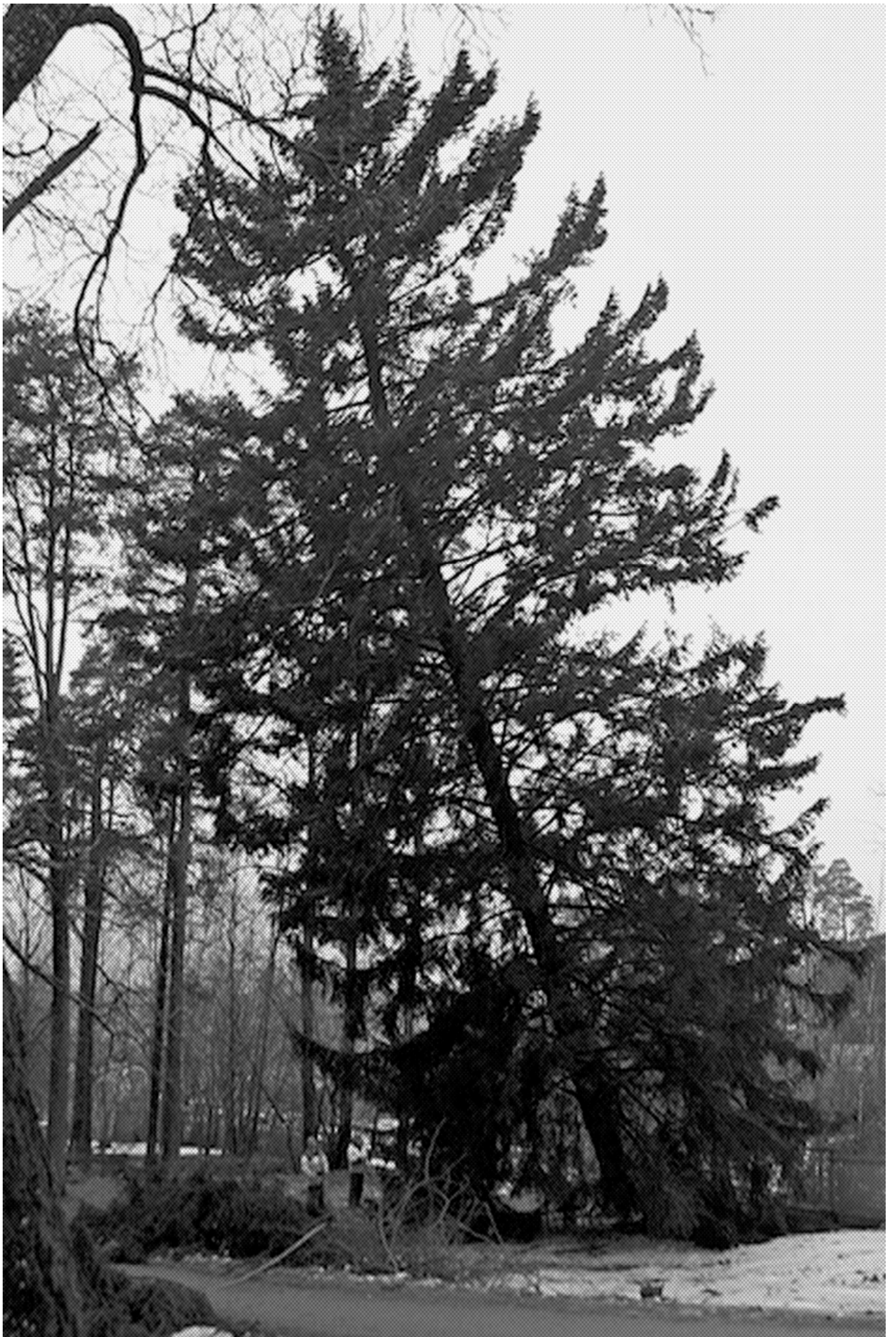
C.C. Yes, it's marketing. They have no program. Their aim is to stay in power or to return to power, and for that they're capable of anything. Clinton campaigned solely by following the polls—"If I say this, is it going to fly?"—each time taking the winning option for public opinion. As they say: 'I am their leader, therefore I'm led by them.' What's fascinating in our age, as in all ages moreover, is the way things conspire. There is an intrinsic link between this type of political nullity, politics becoming worthless, and insignificance in other domains, in the arts, in philosophy or in literature. This is the spirit of the times: without any conspiracy by some power that one could designate, everything conspires, in the sense of radiating in the same direction, for the same results, that is to say, insignificance.

D.M. How should politics be done?

C.C. Politics is a strange profession, even the aforementioned politics. Why? Because it presupposes two abilities that have no intrinsic relation. The first is to come to power. If you don't come to power, you can have the best ideas in the world, and it's of no use. There is thus an art of coming to power. The second ability is, once you come to power, to do something with it, that is to say, to govern. Napoleon knew how to govern; Clemenceau knew how to govern; Churchill knew how to govern. These are people who aren't of the same political alignment as me, but what I'm describing here is a historical type. Nothing guarantees that someone who knows how to govern knows, for all that, how to come to power. In an absolute monarchy, what did it mean to come to power? It meant to flatter the king, to be in the good graces of Madame de Pompadour. Today, in our pseudo-democracy, to come to power means to be telegenic, to sniff out public opinion. Once in power, what do you do? What Mr. Chirac is currently doing: nothing. You swim downstream. As needs be, you change hats because you recognize that in order to come to power you told stories, and that these stories don't apply.

D.M. You say "pseudo-democracy"...

C.C. I've always thought that so-called representative democracy is not a true democracy. Its representatives only minimally represent the people who elect them. First they represent themselves or represent particular interests, the lobbies, etc. And, even if that wasn't the case, to say that someone is going to represent me in an irrevocable manner for five years amounts to saying that I divest myself of my sovereignty as part of the people.



The Poisonous Stone Fish Dreaded Denizen of the North

Before becoming an artist and after some intense years of study, dusting off many a volume in a fervid attempt to sniff out the more pernicious strains of the idealist legacy, the author of this article was trepanning in the tropical seas of the North. After being pounded by the fists of the world and finding little solace in Fichte's elevation of the ego, Hegel's promise of spirit and healed wounds, and finding greater kinship with Schopenhauer's unrelenting pessimism and Nietzsche's cold-blooded critical gaze, the author felt that the more challenged we are by Nothingness, the more passionate, eager and violent must our resistance become. He thus turned from the Germanic heights to the tropical shallows to steel himself for the years to come. During the many hours he spent contemplating the shallows, he saw several specimens of the deadly stone fish—a paragon of resistance. He can vouch for its lethal powers. Many a comrade, he says, has paid the penalty for not having discerned that what looked like a stone was this treacherous enemy of man. What follows is a brief report from these years.

In Arabian seas lives one of the world's most poisonous fish. Never more than 1ft. in length when fully grown, the stone fish is a repulsive object. The head is flat and broad, and it is adorned with a small upturned mouth, the inside of which is of a sickly, whitish-green hue. Near the base of the tail start 13 spines. They are charged with venom similar to that of the deadly Indian cobra.

As a rule the stone fish lies half-buried on the bottom of the sea in shallow water. Its habitat is generally among small stones—hence its name. At other times it is half-covered with sand or mud. So effective is its camouflage that it can hardly be seen even when it is searched for most carefully. Even the keenest and most discerning eye often fail to see it in time to prevent one from stepping on it. The deadly venom is secreted in poison sacs which are beneath the skin under the spines.

I've seen many a boot clad friend and foe step on one of these insidious creatures of the shallows. The sharp spine piercing the sole and entering the flesh, the afflicted writhes in agony as the corrosive venom quickly deadens the surrounding tissue. Without immediate attention, death invariably follows.



It is ingenious how this fish feeds. It takes advantage of its wonderful powers of camouflage. So closely does it resemble its surroundings that small fish swim close to it, and when some of them are just above the broad head the deadly creature opens its mouth and draws in water at great pressure. The current pulls the living food into the mouth waiting to receive it.

There is something perverse about Ludwig Fischer's obsession with the stone fish. For those capable of reading symptoms, one could perhaps find a key to his decision to produce himself as an artist and to contrive a signature that seeks to challenge from within the sundry specters that threaten an art that remains committed to being untimely. As he has often uttered, art should strive to become like the stone fish—a being that plays with its reification, at becoming a lifeless form, so as lure its prey and repel its enemies.

Mehr Licht / Mehr Nicht

Rousseau already said this: the English believe that they are free because they elect representatives every five years, but they are free only one day every five years, the day of the election.



And even that isn't true. The election is rigged, not because the ballot boxes are being stuffed, but because the options are determined in advance. No one asked the people what they wanted to vote on. They are told, 'vote for or against the Maastricht Treaty,' for example. But who made the Maastricht Treaty? It wasn't us. There is Aristotle's wonderful phrase responding to the question, "Who is the citizen?": "The citizen is someone who is able to govern and to be governed." Are there forty million citizens in France at the moment? Why wouldn't they be able to govern? Because all political life aims precisely at making them forget how to govern. It aims at convincing them that there are experts to whom matters must be entrusted. There is thus a political counter-education. Whereas people should accustom themselves to exercising all sorts of responsibilities and taking initiatives, they accustom themselves to following the options that others present to them or voting for those options. And since people are far from being stupid, the result is that they believe in it less and less, and they become cynical, in a kind of political apathy.

D.M. Civic responsibility, democratic practice, do you think that it was better in the past? That elsewhere, today, it's better than in France?

C.C. No, elsewhere, today, it's certainly not better. It can even be worse. Once again, the American elections illustrate this. But, in the past, it was better from two points of view.

In modern societies, let's say starting from the American and French Revolutions until about the Second World War, there was still a lively social and political conflict. People opposed one another. People demonstrated. They didn't demonstrate for a particular SNCF route—I'm not saying this is contemptible, it's at least a goal—but in the past the workers demonstrated or went on strike for political causes and not only for petty corporatist interests. There were major questions that concerned all salaried employees. These struggles marked the last two centuries. However, what we observe now is a decline in people's activity. And there is a vicious circle. The more people withdraw from activity, the

The worlds of Jennifer Levonian's new animations evoke a strange familiarity. One feels at home amidst the myriad pedestrian objects so exactly and sensuously depicted while suddenly realizing that this mundane and comfortable reality surrounding us is much more odd, much more uncanny, than what we normally see.

In three new short films, *Her Slip is Showing* and *Buffalo Milk Yogurt*, showing at the Fleisher/Ollman Gallery through June 12, and *Take Your Picture with a Puma*, which just completed a month-long installation at the PMA as part of Adelina Vlas's *Live Cinema: Histories in Motion* exhibition, Levonian explores the subtle unhings, forgotten hopes and unfulfilled desires of her characters amidst richly wrought landscapes. The stories these films tell through cut-paper animation are often funny—during a recent public dialogue between Levonian and Vlas at the PMA the sight of a wonderfully banal animated lawn sprinkler, from *Her Slip is Showing*, was greeted with uproarious laughter—and the moods produced by the original musical scores are often bright. But the comedy, the brightness of tone, along with the richly variegated hues of the watercolor figures with which Levonian constructs her scenes, serve as counterpoint to an almost mournful disquiet. When, in *Her Slip is Showing*, a small bird watches an ant drag a cocktail olive into an anthill and then expands its tail feathers to reveal the text "Goethe's last words: More Light!," we might do well to recall Milan Kundera's darkly comic quip that these words are merely one graphic mark removed from their opposite.

Perhaps whoever testified to the poet's final articulate breath heard "Mehr Licht" while Goethe actually said "Mehr Nicht."

Perhaps we would simply rather hear "Mehr Licht," and the immaculate

attention that these films pay to the prosaic details of our everyday experience—to our brand-obsessed consumerism, to the kitsch that populates our domestic spaces, to the cultural oblivion of party-hungry American tourism, to the forced exuberance and gaiety that often constitutes proper social etiquette—bears witness to the fact that we systematically avoid the more nocturnal side of things. Even if they sometimes go along with all the nonsense taking place on the surface, though, the characters in these films struggle to find a more authentic place in their world and with others while being hemmed in by the narrow sense of life that this surface, this façade, demands. Sometimes the façade breaks down.

Buffalo Milk Yogurt deals most explicitly with this crack in the façade of everyday reality. An initial tone of lassitude and ennui is set by Corey Fogel's musical score, which produces the stylish cacophony of an unpracticed one-man band as the male protagonist tinkers with a piano, a drum set, a cowbell, a shaker, trying to find something to do to fill up the emptiness of his time. It is the middle of the day. He explodes his lunch in a Panasonic microwave (which I recognized from my 1980s childhood, so fine is the attention to detail). He pours himself half a glass of cabernet sauvignon and then, in a perfectly timed why-the-fuck-not moment of reconsideration, fills the glass. This guy is certainly bored, but it remains productively unclear whether he is plagued by the narrow sense of possibility that his world offers or by his own inability to find a place in that world.

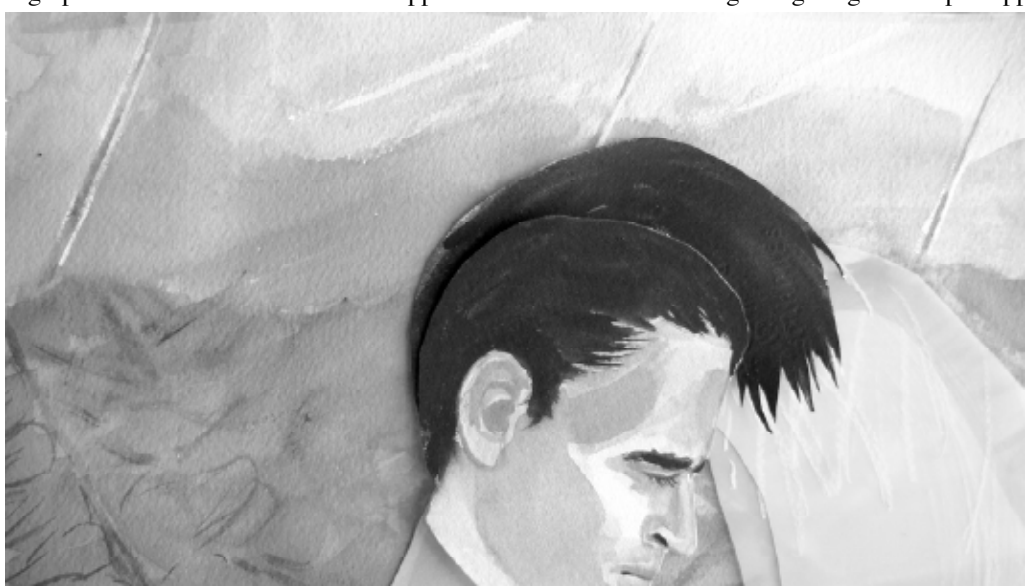
The man's trip to the Bread and Circus Gourmet Market gives one a sense of the constrained horizon of possibility in consumer society. Upon arriving, he encounters a naked woman meditating on a bale of hay, surrounded by pumpkins (it is Halloween). We meet her again when the man leaves the store, being tackled, with a suggestion of sexual violence, by a number of police officers while a crowd of cell phone camera-toting shoppers looks voyeuristically on. In the meantime, in the store, the man has lost his mind. Although he initially performs the normal routine that the marketplace expects of him—responding to the free sample "Try Me!" imperative by eating a piece of cheese, struggling to decide between toasted coconut flavored buffalo milk yogurt and, hilariously, mojito flavored pitbull milk yogurt, surveying the display of Best Friend Cereal—the routine soon becomes overwhelming and he suffers an intense agoraphobic vertigo. The cereal falls out of focus and begins to swoon, and the man knocks over the cheese display and washes his hair in the automatic produce sprinklers. When "freedom" means the freedom to choose between flavors of yogurt and "friendship" is the catchword of a marketing strategy, who can blame him? The façade

has broken down, the fabric of prosaic objects has unraveled, and the world has revealed its *Unheimlichkeit*.

What is to be done in an alienating world? What do we do with our utopian dreams of liberation and redemption, like those expressed at a "Take Back the Night" rally during a flashback in *Her Slip is Showing*? This question becomes more perplexing when the film flashes forward again, and we realize that those with whom we shared our dreams and read Lydia Davis and Annie Dillard in smoke-filled cafés have reconciled themselves to suburban comforts and to the bridal shower niceties of thong underwear cookies, Tiffany & Co. cake, and Calphalon cookware. Who are our compatriots if we cannot reconcile ourselves in this way, or if we refuse to do so? We long for something beyond the dominant social codes—those codes of right conduct governing the supermarket of *Buffalo Milk Yogurt*, the bridal shower of *Her Slip is Showing*, and the bakery of *Take Your Picture with a Puma*. But even when we let these codes break down, making playful puma faces at each other like the flirting pair in *Take Your Picture with a Puma*, hoping for something like a genuine encounter, hoping for something to happen, exposing ourselves, the encounter is so often a missed encounter, and we continue to pass each other by... at the supermarket, at the bridal shower, at the bakery. What do we do with our dreams and desires? Do we give up a sense of narrative through which we might have anticipated an event, resigning ourselves to the truth inscribed, in *Her Slip is Showing*, on the surfaces of grilling burgers and pineapples? "There

is no plot / no story / and no end / There is only habit / and the turning of minutes."

The grill returns in *Buffalo Milk Yogurt*, where it is the instrument of a different kind of inscription.

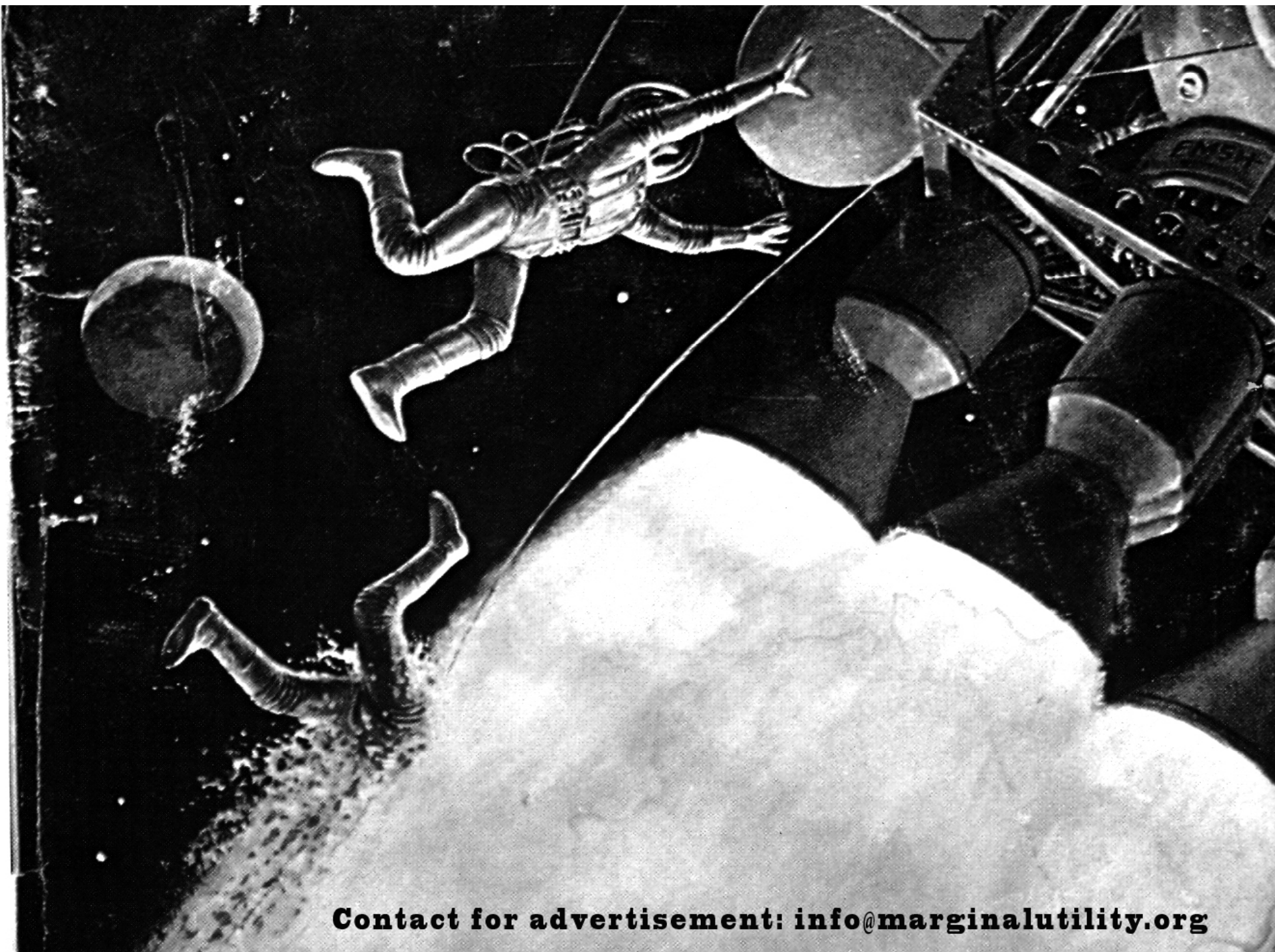


Having returned from his agoraphobic fit at the Bread and Circus, the man approaches his "George Fourman Mean Lean Grilling Machine," opens it, and inserts Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, to be followed by Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. (This might serve as the punchline to the Heideggerian logic of the *unheimlich* employed above.) Pressing down, the man inscribes the covers of these texts with parallel grilling lines that, like a Heideggerian/Derridean X, cross the texts out, branding them with their own negation. What does this negation without negation (one can still read, as it were, between the grilling lines) of philosophical and literary signification signify? Beyond any narrative (or epochal) expectation of definitive historical, political, cultural or erotic fulfillment, two interpretive possibilities present themselves. Perhaps we have entered the terrain of post-historical and post-political economic management, and the man has decided to give up any concern with anything other than the quotidian reality of consumer society. Perhaps his fit of madness has convinced him to abdicate the empty and potentially creative space of his ennui and to fill up his time with more sober and practical concerns in an attempt to resign and reconcile himself to the world as it is. But the intellectual savvy and cultural literacy of these films makes such an interpretation unsatisfying. This grilled negation should instead be seen as a liberating gesture, not from intellectual and cultural passion but for a passion that steps beyond those giants of the 20th century who all had, at some point, famously or infamously, big hopes for political change.

Beyond these big hopes, beyond the narrative expectation of fulfillment, we might ask about the missing fourth, as Socrates does in the first line of the *Timaeus*. Three giants of 20th century culture are negatively inscribed by the George Four-man grill. Who is missing? We might opt for Lydia Davis or Annie Dillard, whose texts make appearances, in *Her Slip is Showing*, at a far enough remove from the grill to escape its negation. Before settling on an answer, though, and deciding which voices might guide us through our attempts to find a place in our world without resigning ourselves to it, we should recognize that these texts show up in a flashback. Looking forward, I would prefer to say that the space of the missing fourth is meant to be empty, as the space in which we might creatively and collectively explore our desires, our dreams, our politics and our artistic practices. These films are evidence enough that Levonian will be creatively and productively exploring this space for a long time, in the light and in the darkness.

—Jeffrey D. Gower

Image: Jennifer Levonian, still from *Buffalo Milk Yogurt*, 2010, animation, 7:32 minutes, Courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman Gallery



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SCREENING

Screening was an alternative gallery based project that was staged in a small black box viewing room near the entrance of the Vox Populi gallery. The project was conceived and programmed by artists Nadia Hironaka and Matthew Suib. Screening broadened the scope of, and expanded access to video art in Philadelphia, in part, by providing a venue less institutional than a museum, but more formal than your living room. Screening was dedicated to the presentation of innovative, challenging and exciting moving images. Screening exhibited works that explored the ways moving image culture influences how we see ourselves, and others.

The first exhibition was held on July 6 2007, and ran three years until it finally closed on June 27, 2010 with twenty exhibitions in total.

JOAN JONAS, Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy: JUNE 4-JUNE 27, 2010

PAT O'NEILL: MARCH 5-MAY 30, 2010

VALÉRIE MRÉJEN: JANUARY 8-FEBRUARY 28, 2010

HIRAKI SAWA: SEPTEMBER 4-NOVEMBER 1, 2009

OODA part 1:
Heather Bursch - Unreleased: JULY 10-AUGUST 2, 2009

OODA part 2:
Renee Petropoulos - Two or Three Things I Know About Gas Station Mini-Marts: AUGUST 7-AUGUST 30, 2009

MUNGO THOMSON: MAY 1-JUNE 28, 2009

KELLY RICHARDSON: MARCH 6-APRIL 26, 2009

KRIS LEFCOE: JANUARY 9-MARCH 1, 2009

MARK LEWIS: NOVEMBER 7-DECEMBER 28, 2008



MICHAEL BELL-SMITH: SEPTEMBER 5-OCTOBER 26, 2008

GEORGE STADNIK: JUNE 6-JULY 27, 2008

SEMICONDUCTOR: APRIL 4-JUNE 1, 2008

DEBORAH STRATMAN: FEBRUARY 1-MARCH 30, 2008

ADAM PUTNAM: DECEMBER 7, 2007-JANUARY 27, 2008

TAKESHI MURATA OCTOBER 5-DECEMBER 2, 2007

PASCUAL SISTO: SEPTEMBER 7-30, 2007

LARS LAUMANN: JULY 6-SEPTEMBER 2, 2007

PHILIPPE DECRAUZAT: JUNE 1-JULY 1, 2007

JOHAN GRIMONPREZ: MAY 4-27, 2007

Screening, like the former Blowhard Gallery, Kate Midget's Project Room, the Lawrence Oliver Gallery, and the Matthews Hamilton gallery, amongst others will be sorely missed.

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more some bureaucrats, politicians, so-called people in charge, take the lead. They have a good justification: 'I take the initiative because people aren't doing anything.' And the more those people dominate, the more the others say to themselves, 'it's not worth it to get involved, there are enough of them dealing with it and, in any case, there's nothing one can do about it.' That's the first point of view.

The second point of view, linked to the first, is that of the dissolution of the grand political ideologies—either revolutionary or truly reformist—that really wanted to change things in society. For a thousand and one reasons, these ideologies have been discredited; they have ceased to correspond to the times, to correspond to people's aspirations, to the situation of society, to historical experience. The collapse of the Soviet Union and of communism was an enormous event. Can you show me one single person among the politicians—not to say political schemers—on the left, who has truly reflected on what has happened, on the reasons why this has happened, and who has, as we foolishly say, learned lessons from it? An evolution of this kind, first of all in its initial phase—the rise to monstrosity, totalitarianism, the gulag etc.—and then in its collapse, merited a very in-depth reflection and a conclusion regarding what a movement that wants to change society can do, must do, must not do, cannot do. Absolutely no reflection!



How, then, do you want what one calls the people, the masses, to arrive at their proper conclusions when they are not really enlightened?

You were talking to me about the role of intellectuals. What are these intellectuals doing? What have they done with Reagan, Thatcher, and with French socialism? They brought back the hard-line liberalism from the beginning of the 19th century, the one that we had been fighting against for one hundred and fifty years and that would have driven society to catastrophe because, in the end, old Marx wasn't entirely wrong. If capitalism had been left to itself, it would have collapsed a hundred times. There would have been a crisis of overproduction every year. Why hasn't it collapsed? Because the workers struggled. They imposed wage increases, thereby creating enormous markets of internal consumption. They imposed reductions in working hours, which absorbed all of the technological unemployment. Now we are surprised that there is unemployment. But since 1940 working hours haven't noticeably diminished. Nowadays we quibble, 'thirty-nine hours,' 'thirty-eight and a half,' 'thirty-seven and three quarters,' it's grotesque!... So, there was this return of liberalism, and I don't see how Europe will be able to get out of

this crisis. The liberals tell us, 'it's necessary to have confidence in the market.' But what these neo-liberals are telling us today, the academic economists themselves refuted in the thirties. They showed that there can be no equilibrium in capitalist societies. These economists were neither revolutionaries nor Marxists! They showed that everything the liberals relate concerning the virtues of the market that would guarantee the best possible allocation, that would guarantee resources, the most equitable distribution of income possible, they showed that all of this is nonsense! All of this has been demonstrated and never refuted. But there is this grand economico-political offensive by the dominating and ruling strata that can be symbolized by the names of Reagan and Thatcher, and even Mitterrand for that matter!



Hesaid, 'alright, you've laughed enough. Now we are going to fire you, we are going to slim down the industry—we are going to eliminate the "excess fat," as Mr. Juppé says—and then you will see that the market, in the long run, will guarantee you well-being.' In the long run, but in the meantime there is 12.5% of official unemployment in France.

D.M. Why isn't there opposition to this liberalism?

C.C. I don't know; it's extraordinary. We spoke of a sort of terrorism of conformist thought, that is to say of non-thought. It is unique in its conformity in the sense that it is the first form of thought that is complete non-thought, liberal conformist thought that no one dares to oppose. Currently, there is a sort of victorious discourse of the right that is not a discourse but affirmations, empty discourses. And behind this discourse, there is something else, which is what is most serious.

What was liberal ideology in its heyday? Around 1850 it was a widespread ideology because there was a belief in progress: 'get rich!' These liberals thought that progress would bring about an elevation of economic well-being. But even when people weren't getting rich, in the exploited classes, there was a move toward less work, toward less arduous tasks, in order to be less stultified by industry. It was the great theme of the age. Benjamin Constant says as much: 'the workers

cannot vote because they are stultified by industry (he says it straight out; people were honest back in the day!), thus a voting system based on the poll tax is necessary.' But subsequently, working hours diminished, there was literacy, there was education, there was enlightenment, which was no longer the subversive Enlightenment of the 18th century but enlightenment all the same, which spread through society. Science develops, humanity becomes more humane, societies become more civilized and little by little, asymptotically, we will arrive at a society where there will be practically no longer any exploitation: this representative democracy will tend to become a true democracy.

D.M. Not bad?

C.C. Not bad. Except that it didn't work, and it doesn't work like that. The rest happened, but men did not become more human, society did not become more civilized for all that. Capitalists did not soften up. We see that now. It's not the fault of men; it's the system. The result is that, from the inside, people no longer believe in this idea. The mood, the general frame of mind, is one of resignation. Today, what dominates is resignation, even among the representatives of liberalism. What's the major argument at the moment? 'Perhaps this is bad, but the alternative is worse.' Everything boils down to this. And it's true that this has numbed quite a lot of people. They tell themselves: 'if we change things too much, we're headed for a new Gulag.' That's what's behind the ideological exhaustion of our age, and I think that we will only get out of this by a resurgence of a powerful critique of the system and a revival of people's activity, of their participation in communal affairs. It is a tautology to say that, but we must wait, we must hope and we must work in this direction.

D.M. The political elite reduced to serving as lackey for the World Company, guard-dog intellectuals, the media that has betrayed its role as an oppositional force, these are some of the causes and some of the symptoms of this rise of insignificance.

C.C. But at present, we're feeling the tremors of a revival of civic activity. Here and there, we're nonetheless starting to understand that the "crisis" is not an inevitable outcome of modernity to which we must submit, "adapt," for fear of archaism. Thus the problem of the role of citizens is raised and the aptitude of each person to exercise rights and democratic duties with the aim—sweet and beautiful utopia—of getting out of generalized conformism.

-Excerpted from the interview "No God, No Caesar, No Tribune!...", forthcoming in the journal *Epoché* and the book *Postscript on Insignificance*, ed. with an introduction by Gabriel Rockhill, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, John V. Garner et alii (London: Continuum Books). Used by arrangement with *Epoché* and Continuum Books. All rights reserved.

- Etienne Dolet