

Sarah Rifky

Sarah Rifky is co-founder of Beirut, an art initiative in Cairo, and founder of CIRCA (Cairo International Resource Center for Art). She has served as artistic director of ArteEast in New York (2017–18), co-curator of Jogjakarta Biennale XII (2013), curator of Townhouse (2009–11), and curatorial Agent for dOCUMENTA(13) (2012). She is co-editor of *Thresholds 47: Repeat, Positionen: Zeitgenössische Künstler aus der Arabischen Welt* and *Damascus: Artists, Tourists and Secret Agents*. She is author of *The Going Insurrection* (2012). Rifky is a Ph.D. candidate in History, Theory and Criticism and the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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PRO SEMINAR 01

Thu, Nov 14, 2019
3–6 pm

Curatorial Research Bureau
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts
701 Mission Street
San Francisco, CA

a pedagogical framework placing students and guests in close dialogue with leading curators and designers about ideas informing their research

Sarah Rifky

PROSEMINAR READINGS

1. *The Curators: An Unruly Conversation*, edited by Sarah Rifky. Unpublished transcript of roundtable conversation among Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Ann Demeester, Ute Meta Bauer and Irit Rogoff, moderated by Hendrik Folkerts and Sarah Rifky. Curating Workshop, as part of *The Curators* symposium, Rotterdam: Witte de With Rotterdam, March 2019.
2. Toscano, Alberto. "Seeing Socialism: On the Aesthetics of the Economy, Production and the Plan." In *Economy: Art, Production and the Subject in the 21st Century*, edited by Dimitrakaki, Angela and Kirsten Lloyd. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015.
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2. Downey, Walker and Sarah Rifky. "[You Can Take a Trip to Berlin.](#)" *Thresholds 47: Repeat* (2019).
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10. Rifky, Sarah. "[Re-reading myself: On writing the revolution.](#)" *Mada Masr*, January 24, 2014.
11. Rifky, Sarah. *The Going Insurrection: 100 Notes, 100 Thoughts: Documenta Series 086*, edited by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2012.
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14. Behkalam, Kaya, and Sarah Rifky. *Damascus: Tourists, Artists, Secret Agents. A Collective Narrative*, edited by Kaya Behkalam, Paula Bugni, Beatrice Catanzaro, Roberto Cavallini, Azin Feizabadi, Carla Esperanza Tommasini, Sarah Rifky, Ashkan Sepahvand / Reloading Images. Berlin: The Green Box, 2009.

ProSeminar 01

Thu, Nov 14, 2019
3–6 pm

SARAH RIFKY: WORLDMAKING,
FORMS AND CURATING
WORLDS APART

Curator and writer Sarah Rifky leads a ProSeminar reflecting on her experiences co-founding and running state-independent art initiatives in Cairo and Alexandria.

The ProSeminar is an invitation to leading curators, designers, and researchers in contemporary art and design to host a conversation about the artworks, exhibitions and ideas that inform their practice. Less than 20 participants and spanning a condensed timeframe of three hours, the model is an opportunity for students, faculty and invited participants to engage in focused dialogue with guests.

Readings provided in advance.

Presented by CCA's Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice as part of Curatorial Research Bureau and 100 Books.

Sometime in March 2009

An unruly conversation about curatorial responsibility

Roundtable conversation Curating workshop – Witte de With Rotterdam, 'The Curators' symposium

Moderators: Hendrik Folkerts and Sarah Rifky

Speakers: Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Ann Demeester, Ute Meta Bauer and Irit Rogoff

Hendrik Folkerts and Sarah Rifky: The roundtable that ensued and of which you will be reading the abbreviated transcript, was the product of a set of conversations shared between episodes of intent listening and furious talking both inside and outside the Witte de With building last March. As participants of the workshop led by Raimundas Malasauskas, we were invited to partake, intervene, react or produce something in relation to the Curator's symposium. A sentiment we immediately shared and felt strongly about was the complete absence of the notion of responsibility in relation to the wide scoping discussions on curatorial practice. We drafted our notes, speculations and conversation snippets into three questions relating to curatorial responsibility and in impromptu fashion we invited four curators to actively engage with those questions and issues. Trying to circumvent the tricky terrains of the curator's responsibility in relation to the artist and audience, we focused on the curator's responsibility, or response-ability, to cultural policy, to discourse and history - as a synthesizer and producer of thoughts and ideas, given the curator's implication in the conditions of production - and finally the curator's responsibility in relation to pedagogy, in the light of the unprecedented formalization of the field of curatorial education. The one-and-a-half-hour-long conversation took place amongst the workshop participants in the Witte de With library. In editing the complete transcript, we have tried to remain true to the nature of the conversation, which was quite relaxed, anecdotal and spectacular - in an everyday sense.

Hendrik Folkerts (HF): The first issue we want to address in this round table conversation is the responsibility of the curator - or as we have stressed before, the ability to respond - in relation to cultural policy. We believe that this is an item that has been somewhat overlooked in the (previous) panel discussions of the symposium. A useful point of departure for a discussion about this subject is the panel debate of yesterday, that coined the curator a political animal. In this respect, it is important to note that policy and the political share the same etymological root, which is a playful yet interesting starting point of our talk. We want to particularly focus on the question: what do you feel is your own responsibility in your practice with regard to cultural policy? Do you feel the need to relate to this at all? Or do you believe that cultural policy should exist solely outside of the curatorial realm? Ute's remark yesterday, that we are indeed implicated in state and institutional agendas, is also something we want to include in this discussion. We are very curious to hearing your responses.

Ann Demeester (AD): Maybe I should start, as currently being based the Netherlands and very familiar with its internal operations when it comes to policy making. I think it's an extremely difficult question, because you actually presuppose that there is kind of tension between the institution and cultural policy, or a kind of risk of being instrumentalized in executing a political agenda. I think, if I look very close at de Appel (Amsterdam) and the Dutch political structure, then I think we have the great liberty of not defining our own agendas, but definitely defining what we want to be as an institution, in a much more open way than would be the case in the surrounding countries. If I reduce your question just to cultural policy coming from the Dutch Ministry of Culture, there is a positive evaluation of mid-scale contemporary art institutions such as Witte de With (Rotterdam), de Appel or Mares (Maastricht).

Seeing that the Dutch government does believe in decentralisation, these institutions cannot just be in the bigger cities. Also, the Ministry allows us to define our own position and own policy and most importantly, our own function, which is quite an unusual situation. For me, the threat of instrumentalisation is much more visible with regard to other factors, which would have – in the case of de Appel – to do with the Dutch obsession with creative industry and, consequently, the constant negotiation of art institutions to (not) contribute to processes of gentrification and urban renewal. This is another matter, however.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (CCB): I am a bit of a left-over romantic and don't have much to say on this subject, although I think it is a crucial subject. The position of policy makers is often difficult: maintaining a direct relationship between cultural production and society. I don't see myself engaging with policy in any constructive way. I think there are people, whose mission this is allocate funding and distribute grants to projects in the community for development purposes. These people have a large role and responsibility. I don't carry that burden. I have never chosen to carry it, and I chose not to carry it in my work.

Ute Meta Bauer (UMB): No, I think you *do* care about policy. You just told me yesterday about the ways in which politicians interfere with your own institution [Castello di Rivoli, Turin].

CCB: 'Care about' is different than 'taking care of'. I mean, I 'care about' in the sense it upsets me to know that local politicians in Turin are the ones who are able to decide who the next director of the Castello di Rivoli will be. In leaving Rivoli there is a risk that they will chose someone with no institutional experience, a person with no in depth knowledge of contemporary art, but someone who is a handsome young man, very polite and elegant, perhaps. Complaining about bad policy of course is different from deciding I can act in policy making. I don't have the legal knowledge and chose not to take up policy as part of my work, in a way, I don't think it's useful for me to try to solve the contradiction between for example great reactionary art and politics.

UMB: Let me go into another issue of responsibility in relation to cultural policy making. I just came back from Hungary, where I visited artists which I worked with and know from twenty years ago. They are in such bad shape: physically, personally and professionally. I told one of the curators I met there that I think it's a shame that policy makers don't take care of that. I think it's their responsibility as a government institution. This anecdote is maybe more on a personal, of even human level. I don't believe I want to develop policy, but I think we as curators also have a responsibility to say something. And you do as well, Carolyn...

CCB: Yes, a responsibility to say something is an opinion, but the responsibility to take on policy as my responsibility, I can't. It stems from a kind of anarchist background and distrust towards policy makers. It is just that I am shocked by the Leftist policies in Italy and destroyed Pasolini and Arte Povera, as much as they could. I don't trust policy makers in terms of what they claim to understand in the short and long term on behalf of societies, which allows them to allocate funds to projects or give money to certain biennials to develop decentralization. I can't be responsible for policy myself.

UMB: It's not about taking care of that yourself. It's also to point out - as a curator, being part of the contemporary art world - that something is severely wrong. And as long as nobody says anything, then nothing will change. I am not in favor of bureaucrats or policy makers per se, but there is so much policy that rather destroys than supports. That's what I was talking about, and that is where our own responsibility lies.

Sarah Rifky (SR): Irit, you spoke about implication. Perhaps we can use that to understand a curator's responsibility in relation to cultural policy. Some curators, like Carolyn, chose to clearly separate their roles from that of policy making, but could we argue, through this idea that you laid out, that we are all "implicated" in being somewhat responsible for what goes on in cultural policy, even as contemporary art curators?

Irit Rogoff (IR): I would absolutely refuse the notion of responsibility as a term. I think setting up things in terms of responsibilities automatically puts in a situation of responding. And I think there are necessities: urgent necessities and not so urgent ones, which somehow navigate much of our work and lives. Parallel to that understanding of how deeply implicated we are in everything, that we are critical and therefore we find ourselves having to expose the levels of our implication. I think the problem with the notion of responsibility and response produces exactly this kind of situation where you [Carolyn] might have to say "I don't do policy, because that is not where my abilities lie" and you [Sarah] would say "we have a responsibility towards a certain kind of things". You know, I work in a different context, I have a task and that is to "think" within the art world, which is something that very often doesn't happen. Rigorous, critical, highly informed and self-reflective thinking that is. As far as policy making bodies go, the question is "how do all the things that we do, produce challenges to that [art] world?" I don't mean by denouncing and praising policies as lousy or inspired but let me give you a concrete example. I am part of a large EU funding network. They fund a lot of our [Goldsmiths] extra-institutional work. Besides all the work we want to pursue, my contribution, or our contribution to policy in this case is not to try and give information on how to make better policy, but to say: you're looking at the wrong things, in the wrong way with the wrong vocabulary, and here are some possibilities to start reorienting yourself and the notion of a common good.

CCB: That is what we were trying to talk about this morning at breakfast.

IR: I was so vast asleep this morning at breakfast, I don't know what we were trying to talk about. Anyway, this is how I would plug into this. I don't think we should entertain enormous questions about responsibility. I think we should examine carefully where we might operate between necessity and implication.

UMB: We can do thinking and thinking and thinking, while matters desperately need our attention. I think we have a lot of luxury problems here. So, the chasing of millionaires might not work, but in the former East the personal and professional conditions of artists, of a generation now in their sixties, are ignored. They were too old to adapt to the new structures. And I think there is a necessity of responsibility here and thus to react! Not only should there be a responsibility of the state to take care of its citizens, but as I said, also a responsibility on our side to point out less fortunate situations. As you said, Irit, there should also be a cultural policy in the UK to protect certain works and to make sure that institutions do what they are supposed to do. Carolyn, this is also what you wanted for the Calzone...

CCB: The Calzone?

UMB: Like.. what work was that? Not Calzone... The... in Castello di Rivoli...

CCB: Ah, Calsolari. An artist.

UMB: Calsolari, sorry! On a more serious note, though, there should be a policy to protect artists, art works and to regulate institutions. Sometimes, if we are not putting pressure on and respond to this, it's too late.

SR: My next question pertains to responsibility, if I can insist on this word. Or a response-ability, towards criticality, towards a history of thought and ideas. As curators, how do we remain faithful to events and writings that produce history and critical thought, through our exhibitions and projects without reducing these events and ideas to thematic surveys or gimmicks.

CCB: I see, how do we not suffer from amnesia? You see, maybe it's good to suffer from amnesia. My Australia experience brought me to think that perhaps we should suffer from amnesia, of critical thinking. In the relativistic paradigm of postmodernism, we broke down the so so-called master narratives and this idea of a linear history up until and throughout the 1980's and 1990's. With this breakdown that affected the linearity of the Western art historical paradigm, through all of these [postcolonial & feminist] studies, what was never discussed by the intelligentsia was the necessity of critical discourse. Artistic practice was discussed, but the root to the discussion was missing: critical distance.

SR: Who do you mean by "intelligentsia" here?

CCB: Everybody who had a voice and who thought "certain things" shouldn't be dealt with because they lacked "critical distance". These "things" to them are not art. For example, practices of a remote community of Aboriginals will produce works that might be classified as neo-exotic and therefore never be acquired by major institutions, such as the Tate Modern or the Castello di Rivoli. In fact, that people are doing something in Pitijara, even in the most radical political sense, their not knowing that what they are producing could fall within the framework of what we might call contemporary art, will never make their work part of our discussion. They cannot be part of the discussion, because it would be classified as primitive.

SR: As you said, there is the role of the intelligentsia, which I understand as those who determine the terms of inclusion and exclusion in the art world and the conditions of production, historically also, who then are the curators in relation to them and how does the contemporary art curator in this position act out their responsibility? Through their projects and exhibitions, curators are able to contribute to the expanding canon of contemporary art: there is a responsibility to remain faithful to the historical canon and critical discourse, matter of power, politics and representation all of which reflect on, if not govern, the relationships between art producers, curators and institutions. I am particularly thinking of what now is referred to as "contemporary Arab art" in relation to the series of Contemporary Arab Representations curated by Catherine Davide and how that has influenced the spectrum of how contemporary art practices from the Arab world have been perceived, categorized and canonized.

CCB: That's a big question. To continue what I was saying, the problem with this hegemony, is the need for critical distance, or criticality in art. In the case of Aboriginal art, you can only decide to act with Destiny Deacon for example. Now, what would the alternative be? I don't know. It's a real problem, because the alternative is the end of contemporary art, in a way. I suppose one must then think beyond the necessity of working within the field of contemporary art and focus rather on the cultural field at large.

AD: I'm more wondering about the nature of your question. Is it a question of powerlessness or a question that you feel that the system is so monolithic, and certain approaches get so much visibility that you can actually not question it? That you cannot posit an alternative?

SR: I am wary of placing the agency solely in the hands of the curator or the artist. I would rather understand the notion of agency as it is embedded within language and a larger more inclusive system of implication. We are then, all agents of this language in a way. Language in this sense includes the larger space which binds us with histories, a network of institutions, funding bodies and governments.

IR: I would absolutely agree with that. The place from which you start implies that we should not forget Edward Said, and of course we can't forget Edward Said; so you don't have to set yourself up as the person who will rescue and recuperate the reputation of Edward Said. It is important to not narrow the paths too much in this field which exclude you from an understanding that you actually have quite a lot of possibilities in shaping much more around you. The very premise of your question on responsibility in relation to representation already assumes that you need to be in some kind of corrective mode. The thing I learnt most from Okwui Enwezor is that it's never about substituting hegemonic power with a counter hegemonic power. There are phenomenal models of knowledge production and they need to be understood in their simultaneity and brought together. In the 1980's for example, the English language in Britain, not the US, was hijacked from its British tradition. The language as we knew it 25 years ago was entirely rewritten through postcolonial literature, when the writings of Salman Rushdie and Chinua Achebe for example began circulating. This change came entirely out of literature and is not what Stuart Hall calls "the empire strikes back." Now, the other thing is that I use criticality very differently. I use it in relation to critique. Criticality is not about standing outside about criticizing a situation, it is something I think Hannah Arendt is very persuasive about: it is a recognition that while we may be very sophisticated analysts of any given situation, we also experience its very conditions, we are a duality, we are what she calls "we fellow sufferers", we are simultaneously the intelligentsia, the intellectuals, the critics... We deliver the very conditions we try and see through. We have to find a language, a *modus operandi*, that references both of these: the experiential and the critical, and that is criticality! It's live! It's of this moment! It has to renew itself. In you these two things are coming alive and clashing, producing the most uncomfortable condition through which to live your life and that is criticality, the recognition that is happening to me at the same moment.

HF: Maybe it is wise to take a step back for a moment. In the discussion about the issue of curatorial responsibility lingers the presupposition of the curator as a clearly delineated profession. This is also something that struck me about these symposium series of Witte de With, namely that they singled out professions: you have the critics, curators and artists as almost separate entities.

UMB: Yes, this is very interesting, but it does not reflect the reality of the practices. We all shift constantly. Sometimes we are the audience, sometimes we are the curators and sometimes the critics.

HF: What do you think is the effect of categorizing these professions separately?

UMB: You can use it as a point of departure. Unfortunately, I was not there when Irit gave her lecture, but I think it is extremely important to shift to investigating the curatorial rather than curating as a singular profession. I don't want to be a curator, I curate shows. I'm interested in the curatorial, in the practice, as much as I'm interested in the artistic and in the philosophical way of encountering certain issues. In fact, a lot of the courses in curatorial training programs sound like job agencies or vacancies,

since they are so focused on the one profession of curating.

Curatorial Workshop participant (CWp): If you are talking about *the* curatorial, do you have a word or a sentence to sum up what the curatorial is?

IR: Two and a half years of us tearing our hair out, to sum it up in a sentence. In giving a definition, I rely very much on my collaboration with a very interesting colleague, Jean-Paul Martinon, who started as a curator and has turned himself into a philosopher. He thinks the curatorial is the notion of the send-off, it's the inaugural act. It's not a business of sticking stuff and it's not the business of making exhibitions. So, you have the notion of the send-off, and the other aspect of it that we try to think about, is setting up the event of knowledge. In other words, that the curatorial includes setting up the event of knowledge.

CWp: And that's different from the *occasion*?

IR: We can think of the occasion as that which hosts the event of knowledge, and the event of knowledge is both conscious and unconscious, it is everything that the curator does - and by curator, I mean a very broad spectrum of practitioners. It's what all the active agents do in order to set up the event of knowledge, and then the event of knowledge does or doesn't take place. For me for example the most important exhibition from last year was Catherine Davide's *Divisions* in the House of World Cultures, which was Chapter 5 of *Representations of the Contemporary Arab World*, the four first chapters of which I really didn't like, I didn't find them interesting, I found them really tedious, issues with representation and so on, and then suddenly came this exhibition, which really was an event of knowledge, because she moved away from representing the Arab world, to saying, I think something that Okwui's approach has been kind of driven towards, which is while you are listening to the state department and the Quai d'Orsay and the Kremlin and wherever else, political discourse is *actually* getting constituted elsewhere. Catherine gave us sixteen phenomenal thinkers, artists, filmmakers, writers, and I think maybe one person who might say "I am a professional intellectual", and they were producing a political discourse of a complexity and richness that none of us here in the arenas where we think we're listening to political discourse could match; so she produced an event of knowledge that I thought was phenomenal, and, in that sense, it wasn't curating, it was a curatorial inauguration.

HF: Although we will discuss the aspect of curatorial training programs later on, I want to get back to Ute's comment about curatorial programs as job agencies/vacancies. What are the consequences of the pre-fab professional curatorial courses taught in certain institutions - if I can summarize it bluntly - for the curatorial profession as such?

UMB: I wouldn't want to generalize it like that. Sometimes I think we reduce ourselves by coining curatorship as a singular, independent profession. We are all rather unruly individuals, who never asked for permission, otherwise we wouldn't be where we are now. But if you make it into a profession, it suddenly has rules, it has policies, et cetera. I think this is how the system is *streamlining* us. Alternatively, a certain kind of disobedience, that is sometimes required, can claim a space for thinking. You have to claim it consciously. Sitting at this table with the younger generation in the curatorial workshop, I would say: define what you want to do, don't define it by a preset of an idea, of what a curator is. Our generation didn't have that, because the profession didn't exist in that way. It would be the same as asking, how do you define a *thinker*?

AD: I am so glad you are saying this, since it's something I am also thinking about very often. To situate even my generation, we are still in a position of privilege, there were not these professional structures that were so clearly defined.

CCB: Why is it a privilege?

AD: It is a privilege because you can shape what you are, how you name it and how you operate within it. For a younger generation now emerging, there are certain kind of structures of operation, as well as professional profiles and definitions. If you want to escape that, you would probably have to either redefine them or agitate against them. In any case, that is not the sort of open situation that existed fifteen, or even ten years ago.

UMB: But you have to *create* these openings. Perhaps it wasn't always a privilege, it was also a struggle to a certain extent.

AD: But a *privileged* struggle that you created a possibility for yourself.

IR: I accused Raimundas of willful silence yesterday and today he had to carry my suitcase in penance. I think there is something to be said for not being messianic, and not delivering a fully articulated message, and there's something about drawing your listeners to you through the workings of opacity. So if something is opaque, you tend towards investigating it, in a way that you don't when something is clear. The question may be is to explain where [Raimundas] your frustrations are coming from, because otherwise we don't know what you want to address. To me, this is coming from a certain cultural position I don't know how to read very well, but I will try, you know, and make an effort. Maybe somebody else wants to speak?

SR: I think what Mai [Abu El Dahab] said yesterday when she spoke to us about curating being akin to "irresponsibility" is relevant to bring up here. The way in which I read this is that the notion of responsibility reverts back to this idea of being implicated, posing a necessity for us respond in certain situations. This irresponsibility is then a gesture, that may manifest itself as willful silence or something else, but Rai, since you and Mai were together on this panel, perhaps you might also want to comment.

Raimundas Malasauskas: For me, that panel was just an interesting way to be in that moment, to be this person who has nothing to say about that particular issue. If I would not have participated in this panel, well, no one would know about it, but in that case, I was there and had nothing to say...

IR: So, for example, it would never occur to you to say "I don't want to talk about what I am asked to talk about" and I say *that's not the subject*. That would be my strategy.

RM: You mean you would not participate?

IR: No, I would say, these people want to talk about this issue, but I am stating that this is not the subject. But the subject is something, somewhere else. We don't know what it is yet but let's figure it out.

RM: To me it was important being this "animal" that had nothing to say about the issue. I actually had nothing to say about it, frankly. If I had not participated at all, you would not know that I have nothing

to say about the subject. It is a statement in itself.

IR: In our field, we are thinking about making things manifest. To produce something that is extremely opaque, but which uses that opacity quite actively, is an interesting way of being, right? So, in a world that is dedicated to making things manifest, to then turn it around and produce opacity, and produce curiosity through that opacity creates an interesting situation. It explains to me why I was curious, rather than *pissed off*.

SR: I think this brings up a really interesting point and question. Through the many curatorial programs that exist, could you say there is a new form of language that is being produced, and that is able to teach us how to employ strategies beyond forms of resistance towards and from within the field, acts of irresponsibility, and performances of "willful silence" as you've called it? I know Curatorial Knowledge is somewhat engaged in this direction of finding a new language, but perhaps you can tell us how this actually works in practice and how does one transmit these ideas through these educational programs? And Ute, from your experience at MIT, as a large institution, would you say there is room for the students, to enact small initiatives that interject the institutional framework, and do you find a space through your pedagogical position to transmit this kind of approach to criticality?

UMB: Let me first address the performance of "willful silence" by means of an example: There were these critical and curatorial meetings which took place in Jakarta. They invited artists and critics and then we - the curators - were much more like commentators, giving information. We were the backdrops, and there we could share our experience. It was such a different feeling! The burden of saying something that is absolutely correct, or which has some kind of impact, has silenced a lot of people for example on the discussion panels in this symposium. You suddenly feel there is this big group and you wonder, what do I want to tell them? Maybe that is the responsibility one has to refuse. A situation like this informal discussion here is much more productive in a way. As for my experience teaching at MIT, I think there's always a space if you produce it, and it doesn't matter where it is, and sometimes you can produce it very modestly in a difficult environment but it's you who has to produce it no matter how much effort it takes. I think our students have to produce this space, and I will not produce it for them, I will support them as much as I can. If they don't initiate it and if they don't have the desire to create that space, I won't produce it for them.

AD: I will address your question in relation to my own practice as well. What we are currently trying to do in the de Appel Curatorial Program is attempting to get away from the notion of training and education because I think that was never what De Appel has been doing. The main core of our program is now focused on the notion of "context-responsive curating" – which functions as an instrument to actually allow people to *de-program* themselves in a very drastic way. A lot of people I encounter are already so professional in the kind of discursive tools they use and the theoretical references they have, but actually they have no own curatorial voice. They don't know why they're in this field, they don't know what exactly draws them to *art* and they don't know how to talk about an art work. My own objective regarding the de Appel Curatorial Program, is not teaching them a certain methodology, because I question my own methodology every day, but allowing people within the very contained duration of the program [8 months] to engage with a permanent discussion with each other and other actors within the field of contemporary art and curating. To allow them to discover what they want to do in the art field, and how they can articulate their subjectivity into something that is relevant for the outside world.

IR: Don't you think that all comes about... [coughs] - sorry, I'm covered in Aspirin! Don't you think that comes about through a kind of endless attempt to fit yourself as a subject in relation to a whole set of existing structures? I have been working with Florian Schneider over the past three years with a whole network of activists across Europe. One of the things I understood through this experience, there is an inclination to move away from defining one's self in relation to these structures, towards what self-organization means. I know, it's a slogan, but in actual fact, and what I understood and saw unfolding is precisely that: a self-definition moving away from defying institutions, hierarchies and authorities and all that juvenilia, and emphasizing instead a possibility of starting from elsewhere. It is a mode of thinking tending much more towards a centrifugal rather than a centripetal structure. *That* gives the work a kind of impetus which can create sort of minor devolutions from within institutions and start functioning as self-organized entities; small initiatives that can happen from be instigated from both within and outside institutions that break the bonds between subjects and institutions towards a production of knowledge that moves up against the hegemonic structures. It is the necessity of contemporary pedagogy in a way, to totally re-examine the relations between subjects and institutions, as *the* interpellative model in an Althusserian way, to make clear to people in their early formation process, that there is a lot more to be interpellated by than an institution.

HF: Thank you. We would like to conclude this utterly productive and stimulating roundtable discussion by sincerely thanking you for your time and your intelligent and elaborate comments on our questions. Your participation in this event has been crucial in raising those issues which are so important to contemporary curatorial discourse and practice. Although we are not nearly finished talking about these subjects, we shall leave it at this for now, and hopefully engage with these questions in our own respective practices.

IR: Thank you. I wish you much independence.

UMB: We should have this kind of discussion far more often.

Seeing Socialism: On the Aesthetics of the Economy, Production and the Plan

Alberto Toscano

In the context of a widespread preoccupation with the aesthetics of politics and the politicisation of art, less attention has been accorded to that area of practical and theoretical effort which we could temporarily class under the rubric of the *aesthetics of the economy* (I say temporarily, since a rigorous exploration of such an aesthetics soon enough challenges the separation between politics and economics). The latter comes to the fore with special urgency in moments of crisis, when our cognitive and political deficit, faced with a complex unravelling and degradation of a system whose intelligibility was always partial, can be registered at the aesthetic level – very broadly construed to include both artificially constructed representations and the individual and collective organs of perception. I want to argue in these pages that it is around the articulation between crisis and transparency that we can best gauge the contribution of the artistic and theoretical ferment of the 1920s and 1930s to thinking the entanglement of two facets of the aesthetics of the economy, conceived not as a domain but as a problem: that of the representability of capital and that of the intelligibility of transition (to communism).

The aesthetics of the economy

As an initial methodological proviso it is worth noting that representations *of* the economy and *in* the economy cannot be compartmentalised without losing the complexity of the question of representation itself.

Susan Buck-Morss's essay 'Envisioning Capital' (1995) provides some important orientation in this regard. Importantly, Buck-Morss presents the 'making' or 'fixing' of the economy as a fundamentally representational problem, to the very degree that it involves establishing agency and efficacy for an abstraction – 'picturing' economic relations and transactions as a unity, a totality, or even, with Marx, as an 'automatic subject'. Among other protocols, this mapping activity involves projecting an external point from which to grasp and navigate a situation within which one is multiply embedded (mapping is thus a kind of transcendence laboriously extorted from immanence, and this *scientia dei*, this God's eye view, is a condition of orientation).

The construction and stabilisation of diagrams and images of the economy signal a kind of epistemic and political shift with significant repercussions on the very idea of representation. The economic representations that, in intimate conjunction with theoretical developments in political economy, allow one to envision capital can, for instance, short-circuit or circumvent the problems of a linear, sequential discourse. We can register this in François Quesnay's reflections on his *tableau économique*: 'the zigzag, if properly understood, cuts out a whole number of details, and brings before your eyes certain closely interwoven ideas which the intellect alone would have a great deal of difficulty in grasping, unravelling and reconciling by the method of discourse' (Quesnay, in McNally 1988, 110; Buck-Morss 1995, 440).¹

The tableau thus allows for a kind of synchronic totalisation of temporal and material movements, which a sequential account of production would be incapable of figuring. In light of Quesnay's training as a physician, we could also think of the disciplinary sources of these representations: for instance, in the passage from blood circulation to the circulation of humans in cities, and further to the circulation of money and resources (Foucault 2007, 17–18). The diagrams are not only diagrams of circulation but also of origination (for the Physiocrats, in the 'fertile' relation between landowners and farmers). It is crucial then also to think of the metaphorical reservoirs from which these representations draw, for instance, the relationship to mechanical and organic models of the economy, with their varying presuppositions about its integrity, composition, operation, degradation; and also to link these economic representations to their political pendants, thinking of the passage,

1 See also Marx's revision of Quesnay's *tableau* in his letter to Engels of 6 July 1863. See Marx and Engels 1965 (no longer available at www.marxists.org/archive/marx).

for instance, from the visibility of Quesnay's table, overseen by legal despotism, to the charting of the effects of the division of labour over time in William Playfair's *Commercial and Politics Atlas* of 1786.

Timothy Mitchell similarly explores the efficacy and influence of 'mechanical analogies for the functioning of economic processes':

At the same time, professional economists continued to imagine mechanical analogies for the functioning of economic processes. Irving Fisher's 1892 doctoral dissertation, which Paul Samuelson called 'the best of all doctoral dissertations in economics', developed a mechanical model of an economic market consisting of a network of cisterns, levers, pipes, rods, sliding pivots and stoppers, through which the flow of water represented the working of the principle of utility. In 1892 he built a working model of this contraption which he used in his classes at Yale for years, until it wore out, and in 1925 he replaced it with an improved model. Fisher argued that the model provided not just a picture of the market but an instrument of investigation, and that the effect of complex variations in the market could be studied by altering the positions of the various stoppers, levers and pivots. (Mitchell 1998, 86)

These activities of modelling, diagramming and envisioning are thus representational in what is perhaps a counter-intuitive sense, since they break with a model of representation as mirror, photograph, correlation. As representations of practically abstract processes and relations, they are also representations of invisibilities.

What is it that we see in fact, when we 'see' the economy? In Buck-Morss's account of Adam Smith's vision, only the results ('invisible except in its commodity effects'), from which, by induction, we project a process (the division of labour, the real protagonist in Smith, whose distributional effects are spoken of in the providentialist, theological image of the invisible hand): 'We see only the material evidence of the fertile process of the division of labor: the astounding multiplication of objects produced for sale. Commodities pile up' (Buck-Morss 1995, 447). Parenthetically, we can recall here a famous dramatic flourish from *Capital*:

Accompanied by Mr. Moneybags and by the possessor of labour-power, we therefore take leave for a time of this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in view of all men, and follow them both into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold

there stares us in the face ‘No admittance except on business.’ Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is produced. We shall at last force the secret of profit making. (Marx 2011, 195)

Much of the modernist corrective to the aesthetics inhering in the Marxist representation of capital – be it in Bertolt Brecht’s critique of photographic realism or Louis Althusser’s speculations on the realism of the abstract (Brecht 2004 [1931]; Althusser 1971a [1966]) – will of course strive increasingly to separate representation from sight. For, as Marx’s own work makes plain, when we walk into the factory we do not see capital ‘itself’ any more than we see it in the market.

As Buck-Morss details, these novel representations of a causally determinant but invisible system are also formative of modes of subjectivity and patterns of desire. This, for instance, is how she correlates abstraction, representation and agency in the classical political economy of Smith:

Looking up from my work at this landscape of things, I cannot see the whole of its terrain. It extends beyond my ability to feel. And this blindness leaves me free to drop my sight to the short horizon of my own self-interest. Indeed, blindness is the state of proper action. Within that horizon, however, desire is free and knows no bounds. This desire expresses itself as a pursuit for things. The pleasure of mutual sympathy, when I find my companion entering into my situation as I into his, is replaced by the pleasure of empathy with the commodity, when I find myself adapting my behavior to its own – which is to say, I mimic its expansiveness. (Buck-Morss 1995, 452)

The shift between different regimes of economic practice can also be traced in terms of forms of envisioning, which is also to say of forms of abstracting – in the sense of selecting, extracting and shaping material for cognition and action. Indeed, Buck-Morss traces an increasing formalisation and stylisation in the movement from classical political economy to neoclassical economics, which is both inscribed in and impelled by a different representational regime. We can then in a sense ‘read off’ the politics of neoclassical economics from its relation to visual display:

Neoclassical economics is microeconomics. Minimalism is characteristic of its visual display. In the crossing of the supply-demand curve, none of the substantive problems of political economy are resolved, while the social whole simply disappears from sight. Once this happens, critical reflection on the exogenous conditions of a

'given' market situation becomes impossible, and the philosophy of political economy becomes so theoretically impoverished that it can be said to come to an end. (Buck-Morss 1995, 463)

Among the productive insights in Buck-Morss's inquiry is its focus on money as the locus of representation. As she notes: 'Money is the measurement of economic activity, the universal representation of all commodities' (Buck-Morss 1995, 455). But money is both an index and a means of representation. One may even see its hegemony as leading, especially with its detachment from a standard or base (in gold, for instance), to a general 'ungrounding' of representation, from floating currencies to floating signifiers – a theme evident in the concern with credit-money in Jean-Francois Lyotard as well as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (Lyotard 1993, 201–40; Deleuze and Guattari 1983 [1972], 222–40). Alongside the greater abstraction and volatility of money, we can follow Buck-Morss in noting how the formalisation and mathematisation of the graph – supreme tool and emblem of neoclassical economics – entails that representation no longer needs to *refer*, in the sense of being physically mappable onto the outside world. As she puts it, the graph is 'not a picture of the social body as a whole, but statistical correlations that show patterns as a sign of nature's plan' (Buck-Morss 1995, 456).

Now, where Buck-Morss is perhaps less productive is in her contention that Marx's contribution is in making visible the embodied suffering generated by capital's voracious abstractions. *Das Kapital's* 'critical eloquence', she writes,

is derived from the fact that we are plunged beneath the surface of commodity exchange to the actual level of human suffering – here thousands of factory workers – that was the lived truth of really existing capitalism during the era of its industrialization. Marx insisted that the human effects of the economy be made visible and palpable, and this remains his contribution to political economy no matter how often his theories – of crisis, of value, of increasing misery – may be disproved. (Buck-Morss 1995, 460 n. 66)

I think this formulation could almost be reversed. Marx's visualisations of mortified labour are expressly drawn from factory inspections and their reformist, pragmatic aims; there were more detailed, incisive and poignant accounts of the misery wreaked by capitalism – not least Engels' own *Condition of the Working Class in England* (Engels 1958). Yet,

though without doubt conditions comparable to, or worse than, those depicted in the mid-nineteenth century by Marx are still constitutive of contemporary accumulation, it is not the historically and geographically specific descriptions of human suffering, but the *dialectical exposition* of its founding dynamics that renders Marx's approach unique. To misappropriate the title of an important book by Donald Mackenzie (Mackenzie 2006), what is evoked in this representation of capitalism is an 'engine, not a camera'. If Marx is still relevant then to the question of capitalism and its representation, it is then to the extent that his theories – of crisis, of value, of increasing misery – remain analytically and critically incisive even when his (borrowed and dramatised) descriptions of the cruelly concrete effects of abstract domination are inevitably stamped with anachronism.

Crisis and transparency

In 1920 Georg Lukács posed the problem of class consciousness, in his eponymous essay later collected in *History and Class Consciousness*, precisely in terms of the aesthetics of capitalist crisis – that is to say, in terms of the political and epistemological conditions for seeing an essential, if contradictory, unity behind the disjointed appearances of capitalism. The invisibility of capitalism *as such* is something of an axiom. As Lukács wrote: 'It is true that society as such is highly unified and that it evolves in a unified manner. But in a world where the reified relations of capitalism have the appearance of a natural environment it looks as if there is not a unity but a diversity of mutually independent objects and forces' (Lukács 1972, 70). Whence the 'empiricism' of bourgeois consciousness. The unity of capitalism is thus an *opaque* unity, recalling Marx's contrast between capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production, his only use of the vexed notion of transparency, to which I shall return. The formulation is from *Capital*, vol. 1: 'Those ancient social organisms of production are, as compared with bourgeois society, extremely simple and transparent'.

Now, one of Marx's key insights, according to Lukács, was that 'one of the elementary rules of class warfare was to advance beyond what was immediately given [...] to look beyond the divisive symptoms of the economic process to the unity of the total social system underlying it' or, to put it in Marx's own words, the workers 'ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects' (Marx, in Lukács 1972, 72–73) – when, for instance, they are occupied

on the trade-union front. It is in this regard that the impasses of class consciousness and revolutionary action are *aesthetic* problems, specific to capital's regime of (in)visibility, regarding which crisis provides potential opportunities. As Lukács observes:

In the age of capitalism it is not possible for the total system to become directly visible in external phenomena. For instance, the economic basis of a world crisis is undoubtedly unified and its coherence can be understood. But its actual appearance in time and space will take the form of a disparate succession of events in different countries at different times and even in different branches of industry in a number of countries. (Lukács 1972, 72–73)

But 'in so-called periods of normality [...] the gap between appearance and ultimate reality was too great for that unity [in the economic process] to have any practical consequences for proletarian action. In periods of crisis the position is quite different. The unity of the economic process now moves within reach' (Lukács 1972, 74–75). At this level, crisis is a rupture, but paradoxically it is a *synthetic rupture*, potentially making visible the unity between seemingly disparate domains and determinations.

This articulation between class consciousness and crisis – on which we can project the dyads of transparency/opacity, visibility/invisibility and unity/multiplicity – is worth keeping in mind when we reflect on the crucial role played in critiques and deconstructions of Marxism and communism precisely by the problem of its 'aesthetics of the economy', as well as its 'aesthetics of politics'. Present in Cold-War critiques of communism as a millenarian political theology heralding the advent of a society devoid of conflict and difference, and in neoliberal refutations of centralised planning as a disastrous fantasy founded on the premise of a complete intelligibility of economic information, this aesthetic counter to the critique of political economy and its striving towards a society of associated producers is also at the heart of post-Marxism. In a 1987 intervention around psychoanalysis and Marxism, Ernesto Laclau proposed that there existed a tension within Marxism, mappable in terms of its interiority or exteriority to the Enlightenment project. On the one hand, Marxism breaks with the Enlightenment in 'the affirmation of the central character of negativity – struggle and antagonism – in the structure of any collective identity', and, most significantly for our purposes, in 'the affirmation of the opaqueness of the social – the ideological nature of collective representations – which establishes a

permanent gap between the real and the manifest senses of individual and social group actions'. On the other hand:

Marxism is not only a discourse of negativity and the opaqueness of the social, it is also an attempt – perfectly compatible with the Enlightenment – to limit and master them. The negativity and opaqueness of the social only exist in 'human prehistory', which will be definitely surpassed by communism conceived as homogeneous and transparent society. It is from this mastery of totality that the moment of negativity loses its constitutive and foundational character: it shone for just a brief moment in theoretical discourse, only to dissolve an instant later into the full positivity which reabsorbed it – positivity of history and society as totalizations of their partial processes, the positivity of the subject – the social classes as agents of history. It would be absurd to deny that this dimension of mastery/transparency/rationalism is present in Marxism. (Laclau 1987, 331–32)

I agree that this would be absurd, but it would also be absurd to ignore the concrete historical and polemical context in which this 'aesthetic' dimension of Marxist knowledge and praxis is played out: that of class consciousness and consciousness in, and of, crisis.

Though regressive utopian myths of transparency, as well as depoliticising fantasies of machinic administration, may be channelled more or less unconsciously by communist politics, the notions of social transparency that it generates, in particular as regards the transparency of planning as against the unintelligible anarchy of capitalism, have to be treated as *determinate* and not *generic* negations of capitalism in crisis. The cognitive, economic or artistic figurations of a transparency of the social must therefore always be thought in counterpoint to the opacity of capitalism – the very opacity that is not only celebrated but operationalised in the 'aesthetics' of classical and neoclassical, as well as neoliberal, political economy.

Dialectical cinema and divisive symptoms

This was a problem that dogged some of Lukács's communist contemporaries, most importantly perhaps Sergei Eisenstein and Brecht. Eisenstein's abortive project to film *Das Kapital*, what he somewhat churlishly called a 'new work on a libretto by Karl Marx', was envisaged as an attempt not to narrate or depict the structure and dynamic of Marx's argument but to appropriate its method for cinema – and in particular to take the

everyday experience of crisis as an occasion for a *filmic dialectic of the abstract and the concrete*, incorporating an affective dimension of pathos and shock specific to film.

Against 'abstract formal experiment', Eisenstein proposed sequences that encapsulate a theoretical movement: 'Somewhere in the West. A factory where it is possible to pinch parts and tools. No search of workers made. Instead, the exit gate is a magnetic check point. No comment needed' (Eisenstein 1976, 9). The method had a didactic aim: to teach the worker to think dialectically. Which is to say not to present capitalism as a stable, intelligible system, but to develop the cognitive organs to think through and against its crisis-prone and contradictory structure, to provide what the Soviet director called a 'visual instruction in the dialectical method', an instrument of 'dialectical decoding': 'The most important tasks in a cultural revolution', writes Eisenstein in his notes, 'are not only dialectical demonstrations but instruction in the dialectical method, as well' (Eisenstein 1976, 26). To approximate the dialectic in film, it was thus necessary to break with a model of representation founded on 'thematic imagery' (though it is worth noting, in contrast to Dziga Vertov, that Eisenstein still depended strongly on forms of symbolism, as when he notes: 'A balalaika and a Menshevik "resemble" each other not physically but abstractly') (Eisenstein 1976, 12).

The method of this film is thus one that, so to speak, descends from the concrete to the abstract, and ascends from the abstract to the concrete, mediating the conjunction of apparent clarity and real opacity of banal everyday life with the complex, conceptual unity of capital:

The first, preliminary *structural* draft of CAPITAL would mean taking a banal development of a perfectly unrelated event. Say, 'A day in a man's life,' or something perhaps even more banal. And the elements of this chain serve as points of departure for the forming of associations through which alone the play of concepts becomes possible. The idea of this banal intrigue was arrived at in a truly constructive manner. [...] The maximum abstractness of an expanding idea appears particularly bold when presented as an offshoot from extreme concreteness – the banality of life. [...] Joyce may be helpful for my purpose: from a bowl of soup to the British vessels sunk by England. (Eisenstein 1976, 15)

The chain of associations is a movement from the particular to the universal: 'Completely idiotic (all right in the first stages of a working

hypothesis): in the third part (for instance), association moves from the pepper with which she seasons food. Pepper. Cayenne. Devil's Island. Dreyfus. French chauvinism. *Figaro* in Krupp's hands' (Eisenstein 1976, 17). To achieve this, one has to think of montage as unifying – in a dialectical class vision – a multiplicity of seemingly disparate events, what Lukács had called *divisive symptoms*: 'The "ancient" cinema was shooting one event from many points of view. The new one assembles *one point* of view from many events' (Eisenstein 1976, 18).

To know catastrophe

Brecht had articulated crisis and representation, the representation of crisis and the crisis of representation, in an even more determined way. As in Lukács, we encounter a specific aesthetic valorisation of crisis as a moment of complex revelation. As Brecht wrote in 'On the Popularity of the Crime Novel' (1938):

We gain our knowledge of life in a catastrophic form. It is from catastrophes that we have to infer the manner in which our social formation functions. Through reflection, we must deduce the 'inside story' of crises, depressions, revolutions, and wars. We already sense from reading the newspapers (but also bills, letters of dismissal, call-up papers and so forth) that somebody must have done something for the evident catastrophe to have taken place. So what then has been done and by whom? Behind the reported events, we suspect other occurrences about which we are not told. These are the real occurrences. If we knew these incidents, we would understand. Only History can inform us about these real occurrences – insofar as the protagonists have not succeeded in keeping them completely secret. History is written after catastrophes. The basic situation, in which intellectuals feel that they are objects and not subjects of History, forms the thought, which they can display for enjoyment in the crime story. Existence depends upon unknown factors. 'Something must have happened', 'something is brewing', 'a situation has arisen' – this is what they feel, and the mind goes out on patrol. But enlightenment only comes, if at all, after the catastrophe. The death has taken place. What had been fermenting beforehand? What had happened? Why has a solution arisen? All this can now be deduced. (Brecht, in Mandel 1984, 72–73)

But, just as reflection on industrial photography instructs us that a

naive realism is disarmed before the complexity of capital,² so the dramatisation and figuration of its contradictory, mutating logic imposes formidable tasks upon the artist, and upon our unreflected conceptions of agency, character, plot, and so on:

Simply to comprehend the new areas of subject-matter imposes a new dramatic and theatrical form. Can we speak of money in the form of iambics? 'The Mark, first quoted yesterday at 50 dollars, now beyond 100, soon may rise, etc.' – how about that? Petroleum resists the five-act form; today's catastrophes do not progress in a straight line but in cyclical crises; the 'heroes' change with the different phases, are interchangeable, etc.; the graph of people's actions is complicated by abortive actions; fate is no longer a single coherent power; rather there are fields of force which can be seen radiating in opposite directions; the power of groups themselves comprise movements not only against one another but within themselves, etc., etc. (Brecht, in Willett 1978, 30)

As his collaborator Elisabeth Hauptmann noted, recalling Brecht's work on a play on the Chicago wheat stock exchange:

We gathered the technical materials. I myself made inquiries of several specialists as well as of the exchange in Breslau and Vienna, and at the end Brecht himself began to study political economy. He asserted that the machinations of the money market were quite impenetrable – he would have to find out how matters really stood, so far as the theories of money were concerned. Before, however, making what for him were important discoveries in that field, he recognized that the current dramatic forms were not suited to reflecting such modern processes as the world distribution of wheat or the life-story of our times – in a word, all human actions of consequence. 'These questions', Brecht said, 'are not dramatic in our sense of the word, and if they are transported into literature, are no longer true, and drama is no longer drama. When we become aware that our world no longer fits into

2 'The situation is complicated by the fact that less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations – the factory, say – means that they are no longer explicit. So something must in fact be *built up*, something artificial, posed'. Brecht 2004, quoted in Benjamin 2005, 526.

drama, then drama no longer fits into our world'. (Hauptmann, in Ewen 1992, 160–61)

This predicament, when 'drama no longer fits into our world', when the intelligibility and legibility of crisis is threatened by a crisis in the intelligibility and legibility of the world, has to be regarded as the spur and context for attempts, both in the arts and in social practice more broadly, to experiment with what a transparent society might mean.

The aesthetics of the plan and the limits of transition

Many of the utopian schemes that emerged in the wake of 1917 and in the midst of civil war and war communism combined the euphoria of world-transformation with a cult of unified and regimented machinic culture which can only be conceived of in terms of the brutal backwardness, and catastrophic condition, of the Soviet economy, which was in effect undergoing an unprecedented *de*-industrialisation (see Stites 1988). The quasi-religious character of invocations of Taylor and Ford, the attempt to fashion a 'new man' out of the devastated human material of the post-war years is well-documented, famously finding its dystopian expression in Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We* (1921). But I think attention to less 'mythical' productions, in the domains of urbanism, architecture and cinema, can allow us to reflect on what an aesthetics of planning and transparency might mean, when it seeks to generate, through a 'cultural revolution', something which, echoing Fredric Jameson's analysis of the problem of representation under late capitalism (Jameson 1991), we could provisionally term *socialist cognitive mapping*. This can in turn provide a way of criticising, in the aesthetic register, the one-dimensional and ahistorical character of the accusation of transparency, levelled at Marxism, communism and socialism.

Conceived of in terms of planning, rather than as a messianic social vision, 'transparency' ties together the questions of class consciousness, economic control and political direction in a way that permits us to explore the 'aesthetics of the economy' as a crucial node for any reflection on the meaning of a transition out of capitalism. Ironically, perhaps, the most effective statement I have come across about planning envisioned as a politically vital form of socialist cognitive mapping is to be found in a 50-year old text by Perry Anderson, in the *New Left Review*, about Swedish social democracy. Anderson foregrounds the status of the plan as instrument, field and object of a cultural and political transformation.

‘In its ultimate significance’, he writes, ‘the plan is not a rationalisation of resources, it is a revelation of values’ – or, we could say, a mechanism for making the social essence transpire through its forms of appearance. In contrast, to the impossibility within capitalism of a *situational representation of one’s being* and activity in terms of the invisible but constraining totality:

The plan decodes the vast, interlocking, impenetrable, inspissated economy and ascribes a lucid meaning to every one of the myriad cryptic gestures which compose it. It renders the entire work-force transparent to itself as engaged in one task, so that each member of it can see how his own task complements and completes that of all the others and is in turn carried beyond itself by them. [...] Everything possible should be done to maximise the transparency of social construction, and the local community has a crucial role to play here: the national plan should be routed wherever possible via a complex of local plans which realise in the most vivid and immediate way the interdependence of work in the community (profits from local concerns to go directly to the financing of local flats, schools, concert-halls, etc.). [...] Transparency is one of the crucial defining characteristics of socialism: a community in which all the multiple mediations between our public and private existence are visible, where each social event can be seen right back to its source, and legible human intentions read everywhere on the face of the world. (Anderson 1961, 44)

Now, if we approach the aesthetics of the plan as it emerges in some of the key political and artistic debates in the wake of the Russian Revolution, we can both note the poverty of the usual criticisms of communism as a messianism which fantasises a society without contradiction, antagonism and so on, *and* identify the thorny and at times tragic problems thrown up by the attempt to create an aesthetics of the plan which would at one and the same time serve as a form of pedagogy (‘production propaganda’, as Lenin would have it) and as an experimentation in form. By analogy with Lukács’s own antinomies of bourgeois thought, we could identify here something like three antinomies of communist aesthetics: (1) the combination of a radical subordination of the proletariat as labourer to an exaltation of the proletariat as future administrator of communism; (2) the tension that inhabits a humanism striving, to repeat Anderson’s phrase, to make it so that ‘legible human intentions [are] read everywhere on the face of the world’; (3) the aestheticisation of the economic plan in the context of a world capitalist economy.

The first problem is at the heart of Robert Linhart's arresting study, from 1976, of the conjunctural and contradictory character of Lenin's thought and politics post-1917, *Lénine, les paysans, Taylor* – a book quite unique in its combination of a real appreciation of Lenin with a welcome rejection of the comforting apologias of Leninism. This chapter, entitled 'The Railways: The Emergence of the Soviet Ideology of the Labour-Process', recounts how, in the context of the famine, the authoritarian Taylorist turn in the organisation of work was driven through in that sector which provided the vital hinge between production, services and administration, and whose critical disorganisation was exacerbated by the very autonomous workers' organisation that had previously made it into a hub of anti-Tsarist agitating, and which now appeared as a kind of economic blackmail, all the more menacing in that it took place within the crisis of the civil war. The Bolsheviks, he notes, were 'almost instinctively attentive to everything that concerns communication, flow, circuits' (Linhart 2010, 151).

In this moment, the railways appeared as the nerve-fibres and life-blood of a 'state in movement', and militarised centralisation, planning and labour discipline as imperatives – as evidenced, among others, by Trotsky's 'order 1042', viewed by Linhart as the first key instance of state planning. After all, 'if there is an activity that must, by nature, function as a single mechanism, one that is perfectly regulated, standardised and unified throughout the country, it's the railway system' (162). The seemingly inevitable Taylorisation of the railways both forges and deforms the USSR, especially in furthering the split, thematised by Linhart, between the proletariat as political *subject* and the proletariat as *object* of an iron discipline. Among the critical sites of the necessary fixation on logistics (namely, on railways and electrification) are the films of Dziga Vertov, which promise a cognitive mapping that would join the Taylorist decomposition of labour, imaged as 'a regular, uninterrupted flow of communication', and its subjective mastery, in which the 'transparency of the productive process' (169) is provided to each worker in the guise of an all-penetrating vision.

Vertov's films are the locus of a kind of physiological pedagogy, a refunctioning of the proletariat nervous system aimed at educating the eye of the spectator, decoding the world through an inhuman kino-eye that can nevertheless permit workers to see the totality and themselves form a totality. As Vertov wrote in *Kinopravda & Radiopravda* (1925):

The textile worker ought to see the worker in a factory making a

machine essential to the textile worker. The worker at the machine tool plant ought to see the miner who gives his factory its essential fuel, coal. The coal miner ought to see the peasant who produces the bread essential for him. Workers ought to see one another so that a close, indissoluble bond can be established among them. (Vertov 1984, 52)

But normal propaganda and pedagogy, based on the whims and character of writers and instructors, are insufficient. 'How, therefore, can the workers see one another? Kino-eye pursues precisely this goal of establishing a visual bond between the workers of the whole world' (52). Note that, to touch on my second antinomy, this proletarian humanism is predicated on a technical anti-humanism, on 'the emancipation of the camera, which is reduced to a state of pitiable slavery, of subordination to the imperfections and the shortsightedness of the human eye' (14), as 'the mechanical eye, the camera, reject[s] the human eye as crib sheet [and] gropes its way through the chaos of visual events' (19).

But this pedagogical emancipation through the machine – which in Vertov's *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926), a visual poem to Gostorg, the foreign trade department of the Soviet Union, is punctuated by the call for 'you', 'sitting in the audience', 'the master of the soviet land', 'knee deep in grain', to assume 'your immense wealth' and contribute to the plan to accelerate the growth of the Soviet economy through trade with capitalism – is also predicated on an obfuscation of labour or of the possibility of emancipatory agency. The state is ubiquitous but in a sense invisible, while labour is decomposed into the ideal of, as Linhart puts it, 'a regular, uninterrupted flow of communication: productive activities are strictly interdependent – extraction, transport of fuel, transformation of wood, stone, iron' (Linhart 2010, 166).

The visual analysis decomposes labour but removes its proper logic and complexity, as well as its agency, creating an abstract labour subsumed by the flow and the plan. For Linhart, this matches Lenin's own attempt to square the circle in the state of political and economic emergency that characterised the late teens and twenties: the hope of a Taylorism that could be appropriated and transvalued by the masses. This is evident in Vertov's attempt to give to each worker a vision of the whole, which for Linhart suffers from the same problem as Lenin's project: the collectivisation of labour is not essentially grounded on a redistribution of agency, of workers' control, but on the mutual publicity of work. It could be said that the class consciousness thus generated is more of a passive revelation

than a mutation in the articulation between the individual and the collective, the overall system and local situations. The transparency of the productive system puts 'the people' at the helm but workers qua workers remain subordinated to the exigencies of the plan. Publicity and agency are disjoined, while 'the double play of the rational evidence of tasks and the habit of carrying them out without constraint would reduce the place and importance of decisions properly so-called' (Linhart 2010, 174).

The Italian Marxist architectural theorist Manfredo Tafuri in his 1971 essay 'Realised socialism and the crisis of the avant-gardes' is even harsher on this count, arguing, not entirely fairly perhaps, that the works of El Lissitzky and Vertov's *Kinopravda* are 'attempts to manage one's own alienation'. Vertov's effort to create a kind of cognitive, nervous and erotic union of man and machine through cinema would thus reveal:

the ultimate aim of the productive avant-garde. It is the collective, the class, which is now called upon to *become machine*, to identify with production. Productivism is indeed a product of the avant-garde: but it is the project of the conciliation between Capital and Labour, operated through the reduction of labour-power to an obedient and mute cog of the comprehensive machine. (Tafuri 1971, 51)

The further result is that in turning formal experimentation into a productive instrument any of its anti-ideological, demystifying character is lost. By 'attributing to the proletariat the historical task of reintegrating Man with himself and his social environment, the recuperation of a re-sacralised work understood as no longer alienated translates directly into the *ideology of organisation*, the Plan' (58). This project loses, according to Tafuri, Lenin's affirmation, however precarious, of the need *not* to erase the class within the Plan, to retain an exteriority between the proletariat and the instruments of valorisation of fixed Capital. This is what vanishes, it could be argued, in works like *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926), which subordinates the mapping of the Soviet economy, and of its indigenous peoples, to a peculiarly paradoxical if eminently realist goal, that of maximising production for export to capitalist countries (and thus, one imagines, the exploitation of the Soviet proletariat, not to mention nature) in order to accelerate the building of a socialism whose one condition is the maximisation of fixed capital, or, as the film relentlessly reminds us in the second person singular and plural, 'machines that build machines'.

All of the contradictions of socialist cognitive mapping, in its Soviet phase, are here: the exaltation of labour and its subsumption to the plan; humanism (anti-colonialism, mastery over collective fate, Vertov's characteristic attention to faces, expressions and moments of happiness) and anti-humanism (the subordination of the former to the flow of logistics and the accumulation of fixed capital); capitalist trade as a precondition for socialist construction. The problems of cognitive mapping in socialist transition thus turn out to be even more complex, if markedly different, than those thrown up by capitalism's distinctive modalities of opacity and invisibility.

The Curator

BY MILLER WILLIAMS

We thought it would come, we thought the Germans would come,
were almost certain they would. I was thirty-two,
the youngest assistant curator in the country.
I had some good ideas in those days.

Well, what we did was this. We had boxes
precisely built to every size of canvas.
We put the boxes in the basement and waited.

When word came that the Germans were coming in,
we got each painting put in the proper box
and out of Leningrad in less than a week.
They were stored somewhere in southern Russia.

But what we did, you see, besides the boxes
waiting in the basement, which was fine,
a grand idea, you'll agree, and it saved the art—
but what we did was leave the frames hanging,
so after the war it would be a simple thing
to put the paintings back where they belonged.

Nothing will seem surprised or sad again
compared to those imperious, vacant frames.

Well, the staff stayed on to clean the rubble
after the daily bombardments. We didn't dream—
You know it lasted nine hundred days.
Much of the roof was lost and snow would lie
sometimes a foot deep on this very floor,
but the walls stood firm and hardly a frame fell.

Here is the story, now, that I want to tell you.
Early one day, a dark December morning,
we came on three young soldiers waiting outside,
pacing and swinging their arms against the cold.
They told us this: in three homes far from here
all dreamed of one day coming to Leningrad
to see the Hermitage, as they supposed
every Soviet citizen dreamed of doing.
Now they had been sent to defend the city,
a turn of fortune the three could hardly believe.

I had to tell them there was nothing to see
but hundreds and hundreds of frames where the paintings had hung.

"Please, sir," one of them said, "let us see them."

And so we did. It didn't seem any stranger
than all of us being here in the first place,
inside such a building, strolling in snow.

We led them around most of the major rooms,
what they could take the time for, wall by wall.
Now and then we stopped and tried to tell them
part of what they would see if they saw the paintings.
I told them how those colors would come together,
described a brushstroke here, a dollop there,
mentioned a model and why she seemed to pout
and why this painter got the roses wrong.

The next day a dozen waited for us,
then thirty or more, gathered in twos and threes.
Each of us took a group in a different direction:
Castagno, Caravaggio, Brueghel, Cézanne, Matisse,
Orozco, Manet, da Vinci, Goya, Vermeer,
Picasso, Uccello, your Whistler, Wood, and Gropper.
We pointed to more details about the paintings,
I venture to say, than if we had had them there,
some unexpected use of line or light,
balance or movement, facing the cluster of faces
the same way we'd done it every morning
before the war, but then we didn't pay
so much attention to what we talked about.
People could see for themselves. As a matter of fact
we'd sometimes said our lines as if they were learned
out of a book, with hardly a look at the paintings.

But now the guide and the listeners paid attention
to everything—the simple differences
between the first and post-impressionists,
romantic and heroic, shade and shadow.

Maybe this was a way to forget the war
a little while. Maybe more than that.
Whatever it was, the people continued to come.
It came to be called The Unseen Collection.

Here. Here is the story I want to tell you.

Slowly, blind people began to come.
A few at first then more of them every morning,
some led and some alone, some swaying a little.
They leaned and listened hard, they screwed their faces,
they seemed to shift their eyes, those that had them,
to see better what was being said.
And a cock of the head. My God, they paid attention.

After the siege was lifted and the Germans left
and the roof was fixed and the paintings were in their places,
the blind never came again. Not like before.
This seems strange, but what I think it was,
they couldn't see the paintings anymore.
They could still have listened, but the lectures became
a little matter-of-fact. What can I say?
Confluences come when they will and they go away.