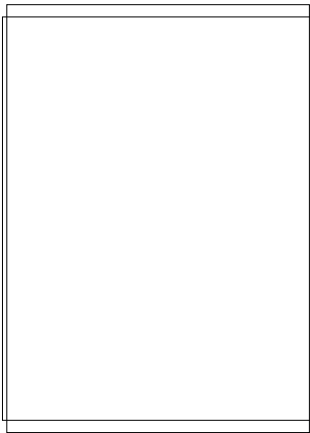
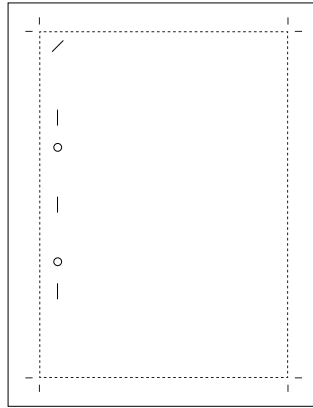


# printing & assembly instructions

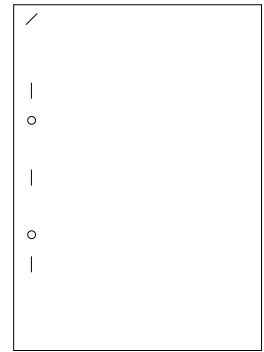
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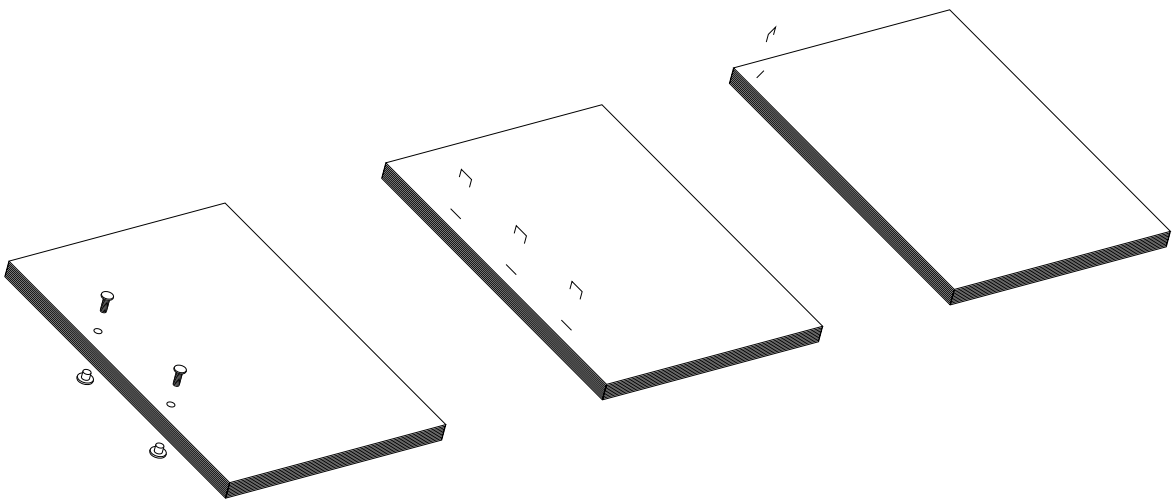
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(1) PAPER SIZE	use A4 (210 x 297 mm) or US Letter (215.9 x 279.4 mm)
(2) PRINTING AND TRIMMING	print in “actual size”. choose single sided printing. use crop marks to trim the edges of the paper
(3) BOOK SIZE AND GUIDE	final size should be 240 x 172 mm (9.44 x 6.77 in). use the other marks as a guide for binding
(4) BINDING	we suggest using screws or staples. a binder can be used for collecting multiple articles

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issue #001

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IRMGARD EMMELHAINZ

Aesthetic  
Materialism  
under Absolute  
Capitalisms

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DISPATCHES JOURNAL

Ever since the avant-gardes of the twentieth century, a particular debate has persisted: should art have a transitive relationship to politics and be put at the service of a critical function, or should artists find strategies to maintain art's autonomy and evade instrumentalization in the name of political ideologies? Walter Benjamin, for instance, posited that progressive politicized art involved an awareness of the artist's position in the process of production, while Theodor Adorno vouched for an intransitive or non-causal relationship between art and politics. In the 1960s, readings of these Frankfurt School debates emerged as a materialist aesthetics that sought to render the world visible by producing *reflections* or *consciousness* of the relationships of production. By questioning the relationship between aesthetics and political practice, anti-capitalism, propaganda, and representation, as well as by experimenting with the constructed nature of photography, films, and archives, artists developed a Marxist aesthetics that implied a dialectical, materialist approach to cultural practice. These practices—pioneered by artists and filmmakers such as Victor Burgin, Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Hans Haacke, Jean-Luc Godard, and Chris Marker—focused on the economic and social conditions that determine subjectivities according to class relations, and then presented such relations self-reflexively, making visible both the apparatus of representation and the mechanisms of relationality at play between its producers and subjects.

Later, on the eve of globalization, aesthetic materialism took up political work in artistic practice in order to map the flows of capitalism, global labor, living, working, and migrant conditions. One example is Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* (1996), a photo- and text-based project that seeks to break through the abstraction inherent to the processes of global capitalism by visualizing its material conditions of possibility. The project pictures cargo ships as the vessels for global flows that are connected by maritime trade and ports. There is also Martha Rosler's photographic series *In the Place of the Public: Airport Series* (1983-1994), in which the artist considers the privatization of public space exemplified by airports so as to render visible the ways in which this privatization has recast forms of social experience and interaction. Airports are highly controlled environments, and as spaces of consumption packaged in modernist aesthetics, they became the blueprint for privatized and corporate public environments across the world. Like the artists of the 1960s before them, Rosler and Sekula, among others, attempted to offer objective knowledge of the world based on socio-economic relationships of production.

More recently, artists faced with the end of history and the morass of globalization have tasked themselves with cognitively mapping the new signs and subjects put into circulation by the expansion of empire. Artistic attempts to render the new political order visible include Ursula Biemann's *Remote Sensing* (2002), a video that traces the topography of the global sex trade in relation to transnational migration and the trafficking of women, and *Timescapes/B-Zone* (2005-06) by Angela Melitopoulos, wherein the artist maps the construction of infrastructure that interlinks European regions so as to insert them into the global flows of merchandise, people, and capital. Through a cognitive cartography that accounts for the disappearance of the worker as a harbinger of emancipation, these works seek to visualize the material conditions and grounds for new politicized discourses and subjectivities at the crux of global processes.

But where are we in this debate today? Over a decade after projects such as Biemann's and Melitopoulos', the liberalization of the market is no longer the paradigm of socio-economic global relations, nor the content of politicized art. Despite the ongoing collateral damage wrought by this liberalization, in recent years, its place as the defining figure of neocolonialism and capitalism has been exceeded by the urgency of environmental crisis. The practice of extractivism has been put at the center of politicized artworks, where it is supported by concepts such as "petrocapi-talism," "decolonization," "the Anthropocene," "capitalocene," and "primitive accumulation." These concepts have been attempts to critically come to terms with the current manifestations of absolute capitalism. In the context of the full-blown global industrialization of cultural production, art now bears the mandate to give up its autonomy and be useful. Unlike Marxist aesthetics, which sought to maintain the artwork's autonomy in order to distance it from ideological propaganda, the aesthetic quality of contemporary art is now measured against an artwork's criticality, or its potential effectivity in the social field. Today, art is asked to aid in constructing communities, whether that be by salvaging the social tissue or giving visibility to disenfranchised populations. "Conflict" is now a subject for curatorial and artistic intervention, and artistic practices must unleash "beautiful trouble" as a way to reconfigure ethics, propose climate solutions, and give leeway to oppositional assembly and occupation. "Sensible politics"—a niche of cultural production linked to political practice—is considered post-ideological, and it implies that what matters is how things are represented, delivering a form of non-governmental politicization that encodes unstable political acts in medial forms<sup>1</sup>. It also means positing art as a platform for

notable acts of collective and creative mobilization that might recast institutions' sense of public purpose and explore art's capacity to define a democratic field<sup>2</sup>. Sensible politics further frames the symbiosis of cultural and political practice as *artivism*. For instance, T.J. Demos recently identified a "cultural politics of opposition" that is grounded on the materialization of the images and sounds of emancipation and decolonization so as to oppose capitalism's rapacious commodification of anything and everything. In Demos' view, recent works by Biemann, Melitopoulos, and Allora & Calzadilla are examples of such intersectional forms of opposition in that they both reveal the effects of global extractivism, and, at the same time, propose new forms of oppositional movement building and solidarity<sup>3</sup>

The genesis of the symbiosis of activism and aesthetics resides on the fact that the primary means of contemporary political practice is information and communication technology, and therefore, creativity and culture lie at the heart of the struggles with which social movements engage. In this regard, mass media have become instrumental in challenging existing power structures and creating alternative means of dialogue. At the same time, however, we must also consider that politics has become a question of epistemology—a means of expression and a technique for making certain topics intelligible. These topics gain relevance through their visibility in the media and sociopolitical fields and are thus able to mobilize emotions such as fear, insecurity, indignation, and anger. In order to shape political "forms of consciousness" (adding, deconstructing, denouncing, and diverting signs, codifying and decodifying), political work in social movements involves the modification of what is visible in the infosphere.

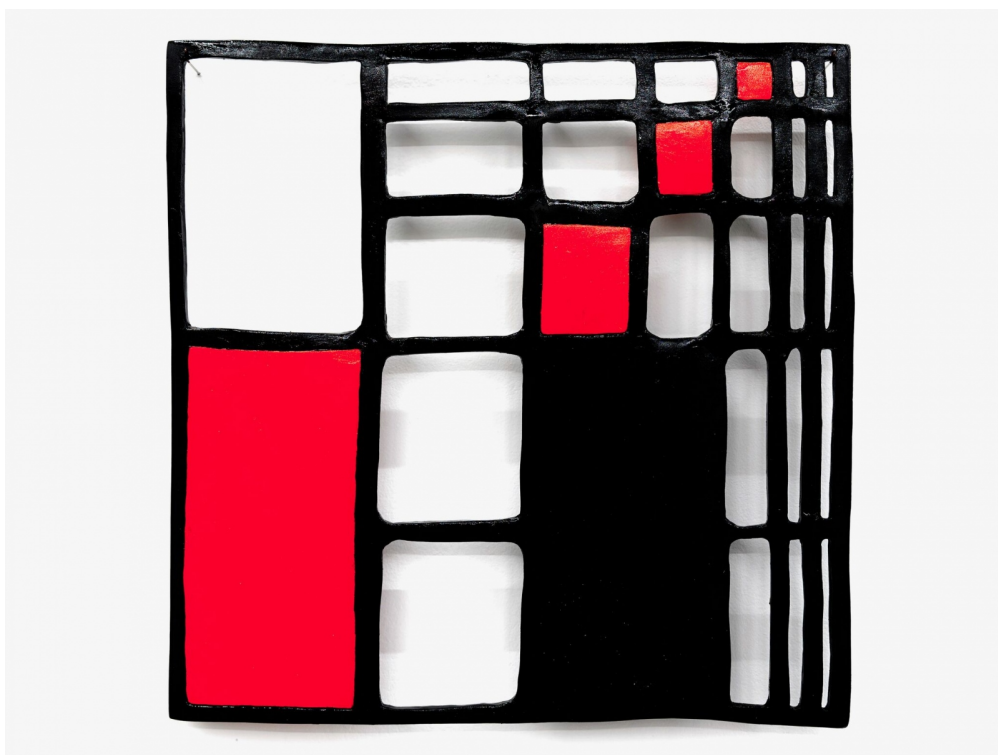
One central problem of our times, however, is that neoliberal policies are eroding ways of life. For this reason, contemporary social movements have been triggered less by problems of wealth distribution, or antagonism between the working and wealthy classes (as was the case in the previous century), and more by concerns regarding the grammar of forms of life: quality of life, equality, individual self-realization, democracy (participation and transparency when it comes to both the media and the government), human rights, environmentalism, civil rights, anti-globalization, security, and so forth. Nevertheless, conceiving of social movements and politicized art as vehicles for changing or preserving forms of life is problematic. It implies subordinating social and economic criticism to artistic critique, and risks falling into the impasse of either positing a universal (anti-capitalist or not) emancipatory project or resisting global capitalism on behalf of the local traditions that the system is in the process of

destroying (although we now know that capitalism is capable of adapting to and thriving in any non-Western tradition).

The impasse brought about by subordinating politics to aesthetic critique sheds light on the fact that, contrary to what we wanted to believe, the legacy of modernity resulted not in a horizon of emancipation led by the proletariat, but instead a biosphere and population at the verge of extinction—humankind surviving and self-destructing in a world already in ruins. Without a doubt, the modern assumption of man’s domination of nature and societies—bound to the project of the Enlightenment in the form of scientific and artistic mastery, as well as political emancipation—is at the root of the normalization of neocolonial destruction of life forms, and absolute capitalism’s authorization of some making a living for sake of others’ privilege. In other words, from a decolonial perspective, the Western “I think, therefore I am” is preceded by 150 years of “I conquer, therefore I am.” The *cogito ergo sum* is thus none other than an imperial subject grounded on the genocide, epistemicide, racism, and sexism that are the foundations of knowledge and high culture in the modern/colonial world<sup>4</sup>. The mastery of knowledge—represented by “high art”—is embodied by the “knowing” Western subject that considers itself and its gaze as neutral, objective, and superior (as expert knowledge).<sup>5</sup> Let’s recall the title character of Werner Herzog’s *Fitzcarraldo*, whose mad colonial enterprise is justified by bringing opera to the Amazonian jungle. Or we could think of the scene in Jean-Luc Godard’s *For Ever Mozart* (1996) that shows SS soldiers listening to Beethoven. In these works, the destruction that underlies modernity is somehow justified or “healed” through the achievements of Western cultural expression, thus illustrating why traditional methods of *ideologiekritik* are no longer useful to explain the workings of power relations within neoliberal societies. Instead of critiquing the current worldview, we must instead investigate what maintains it as common sense. For instance, the nineteenth-century faith in technology today manifests as our pragmatic belief that design and technocracy are not only measures for progress, but solutions to our problems and mediators between humans and “nature.” This mediation is ubiquitous and has reached the point where it structures human-human relationships. A recent example is the extreme automatization of stores, according to which sensors and artificial intelligence have replaced cashiers, and shoppers complete their transactions with their smartphones. Such automatization was pioneered by Amazon Go, and retailers are now in a global race to follow suit.<sup>6</sup> Thus, before the urgency of the present, we need to draw an epistemological continuum among the racialized relations of production that gave



JULIETA ARANDA  
*Ghost Nets*, 2018



JULIETA ARANDA  
*Ghost Nets*, 2018



shape to colonization, the networks of primitive accumulation in the present, and the commodification of everything, which is intrinsically linked to techniques that have enabled us to modify, create, or better life and lives. Could art help us understand and undo technocratized visualities and their links to our general crisis of empathy? To be sure, positing extractivism and its colonial roots as the central political problem today is a step toward breaking the nineteenth-century spell of universal progress. By admitting that Western universalist ideologies cannot be sustained, we may come to realize that we need to give up the belief that the Western way of life is the best and only way to measure “historical progress.” Our understanding of the world is modern, and that means it is based on frameworks that structure human organization politically, philosophically, socially, and epistemologically. Since these frameworks are abstract, this understanding is based on a division between theory and practice, with matter (bodies, land) abstracted into epistemological spaces. In this context, could aesthetics be the grounds for new forms of representation that do not seek to give visibility to that which power has made invisible? Below I will look at examples of artworks that, without intending to, give us a glimpse of the materiality of that which is at the root of capitalist processes and modern epistemology.

In her installation *Ghost Nets* (2018), Julieta Aranda creates a series of analogies between bones and grids, pixels and cubes. These analogies open toward a fresh and necessary understanding of how structures within our bodies and world play a role in creating and maintaining societies, and of how agency circulates relationally in both human and non-human worlds. “Ghost fishing” describes a highly destructive phenomenon that is activated when fishing nets get detached from their vessels and begin catching fish, coral reefs, and other forms of marine life autonomously. Entire ecosystems are being wiped out as these nets drift across oceans, and if left unattended, ghost nets will keep fishing for the next several centuries. This phenomenon is one of the narratives behind Aranda’s installation. At the center of the gallery, we encounter a gigantic bone that is suspended from the ceiling by nylon nets and bound to the floor by three bundles of ropes. The bone is surrounded by structures that form uneven grids of red, white, and black. The structures show unfolded cubes whose six faces appear in the same plane. They were inspired by the patterns and shapes of crosswords puzzles and are intervened upon by circles and semi-circles. Some of these structures hang from the ceiling, while others are directly painted onto the gallery’s walls; ceramic versions hang on the walls or stand freely on the ground.

This arrangement is interspersed with smaller bones, which lean against the walls or rest on colored sand. The installation is presided over by a giant rug in the shape of a crossword puzzle, which we confront when entering the gallery space. In the text about the installation, curator Chus Martínez compares bones to the white cube: we usually think that both are dull but necessary.<sup>7</sup> As her text informs us, however, the raw matter of bones is *osteocalcin*, a protein that plays a crucial role in regulating sugar and thus, our memory and mood. In other words, bones not only hold the structure of our bodies, but also carry out and preserve our memories, and bear responsibility for our emotions. In light of this actuality, we can infer a series of analogies unfolding in the juxtaposition of the elements that appear within Aranda's installation: bones, like the ghost nets, have autonomous agency, as do the human-made structures that give shape to our world. The grids, like the crossword puzzle, store and structure things and words in a manner similar to the way that sand and ice preserve traces of life within them. Such storing and structuring are also not unlike the way that arrangements of pixels, permanently in flux, constitute images on the internet, traces of which we see in Aranda's installation on a screen to the right of the main bone. *Ghost Nets* is evocative of the fact that *everyone and everything* has memory, agency, and life. Although Western societies are built upon the domination of nature, humans are not above nature and things—inert structures are also a part of societies and have agency over them. Agency, in this case, may not include consciousness or thought, but it is nonetheless located in relations between individuals, among everyone and everything to which we have obligations and responsibilities. The agency of sand and ice in preserving life is the same as that of bones, grids, and nets. Understanding this interrelation enables us to undo binaries, such as abstraction and embodiment, human and non-human, organic and inert, inside and outside, and to acknowledge that we are not only responsible for stopping the destruction of the fishing nets that roam the oceans, but also for the epistemological, social, and economic structures that created them in the first place.

One urgent task of the present is to undo our unconscious internalization of political crisis as private suffering, and to instead posit it as a collective problem. In the current panorama of expropriation and violence, the communities that need to take care of a wound are perceived as the “damned of the earth.” Regimes of alterity no longer occupy the locus of otherness that could question hegemonic structures, in part because modernization engendered communities inhabited by damaged bodies and emptied of cultural signification, who were exposed to forms of violence that do not count as crimes. At the same time, the only accepted frame for “political agency” is the

demand to restitute human rights (or to stop extractive projects), and this demand implies particularizing political crises by transforming them into private or culturally specific suffering, thereby hindering their potential to become collective and global political struggles.

Candice Breitz's two-channel video installation *Love Story* (2016) is relevant here: in Breitz's video, the bodies of white celebrities (Alec Baldwin and Julianne Moore) become the vessels for an array of testimonies from people forced into migration. The point of the installation is that brown bodies may only become visible, and their speech only heard, through white voices—otherwise they remain indistinct noise. As *Love Story* reveals the mechanisms of colonial relations still entrenched in the structures of aesthetic-political representation, Clarisse Hahn's short film *Mescaline* (2017) narrates the consequences of an ignored, reciprocal gaze at work in an encounter between foreign agents. The film's events unfold in a small town in the Wirikuta desert, an expanse of land that lies in the north of Mexico's San Luis Potosí. It features a young European couple on a "mystical tourism" trip. Agathe and Mehdi are cultured and curious, and they have traveled to Mexico in search of peyote, "the magic cactus." Following in the steps of Antonin Artaud and Henri Michaux, the couple is looking for the secrets of the earth that can be revealed in the experience offered by peyote intake. The impulse that drove Artaud, and those who have followed him to the Huichol desert, was a utopian quest for a primitive and mystic culture, rich in cults and myths that could be an alternative to European decadence and rationality. In 1936, when Artaud traveled to witness the peyote ritual on a commission by the Mexican government, he had to wait for twenty-eight days until the ceremony was performed for him by the Huichol sorcerers. In contrast, the protagonists of *Mescaline*—like the other five thousand tourists who visit the Sierra Tarahumara every year to consume peyote—are led to the desert and instructed on how to harvest and cut the cactus without the context of the ritual. Nowadays, a substance once used only for spiritual healing is also consumed as a recreational drug. Those who ingest mescaline without supervision or guidance risk endangering themselves in the process, and such is the case with Agathe and Mehdi. Without much choice, the inhabitants of the town where the film's narrative unfolds endure the uninvited presence of mystical tourists, who descend on the desert with false hopes of corporeal liberation and encounters with *Ciguri*.<sup>8</sup> Hahn cultivated a relationship with these townspeople for many years prior to making her film, and they appear as protagonists within it. One of the extraordinary



CLARISSE HAHN  
*Mescaline*, 2017



CLARISSE HAHN  
*Mescaline*, 2017



CLARISSE HAHN  
*Mescaline*, 2017

things about *Mescaline* is how the director, unlike her predecessors in the Sierra Tarahumara, does not turn the gaze inward, toward the experience of mescaline itself, but instead, outward and around. This crucial—decolonial—move renders legible how mescaline affects the native community's life through patterns and practices of colonial power. Hahn also shows the mechanisms behind the mystical tourists' presence in the Sierra Tarahumara that perpetuate a modern colonial relationship to non-Western cultures based on the latter's exoticization and consumption. In *Mescaline*, moreover, the community and the tourists become present to each other as mutual projections, which inevitably leads to destruction and violence. While completely high, Agathe sends friendly signals that are misperceived as flirting, and Mehdi comes into the town to disturb the community's essential subsistence structures. In a truly open effort to be friendly, Agathe jumps in a truck with five men to whom her amicable attitude, white skin, and pockets full of foreign money mean privilege and a history of colonization and racism between them. Intoxicated by alcohol and mescaline, Agathe wakes up the next day to realize that she has been gang raped. At the end of the film, we see her with an empty gaze and mute, unable to process what she has just been through and focused on devouring a chewing-gum flavored popsicle she bought off the road. A young man finds Agathe's lace underwear at the site of the rape (the back of a truck in the desert) and brings it over to a group of women, who symbolically burn it on the stove. As we glimpse the community's everyday life, we realize that the women, although angry with their men, are not economically independent, and cannot send them to hell for fooling around with foreign women. They are also infuriated by Mehdi, who, while high on mescaline, comes to disturb their goats, and ends up taking a swim in the town's drinking water tank. The women berate him, but benignly; perhaps he is saved from more severe punishment for his mischief by his brown skin. By showing the dynamic between "natives" and "foreigners," Hahn's film sheds light on the mutual idealization and exoticization that still permeates the relationships between Western and non-Western cultures and indicates how the Other—under the yoke of colonialism—continues to appear as an inaccessible consciousness, and thus, as an absence that unveils violence even as it hides.

From a different perspective, Miguel Ventura's recent collages also draw on colonial relations from the past that are embedded in Mexico's present. Calling on the tradition of the avant-garde, Ventura's juxtapositions make visible the faces, corporations, foundations, and organisms that are part of the neoliberal economic political system. In

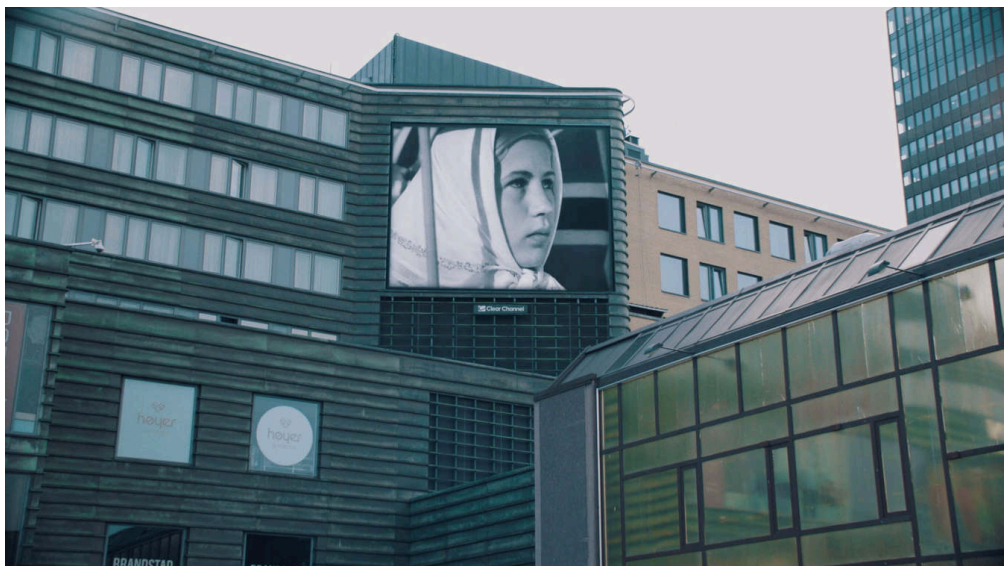


MIGUEL VENTURA



doing so, the artist transgresses the etiquette of politicized contemporary art, refusing the frame of counter-information, testimony, a politics of recognition, or sensible politics geared at reconstituting the social tissue, and evading contradictory images of democratic Mexico in which culture functions as a site of antagonism. Ventura's collages, in other words, confront Mexican society and the artworld's complicity with the root of endemic violence: racism as it has been structured by five hundred years of colonization. In his complex and beautifully patterned collages, Ventura posits modernism as a blind, utopic image of progress—one used to justify the dispossession of the commons and the territorial cleanse of Mexican territory, specifically in areas rich in minerals and hydrocarbons—and the impulse behind the militarization of the country (as in the “War on Drugs”) since 2006.

Just as Ventura's collages recall Dadaism's critique of European fascism before World War II, Sara Eliassen's site-specific video intervention *The Feedback Loop* (2018) suggests that it is important to break through the daily flow of images that surround us—the sensible regime—in a dense public space, as such a flow might be the current manifestation of propaganda. For the project, the artist bought screen time on advertisement spaces in Oslo's Central Station. Some of the screens take the form of giant smartphones, while others are more traditional large displays, and onto each, Eliassen uploaded one of five versions of a ten- to thirty- second long video. Throughout the day, these videos appear simultaneously on all of the screens, interrupting the stream of local commercials. In general, Eliassen's work explores how our contemporary condition is determined by our existence within the sensible regime, a system made up of visibilities and signs that get interwoven through the mass media, cultural production, and interpersonal communication. Eliassen is interested in how the sensible regime (or “screen culture”) produces social arrangements, creates subjectivities, and organizes gender and class relations, as well as in how, more than “reality,” the sensible gives shape to our perception of the world. In the aftermath of Anders Breivik's terror attack against Oslo's civilian population in 2011, and the controversy that arose in 2017 over critiques of artist Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till, Eliassen's *The Feedback Loop* presents pressing questions about the right to and of representation, especially in the context of rising Islamophobia, misogyny, classism, racism, migration, politics, and the crystallization of fascisms across the world that are supported by the sensible regime.



SARA ELIASSEN  
*The Feedback Loop*, 2018



SARA ELIASSEN  
*The Feedback Loop*, 2018

For her intervention, Eliassen appropriated sequences from the Norwegian-German film *Symphonie des Nordens: Eine Dichtung in Bild und Ton über Norwegens Landschaft* (*Symphony of the North: A Poem in Images and Sound about Norway's Landscape*, 1938), which was directed by Julius Sandmeier, with music composed by Karl Eisele. *Symphonie des Nordens* was made according to the political line established by the Nazi's Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels: it presents a sensible regime fabricated with folkloric contours and aims to display the nation's roots. The film constructs an idealized image of Norway through descriptions of its landscape, glorifying the country's mountains, fjords, forests, and folkloric manifestations. In her intervention, Eliassen uses the same montage and morphing techniques that German propaganda films once employed to induce viewers into identifying with nationalist ideology. Eliassen uses the structure of the loop to first show a wide-angle shot of a non-white teenager looking at scenes from Sandmeier's film on a screen in Oslo's Central Station. Next, we see a shot of the young man's face at the moment in which his eye absorbs an image of Norway. Or perhaps the image absorbs him, as we suddenly see this teenager appear inside Sandmeier's images of snowy Norwegian mountains. In the end, the screen material, the screen itself, and the human all merge into one.

With her intervention in Oslo's Central Station, Eliassen provocatively poses an image-question: Does our contemporary sensible regime function as a form of propaganda, and if it does so, how? Clearly not by constructing national identities, but rather through more insidious ways of producing desirable and non-desirable subjectivities tied to ethnicity, religion, and belonging. This regime surreptitiously pushes for new versions of "us" and "others," which are today based on ethnic roots, as opposed to notions of national belonging (which were based on a link between race and land). By repurposing the ghostly images that supported fascisms in the first half of the twentieth century as the background of an image of an immigrant teenager in contemporary Norway, Eliassen interrogates how the models of Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism or French integrationism could work in post-Breivik Norway (as they have obviously failed there and elsewhere). In the fascisms of the first half of the twentieth century, ethnicity was race was nation linked to territory (the Nazi logic of "*Blut und Boden*"). Today, however, ethnicity is difference linked to transnational communities (as opposed to territory) and is inseparable from a political demand for visibility and recognition. In a way, ethnicity (as well as religion and sexuality) is to globalization

what ideology was to the Cold War. Instead of a singular mass dancing an anonymous movement under the baton of a dictator, today fragments of masses dance to express a rejection of being directed by the movements of a single baton, and resist being molded by a singular national identity. As the question of class difference has been superseded by the racialized economic distribution of wealth and privilege across the planet, what does recognition mean when unilateral dominion relations prevail? A new, pluralized version of the *Volk* has returned, stupidly and bloodily spreading an obsession with belonging and aggressive identitarian affirmation. This results from a prevailing sense of displacement—the loss of tradition and emotional roots—which leads to aggressive and destructive forms of reterritorialization, a return to the past in the shape of aggressively singularized ethnic, religious, and sexual identities.

Ariella Azoulay's recent elucidations of photographic theory link the optical device to the specific political formations that made it possible. For Azoulay, "The invention of the New World and the invention of photography are not unrelated."<sup>9</sup> In the same vein, I would argue that patterns of extraction and dispossession and practices of visibility and visualization are not unrelated, and that they are directly linked to the history of colonization. In this regard, art has the potential to experiment with contemporary practices of vision and perception, and to explore how they affect how we *are* in the world and with others. For instance, Eshrat Erfanian's *The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Edition* (2015) is a series of sixteen digital prints that depicts residential neighborhoods in Tehran from satellite views gleaned from Google Earth Pro. The prints are zoomed-in and intervened upon with twenty-four-karat gold leaf. In the series, Erfanian pursues her ongoing exploration into the implications of normalizing the new visual imagery that is facilitated by technology and its ties to the military apparatus and capitalism. Her piece also addresses the ontological and political status of images of war and globalization, the reshaping of subjectivity by new technologies, and the question of what these new technologies actually render legible and what they might make invisible. Erfanian's series can be positioned within the lineage of Harun Farocki's explorations of what he called "operational" or "functional" images, which are those that are not destined to be seen, but which provide a form of vision without a look.<sup>10</sup> Such images contain information worthy of interest to specific users: from citizens to the military to corporations. Erfanian's translation of Google Earth images from one support to another—from the interface of the screen to digital prints in a series—is a recurrent practice in her work, and the first step towards the creation of an apparatus that appropriates images to squeeze the power out from within them. In *The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>*



ESHRAT ERFANIAN  
*The 4th and 5th Edition, 2015*

*Edition*, Erfanian works on the disembodied objectivity embedded the Google Earth images, which offer neither social nor historical interpretation, and which, like globalization, render localities anonymous. By selecting certain neighborhoods to work on, the artist also works these images' automated objectivity against her own subjective insertions into them. In an act of appropriation, subjectivation, and contextualization, she intervenes upon them with gold leaf. The material evokes the traditions of gilding images in Christian and Islamic art, and thus becomes an allegory for the invisibility of the Iranian ordeal—its illegibility to the hegemonic West that has imposed a new Orientalism through Islamophobia. At the same time, in evoking the value of gold in traditional religious art, the gilding also alludes to how, today, the war machine maintains itself through the value of gold, oil, and other resources. Furthermore, if, in traditional Christian painting, the value of gold was said to equal the godly quality of the figures within a representation, here its implications are reversed, with the gold glorifying the powerless citizens and victims of war. While no image of humanity is articulated within this series, Erfanian's appropriation and translation of Google Earth images raises questions about how visual vertical sovereignty shapes and affects peoples, landscapes, politics, and social systems. Erfanian thus develops a grammar that works against the images themselves: if they are solidified power and ideology, and if they represent surveillance and are thus a threat, through subjectivation and systematization, Erfanian establishes a relationship with them that is one of care and love. Some of the artist's relatives live in the neighborhoods shown in the images, and therefore, the gold leafing also acts as a layer of protection against the current geopolitical threats to her loved ones. In this series, Erfanian elegantly unfolds the meaning and political implications contained within Google Earth images, revealing the stakes of these pictures from the point of view of a beholder looming above, as well as that of those below, who have unknowingly become images and thus, subjects of power and deterrence.

To conclude, we urgently need to find other genealogies of thought and action that can make us both understand and go beyond modern epistemological frames of understanding, knowledge, thought, and vision. Art can help in finding these genealogies, but before it does so, we need to enable consumers of cultural products to discern the difference between *the political* (or occupying a space to denounce, critique, or show what is made invisible by power) and *politics* as a form of representation or collective organization. Only then we can begin to find forms of thought and action



that would lead to autonomous and collective kinds of organizing guarded from capitalism. If we take the standpoint of decolonization, we must be aware that decolonialism requires an unsettling restructuring beyond the logic of extraction and dispossession, and that it needs to be grounded on epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships. Decolonization also needs stories and narratives beyond those of crises, victims, or survival; it needs stories that rely upon self-determination and that change from within, rather than only after being recognized by an external other. Decolonization means struggles on the ground and with our bodies to defend the material and symbolic conditions that guarantee the reproduction of life in common. Beyond the impatience to politicize art, or to attribute a messianic role in our contemporary society to it, these struggles are inevitably embodied in precarious small steps that are permanent, yet discontinuous in rhythm, and present in almost all vital processes that contradict the homogenous, identical, and lineal temporality of capital and the state.

- 1 See Meg McLagan and Yates McKee, eds., *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism* (New York: Zone Books, 2012).
- 2 Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson, and Dominic Willsdon, "Plight of the Publics: An Introduction to Public Servants," in *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good*, eds. Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson, and Dominic Willsdon (Cambridge and New York: The MIT Press and The New Museum, 2016), xv.
- 3 T.J. Demos, "Blackout: The Necropolitics of Extraction" *Dispatches* 001 (June 2018).
- 4 Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16<sup>th</sup> Century," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 11, no.1(2013): 77.
- 5 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575-599.
- 6 Nick Wingfield, "Retailers Amazon in -tech push for automated shopping," *The Star*, April 2, 2018, [https://www.thestar.com/business/tech\\_news/2018/04/02/retailers-race-amazon-in-high-tech-push-for-automated-shopping.html](https://www.thestar.com/business/tech_news/2018/04/02/retailers-race-amazon-in-high-tech-push-for-automated-shopping.html).
- 7 Chus Martínez, "Julieta Aranda, *Ghost Nets*," Galeria OMR, May 24–June 30, 2018, <http://galeriaomr.com/julieta-aranda-ghost-nets/>.
- 8 "Ciguri" is a term that names both peyote and the experience of consuming it.
- 9 Ariella Azoulay, "Unlearning the Origins of Photography," *Unlearning Decisive Moments of Photography* (blog), *Foto Museum*, September 6, 2018, [https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/155239\\_unlearning\\_the\\_origins\\_o](https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/155239_unlearning_the_origins_o)



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- 10 See Harun Farocki, "Phantom Images," *Public* 29 (2004): 13-22.