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THE RADICAL

Ch. 1
Aftermodernity

ALTERMODERNITY

ROOTS: A CRITIQUE OF POSTMODERN REASON

In contemporary aesthetic thought, the "critical dimension" of art represents the most common criterion of judgment. Reading art catalogues and journals that mechanically echo this ideology of suspicion and turn the "critical" coefficient of works into a touchstone able to differentiate good from evil, the interesting from the insignificant, how can one escape the impression that works are no longer evaluated so much as sorted and graded like eggs on a production line? Such pigeonholing is well attested; it was already the dominant approach at the end of the nineteenth century, another era in which academicism privileged the subject (which must not be confused with the content) over form (which is not simply a matter of visual pleasure). In postmodern times, we are once again seeing works that flaunt edifying sentiments in the guise of a critical dimension, images that are able to win acceptance despite their formal poverty by foregrounding their militant or minority status, and aesthetic discourses that exalt difference and multiculturalism without really knowing why.

The numerous aesthetic theories born of the nebulous alliance of cultural postcolonialism have failed to elaborate a critique of modernist ideology that does not lead to an absolute relativism or to a piling up of "essentialisms." In their most dogmatic form, these theories go so far as to obliterate any possibility of dialogue among individuals who do not share the same history or cultural identity. The threat should not be minimized: through the pressure of caricature, the comparatist ideology underlying postcolonial studies is paving the way for a complete atomization of references and criteria of aesthetic judgment. If I am a Western white man, for instance, how can I exercise critical judgment on the work of a black Cameroonian woman without running the risk of inadvertently imposing on it an outlook corrupted by Eurocentrism? How can a heterosexual critique the work of a gay artist without relaying a dominant perspective? But even if the suspicion of Eurocentrism or phallocentrism were to be established as critical

norms, the problem of the periphery would remain intact: the center is designated, with Enlightenment philosophy in the defendant's seat. But what is the charge? Homi Bhabha presents postcolonial theory as an active refusal of the "binary and hierarchical" vision that characterizes Western universalism.¹¹ Gayatri Spivak, an important figure in "subaltern studies," wants to *dewesternize* the very concepts through which alienation is thought. These projects have had salutary consequences, but it is their perverse effects that I am focusing on here, effects which transform the modern outlook that grew out of the Enlightenment into something unrecognizable, something both omnipresent and reviled, ceaselessly deconstructed yet untouchable. Jacques Lacan would accord it the status of an *objet petit a*, which is to say an object existing only as shadow, an empty center, visible only indirectly, in the form of its anamorphoses. This modernist totem thus offers a strange analogy with capital, denounced and despised but at the same time considered untouchable, endlessly deconstructed yet left intact.

"Postmodernism," write Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, "is indeed the logic by which global capital operates," for it constitutes "an excellent description of the ideal capitalist schemes of commodity consumption" through notions such as difference, cultural multiplicity, mixture, and diversity.¹² Postmodern theories, they go on to say, can thus be understood as the homologous counterparts of religious fundamentalisms, the former attracting the "winners" of globalization, the latter its "losers." Once again we rediscover that binarism (hip uprootedness versus enrootedness in identity) from which it is increasingly urgent that we extricate ourselves by using the resources of modern culture. The work of reconstituting a new modernity—whose strategic task would be to strive for the dissolution of postmodernism—entails first of all inventing a theoretical tool with which to combat

everything in postmodern thought that in practice supports the trend toward standardization inherent in globalization. It is a matter of identifying what is valuable and extracting it from the binary and hierarchical schemes of yesterday's modernism as well as from regressive fundamentalisms of all sorts. It is a matter of opening up an aesthetic and intellectual region in which contemporary works might be judged according to the same criteria—in brief, a space for discussion.

In the meantime, we are witnessing the emergence of a kind of post-modern aesthetic *courtesy*, an attitude that consists of refusing to pass critical judgment for fear of ruffling the sensitivity of the other. Granted, this overblown version of multiculturalism is based on well-meaning sentiments, that is to say, desire for recognition of the other as *other* (Charles Taylor). But the perverse effect of this courtesy is that it implicitly leads us to view non-Western artists as guests to be treated with politeness, and not as full-fledged actors on the cultural scene in their own right. For what could be more insulting and paternalistic than discourses that dismiss out of hand the possibility that a Congolese or Laotian artist could be pitted against Jasper Johns or Mike Kelley in a shared theoretical space and made the object of the same criteria of aesthetic evaluation? In postmodern discourse, "recognition of the other" too often amounts to pasting the other's image into a catalogue of differences. *Animal humanism*? This so-called "respect for the other," at any rate, generates a kind of reverse colonialism, as courteous and seemingly benevolent as its predecessor, was brutal and nullifying. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek cites an interview with Alain Badiou in which the latter recalls that the concept of respect for the other would be meaningless, for example, to a resister engaged in the struggle against the Nazis in 1942, or even "when one must judge the works of a mediocre artist."¹³ Thus, this notion of respect or recognition of the other in no way represents "the most basic of ethical principles," as one might be led to believe from reading Charles Taylor. We must move beyond the

11 HOMI BHABHA, *THE LOCATION OF CULTURE* (LONDON: ROUTLEDGE, 1994).

12 MICHAEL HARDT AND ANTONIO NEGRI, *EMPIRE* (CAMBRIDGE, MA: HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2001), 152.

translation
(as argument)

peaceful and sterile coexistence of reified cultures (multiculturalism) to a state of cooperation among cultures that are equally critical of their own identity—that is to say, we must reach the stage of translation.

The stakes are immense. It is a question of rewriting “official” history in favor of plural accounts, and in the process working out the possibility of dialogue among these different versions of history. Without this, the trend toward cultural standardization will only escalate, reassuringly masked by the idea of “recognizing the other,” where the other is conceived as a species to be preserved. Gayatri Spivak defends the idea of a “strategic essentialism,” in which minority individuals or groups lay claim to the cultural substance on which they found their identity, which permits these “subalterns” to gain a voice in the context of globalized imperialism. Spivak is known to view all cultural identity as potentially susceptible to deconstruction, but she proposes this detour “in a scrupulously visible political interest.”¹³ Is this tactic truly efficacious? An “essence,” the dictionary tells us, is “what makes something what it is”; essentialism thus refers to what is stable and immutable in a system or concept. That the origin thus takes precedence over the destination in the life of forms and ideas turns out to be the dominant postmodern motif.

Why should Patagonian, Chinese, or Iranian artists be required to produce their cultural difference in their works, while American or German artists find themselves judged on their critiques of patterns of thought, or on their resistance to authority and the dictates of convention? Lacking a common cultural space since the collapse of modernist universalism, Western individuals have felt obliged to

13 CHRISTOPHER COX AND MOLLY WHALEN, “ON EVIL: AN INTERVIEW WITH ALAIN BADIOU,” *CABINET*, NO. 5 (WINTER 2001): 72, QUOTED IN SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, *WELCOME TO THE DESERT OF THE REAL* (LONDON: VERSO PRESS, 2002), 87.

14 GAYATRI SPIVAK, *IN OTHER WORLDS: ESSAYS IN CULTURAL POLITICS* (NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, 1988), 205.

regard the other as a representative of the true, and to do so from a locus of enunciation by which a narrow barrier separates them from the other. Commenting both on *Magicians of the Earth* and on *Sharing Exoticisms*, the exhibition that he organized for the Lyon Biennial in 2001, Jean-Hubert Martin explains that “the great change marking this *fin de siècle* is that now it is possible for every artist in the world, whether his inspiration is religious, magical, or otherwise, to achieve global fame in accord with the codes and references of his own culture.”¹⁵ Thus, we find ourselves confronting an aporia: although we know that the universal master narrative of modernism is obsolete, the idea of judging each work according to the codes of its author’s local culture implies the existence of viewers who have mastered each culture’s referential field, which seems difficult to say the least. But after all, why not imagine an ideal viewer with the properties of a universal decoder? Or why not accept the idea that judgment must be suspended indefinitely? In a sort of Faustian pact with an other fantasized as the keeper of political and historical truth, art criticism willingly views itself as a kind of neo-anthropology that aspires to be the quintessential science of otherness.¹⁶

One cannot help but be struck, however, by the dichotomy between this humanist proposition (judge each artist “in accord with” his own culture) and the real movement of social production: in an era in which ancient particularities are being eradicated in the name of economic efficiency, aesthetic multiculturalism urges us to examine with particular care cultural codes that are on the path to extinction, and in doing so makes contemporary art into a conservatory of traditions and identities that are in reality being wiped out by globalization. One might speak of a productive tension here, but I see a contradiction, even a trap. But the crux of the matter lies in the expression used by Jean-Hubert

15. *PARTAGES D'EXOTISMES*, CATALOGUE OF THE LYON BIENNIAL, 2001, 124.

16. HAL FOSTER, *THE RETURN OF THE REAL* (CAMBRIDGE, MA: MIT PRESS, 1996).

presentation
definition

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Martin—"in accord with." Not "by conforming to or following their codes and references," which would indicate something exclusive, but by harmonizing their codes with other codes, by making their singularity resonate with a history and with problems born of other cultures. In short, by an act of translation. Indeed, today translation may represent that "basic ethical effort" that has been mistakenly associated with recognition of the other as such. For translation always implies adapting the meaning of a proposition, enabling it to pass from one code to another, which implies a mastery of both languages but also implies that neither is self-evident. The gesture of translation in no way prevents criticism or even opposition; in any case, it implies a presentation. In performing it, one denies neither the unspeakable nor possible opacities of meaning, since every translation is inevitably incomplete and leaves behind an irreducible remainder.

It is worth noting that within the crypto-humanist discourses born of cultural studies and postcolonial studies, the sole element that has been bequeathed without argument is the sphere of technology. Thus, in art, video is becoming a *lingua franca* thanks to which artists, whatever their nationality, can legitimately show off their cultural differences, which are then inscribed in the new context constituted by the technological apparatus, a context that is universalist by default.

Yet video is by no means a neutral technology or discipline; the proliferation of the documentary genre that has taken place since the beginning of the 1990s responds to a dual need for information and thorough reexamination. The need for information stems from the fact that certain former functions of cinema—functions that Roberto Rossellini and the French New Wave exalted in their time (recall the concept of "ontological realism," which makes of each fiction a documentary of the time and place it is recorded)—are increasingly being abandoned to contemporary art by a film industry that is no

longer interested in the external world as anything but a storehouse of settings and plots. For Hollywood films no longer bear witness to the way people live. Giving news of the world, registering changes in our environments, showing how individuals move around in or form part of those environments: most so-called auteur films fulfilled these tasks, some more diligently than others. In the past, that is, cinema brought us information about the world around us; now, it seems, this role is for the most part entrusted to contemporary art. The proliferation of long viewing sessions at biennial exhibitions and the increasing artistic legitimacy of the documentary genre indicate above all that this type of object is no longer commercially viable outside the art circuit, and also that the simple need for news of the world is today more often satisfied in art galleries than in movie theaters. This reversal of the roles of art and cinema also extends to the aesthetic domain, with the invasion of cinema by what Serge Daney calls "the visual" (the application to the cinematic image of the principles of advertising) and the problematic character of the image in art. To make a long story short: while film has been moving more and more toward the image (to the detriment of the shot), art has been going in the opposite direction, fleeing the symbol to confront the real through the documentary form. Certainly this phenomenon is in part the effect of a productive encounter between art and film, but it is also, alas, an effect of the law of profit, which transfers unprofitable products to a less costly system of production.

The documentary form has the immediate virtue of reconnecting signs to real referents. In the videos of Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, Kutlug Ataman, Shirin Neshat, Francis Alÿs, Darren Almond, and Anri Sala, the "exotic" context plays a significant role, and one that goes beyond the subject at hand. Instinctively, viewers seek news of the planet in these videos, information about elsewhere, about the other. Here it is not the manner in which the world is represented that turns out to be other, but the reality these artists are framing with their

camera; the audience is hungry for information. "I come from there," the artist could say, "but I am showing you images of my universe using the format that is most familiar to you, the televised image."

Kutluğ Ataman plays with this familiarity in his imposing installation *Kubā*. In a dimly lit space, a horde of television sets of various origins are installed in a rectangular formation on precarious tables and desks, each broadcasting the image and letting us hear the monologue of a different inhabitant of Kuba, a slum in the suburbs of Istanbul. More than the chaotic compositions of Nam June Paik, which this assemblage of televisions might call to mind, Ataman's work combines the formal design of the electronics store with that of the classroom. Whether gathering the voices of transvestites or those of refugees, Ataman belongs to the tradition of a Pasolini filming in the Roman suburb a local piece of the Third World. It may be demagogic, paternalistic, simplistic, like most of this sort of production, yet the televisual frame that the artist imposes on his models, whose words are lost in a forest of sounds and images coming from a multitude of outmoded monitors, more adequately represents the contemporary tragedy than does a charity benefit show. We must get closer to hear a particular voice; we must pay attention, as would a casual visitor. X

What does it mean today to be American, French, Chilean, Thai? Already these words do not have the same meaning for those who live in their native country and those who have emigrated. What it means to be Mexican in Germany has little to do with what it means to be Mexican in Mexico. With the standardizing tide of globalization traversing virtually all nation states, the portable dimension of national identities has become more important than their local reality. Jean-Paul Sartre, in *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phony War*, recounts that in fall 1939, under the Nazi threat, the French government organized the exodus of entire villages from Alsace to Limousin, which was then

a very backward area. The fact that these Alsatians were transplanted village by village induced among them a fixation on their rites, customs, and collective representations, but in a context in which these particularities no longer signified anything, since they were no longer reflected in the climate or architecture that had previously given them a material basis: "Not surprisingly, the more that social ritualism comes to lack real foundations," explains Sartre, "the more exacerbated and frenetic it becomes. It is now a kind of landless society, dreaming its spirituality instead of apprehending it through the thousand and one tasks of everyday life. This spurs pride as a defensive reaction, and an unhealthy tightening of social bonds. The result is a frenetic, upside-down society."¹⁷ What better image could there be for the French *banlieues** or for American neighborhoods in which immigrant communities cluster? Still more remarkable, however, is the fact that this account of villages relocated during World War II also describes the cultural condition today of an average European with the advent of globalization. The "ground" is giving way; we are told to compromise our rituals, our culture, and our history, now confined to standardized urban contexts that no longer reflect any image of us, except in locations reserved for that purpose: museums, monuments, historic districts. Our environments no longer reflect history; rather, they transform it into a spectacle or reduce it to the limits of a memorial. Where can it be rediscovered? In portable practices. It is in the domain of everyday lifestyles—images, clothing, cuisine, and rituals—that immigrants tinker, far from the gaze of the masters of the soil, piecing together a fragile and deracinated culture whose essential quality is that it is detachable. These portable forms are arranged and one way or another

17. JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, *WAR DIARIES: NOTEBOOKS FROM A PHONY WAR* (LONDON: VERSO, 1999), 43.

* TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: WHILE THE WORD *BANLIEUE* MAY LITERALLY BE TRANSLATED AS SUBURB, IN FRANCE THE *BANLIEUES* CONJURE IMAGES OF POVERTY, VIOLENCE, AND DECAY; THEY ARE ASSOCIATED WITH HOUSING PROJECTS AND IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES. THUS, THE WORD *BANLIEUE* HAS CONNOTATIONS CLOSER TO THOSE OF "INNER CITY" OR "SLUM" OR "GHETTO" THAN TO THOSE OF "THE SUBURBS."

installed on a cultural landscape that did not anticipate them. They grow like wildflowers, sometimes provoking violent rejection. Thus, culture today essentially constitutes a mobile entity, unconnected to any soil, while the phenomena of diaspora are still reflexively conceptualized in the outdated terms of enrootedness and integration.

Postmodern multiculturalism has failed to invent an alternative to modernist universalism, for everywhere it has been applied it has recreated cultural anchorages or ethnic enrootedness. For just like classical Western thought, postmodern multiculturalism operates on a logic of membership. A work of art is thus inevitably explained by the "condition," "status," or "origin" of its author. The work of a black, gay or lesbian, Cameroonian, or second-generation Mexican immigrant artist will thus mechanically be read through the prism of this biopolitical framework that is, however, every bit as normative as the others. Thus, everyone is located, registered, nailed to a locus of enunciation, locked into the tradition in which he or she was born.

"Where do you speak from?" critics ask, as if human beings must always stand in the same place and in one place only, and as if they could have at their disposal only a single tone of voice and a single language with which to express themselves. This is the blind spot of postcolonial theory when applied to art: it conceives the individual as definitively assigned to his or her cultural, ethnic, or geographic roots. In doing so, it plays into the hands of the powers that be, which profoundly desire subjects who enounce their own identity, thereby facilitating their statistical classification. Similarly, what the art market wishes is to have simple categories and recognizable images at its disposal so as to facilitate its distribution of products. Multiculturalist theories have thus merely reinforced the powers that be, for they have fallen into the trap that was laid for them: struggling against oppression and alienation through an act of symbolic house arrest—that of essentialist theme parks. And yet, as Claude

Lévi-Strauss wrote: "The one real calamity, the one fatal flaw which can afflict a human group and prevent it from achieving fulfillment is to be alone."¹⁸

This idea of territorial assignment has its source in a modernist ideology that it claims to refute, but which the radical left sustains on life support by borrowing ways of thinking used by anticolonial struggles throughout the twentieth century, concepts through which we perceive every fight for liberty: emancipation, resistance, alienation. Postmodern discourse takes up these conceptual categories and applies them as they are (without modification) to other social or historical objects.

In his famous essay *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon explains that the ultimate weapon of the colonizer is his ability to impose his image over that of the colonized people. It proved necessary to destroy those intrusive images in order to rediscover, beneath the layer that was obscuring them, those of the peoples struggling for their independence. Indeed, how could anyone fail to notice that today more than ever, the political struggle is a struggle over representations? According to Fanon's contemporary disciples, it is thus essential to replace a history dominated by "dead white males" with what they rightly call "a genuine historical pluralism," that is, by integrating the voices of the defeated into the monophonic narrative of history. Yet the repressive and totalitarian destiny of the bulk of African countries that attained independence ought to have taught us a few things: once emancipation has been obtained, anticolonialism is not a substitute for political thought; by extension, it can by no means provide the basis for a viable aesthetic and cultural project. The anticolonial model, which permeates cultural studies and discourses on art, undermines the foundations of modernism without, however, replacing them with anything other than that very gesture of hollowing out; that is to say, with emptiness. And in

18. CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, *RACE AND HISTORY* (UNESCO, 1958), 43.

that tireless deconstruction of the Western white male voice, we scarcely hear anything anymore but the soft voice of an aimless negativity.

Today this postcolonial discourse appears hegemonic, for it is perfectly inscribed within postmodern identitarian ideology. If one were to caricature it, one could do so thus: the works of the past were merely the products of the historical conditions in which they appeared, and we should interpret them from an ethno-sociological perspective, whereas contemporary works can be explained by their birth in the universal megalopolis from which they draw their spontaneous meaning. The city, the city, the city. Postmodernism has thus replaced the abstract and theoretical universalism of modernism with another form of totalization, at once symbolic and empirical: that of an infinite urban environment that would be the arena for an identity struggle between immigrants and natives, and for territorial conflict between public space and private property. Thus becomes visible the primitive scene of postmodern ideology: the construction of a gigantic film set, before which rises the scaffold whereon what was once the modern event is to be liquidated—dissected and pulverized in an identitarian multiculturalism. The concept of the event, theorized by Alain Badier, allows us to consider the question of modernity in a different way: to what are we faithful? To what historical fact are we binding our action? The theoretical stake of this essay could be said to boil down to the philosophical decision to remain faithful to the program opened up by modernism qua event in the realm of ideas (while picking and choosing among its parts), without, however, perpetuating it as form, for it is neither a matter of embracing the fetishization of modernist principles fashionable in art today, nor of relegating to the past the spirit that animated it.

A clever and widespread strategy is to assign modernism to the beginning of the twentieth century by tying it to the radical political ideologies that formed its historical backdrop and by pinning it

once and for all to the map of revolutionary "terror." But such a strategy entails reducing the modern event to an outgrowth of history, limiting it to being merely the product of its time. The works of Kazimir Malevich and Marcel Duchamp cannot, however, be considered simple products of history and of the sociopolitical circumstances that saw their birth. They are not merely the logical result of a series of determinisms, but they also constitute events that generate effects and influence their epoch—in short, produce history. If postmodern critical thought insists so forcefully on a one-way relation of influence between art and history, it is because such a relation is at the heart of the politics of assignment, of the ideology of belonging (to a place, to a moment) that underlies its core discourse. Postmodern thought thus arises as the negation of those powers of decentering, of setting in motion, of unsticking, of de-incrustation; powers that are the foundation of the emerging culture that I term here *altermodern*.

Feminist thought and recent political theories of sexuality inspired by the works of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan analyze the post-identitarian regime into which contemporary individuals have entered, affirming that we are no more definitively assigned to our culture or to our country than to a gender. Judith Butler considers it a given that "there is no self-identical subject."¹⁹ As concerns sexuality, the notion of identity has been supplanted by that of actions performed, by the concept of staging the Self, which implies the perpetual mobility of the subject. Sexual identity, Butler explains, is nothing but a game of codes, an articulation of signs that an individual takes on without subscribing to them, merely citing sexual norms rather than identifying irrevocably with any one of them. Thus, we are all potentially queer: not only sexual assignment but all elements of our identity are a product of such gestures, moves that can be played on the chessboard of culture. Cultural life is thus formed of tensions between the reification,

19. JUDITH BUTLER, *BODIES THAT MATTER* (LONDON: ROUTLEDGE, 1993), 230.

pure and simple, presupposed by self-assignment to a readymade category (such as being an amateur opera-lover, a teenage goth, a reader of historical fiction) and the idea of activating or risking identities, which implies a struggle against all attachments and the assertion that consumption of cultural signs does not imply any durable connotation of identity. By definition, we are not what we wear. In 1977, English punks wore Nazi and communist buttons side by side on their leather jackets. Displayed together, those swastikas and sickles above all signified hatred of any logic of ideological assignment: against conclusive evidence (the notion that people must represent the signs they wear, rather than the reverse), the punks chose floating paradox. The only things pinned to their jackets were signs emptied of meaning by the shock of their coexistence. Membership in an identitarian community depends on this logic of political buttons. Wrapped in signs whose coherence is certified by a tradition, in aesthetic and intellectual clothing that is thought to form a "natural body," the contemporary nationalist turns out to be an unwitting drag queen.

I asserted above that it should be possible for a Congolese or Laotian artist to be pitted against a Jasper Johns or a Mike Kelley in the same theoretical space and assessed according to the same set of aesthetic criteria. Against this proposition, the postmodernist reflex consists of denouncing the attempt to bring Congolese or Laotian identity into alignment with a single aesthetic system, since such a system must be suspected of universalism. Yet the identitarian compartmentalization on which the postmodern ethic is based is the foundation for a form of discrimination that is all the more subtle, and maintains Western cultural domination all the better for being practiced under the mask of generosity worn by an ideology of "recognizing the other." But if it is really "in accord with the codes and references of [their] own culture"—to use once again Jean-Hubert Martin's terms—that the works of Barthélémy Toguo, Kim Soo-Ja, and Chris Ofili can be interpreted, these cultural codes and identitarian references

would be nothing more than folkloric elements if they were not connected to that construction plan formed by the system of art, a foundation that historically depends—at least to a large extent—on Western culture. Is its Western origin sufficient grounds for disqualifying this construction plan? Yes, if one believes that the future of art depends on the simple coexistence of identities whose autonomy is to be preserved. No, if one thinks that each of these specificities can participate in the emergence of a modernity specific to the twenty-first century, a modernity to be constructed on a global scale, through cooperation among a multitude of cultural *semes* and through ongoing translation of singularities: an altermodernity.

This system of art, this construction plan, cannot function without a knowledge of its history. That history, however, is not self-enclosed but continuously enriched—thus, today we can make discoveries about the past, like that of the Crystalist movement in Ethiopia in the 1970s, or that of the tradition of tantric monochromatic paintings in seventeenth-century India. It is up to artists of all countries to appropriate this history for themselves in every sense. To take a recent example, the manner in which Rirkrit Tiravanija has forged connections between the Buddhist tradition and Conceptual art is an exemplary model of formal and historical transcoding. Conversely, Tsuyoshi Ozawa's gesture of renewing objects from traditional Japanese culture by introducing practices born of the Fluxus movement demonstrates that this transcoding can take original and singular paths. Buddhism augmented by Dan Graham, Fluxus augmented by the popular tradition of Japan: what these artists aim for in their works is not to accumulate heterogeneous elements, but to make meaningful connections in the infinite text of world culture. In a word, to produce itineraries in the landscape of signs by taking on the role of *semionauts*, inventors of pathways within the cultural landscape, nomadic sign gatherers.

But how can we simultaneously defend the existence of cultural singularities yet oppose the idea of judging works by those singularities, that is to say, refuse to judge them only in keeping with their traditions? It is this aporia that is both the basis of postmodern discourse and the cause of its ontological fragility. In other words, postmodernity consists in not responding to the question. For to formulate a response would require choosing between two conflicting options: one must either tacitly acquiesce to tradition, if one thinks that each culture generates its own criteria of judgment and must be evaluated according to these criteria, or else bet on the emergence of a system of thought capable of making connections between disparate cultures without denying each one's singularity. Postmodern discourse, which oscillates between critical deconstruction of modernism and multiculturalist atomization, implicitly favors a perpetual status quo. From this standpoint, it represents a repressive force, insofar as it helps maintain world cultures in a state of pseudo-authenticity, warehousing living signs in a nature park of traditions and modes of thought where they remain available for any merchandizing venture. What, then, threatens to disrupt this ideal reification? What is that studiously repressed object whose contours can be indirectly perceived in this ideological system? A word never to be pronounced: modernity. In other words, a collective project unconnected to any origin, one whose direction would transcend existing cultural codes and sweep their signs up in a nomadic movement.

What I am calling altermodernity thus designates a construction plan that would allow new intercultural connections, the construction of a space of negotiation going beyond postmodern multiculturalism, which is attached to the origin of discourses and forms rather than to their dynamics. It is a matter of replacing the question of origin with that of destination. "Where should we go?" That is the modern question par excellence.

The emergence of this new entity implies the invention of a new *conceptual persona* (in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari gave this term) that would bring about the conjunction of modernism and globalization. In order to define it, we need to reexamine one of the founding texts of twentieth-century thinking about art, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," by Walter Benjamin. While this 1935 essay has usually been read in relation to the production of images, it also contains a code of ethics whose potential remains underappreciated. Benjamin defines the aura of the work of art as its "here and now," that is, "its unique existence at the place where it happens to be,"²⁰ the uniqueness that founds its authenticity and its history. With the technological reproduction of images, he explains, this notion of authenticity is shattered, but not only in the sphere of art: the new modes of production of the image imply both new relations of work and a redefinition of the subject. Taking cinema as a paradigmatic example of these new relations, he explains that each of us, in the crowd of the big cities, henceforth lives under the gaze of the camera. "The expansion of the field of the testable that the camera brings about for the actor is analogous to the extraordinary expansion of the field of the testable brought about for the individual through economic conditions."²¹ The cinematic shot becomes the definitive model for control of human livestock, and it will considerably alter the exercise of political power. With the appearance of cinematic news, Benjamin continues, anyone can be filmed in the street; anyone can find in the emerging media the possibility of making him- or herself heard. Benjamin drew from this the surprising conclusion that "the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case."²²

²⁰ WALTER BENJAMIN, "THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION," IN WALTER BENJAMIN, *ILLUMINATIONS: ESSAYS AND REFLECTIONS*, TRANS. HARRY ZOHN, ED. HANNAH ARENDT (NEW YORK: SCHOCKEN BOOKS, 1968), 220.

²¹ *IBID.*, 246.

On this particular point, we should take Benjamin at his word and suppose that the era he presaged has managed to produce a new figure of the subject, one rid of that psychological aura that a sacrosanct identity represents. This figure can be discerned in Benjamin's description of the prototype of the new proletarian: the film actor. The latter moves in a fragmented context that he does not master, where he "offers not only his labor but also his whole self, his heart and soul."²³ This section on the actor opens with a long citation from Luigi Pirandello, who essentially explains that "the film actor ... feels as if in exile,"²⁴ that is to say, alienated from the images of himself that the film camera registers. According to Benjamin, "the feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera ... is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one's own image in the mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable."²⁵ A transportable image, a moving mirror: in the world of unlimited reproduction, the destiny of the subject is that of a permanent exile. A century later, we move in a mental universe where each of us lives, every day, the experience of the actor in 1935. It is difficult for us to found our identity on solid ground, and this lack incites us to cling either to a community that provides an identity or else to a pure constructivism. In this world of the inauthentic, policed by the domestic technology of images and surveillance cameras, standardized by the global industry of the imagination, signs circulate more than the forces that animate them. We have no choice but to move in cultures without identifying with them, create singularity without immersing ourselves in it, and surf on forms without penetrating them. No doubt the destiny of man without an aura (thus without background, which here means without origin) is even more difficult to accept for Westerners, who are heirs to a culture

²² *IBID.*, 232.

²³ *IBID.*, 231.

²⁴ *IBID.*, 229.

²⁵ *IBID.*, 230-31.

in which values tend toward totality and the universal. Yet this is the destiny we must assume today, unless we wish to opt for the rigid identities whose nationalisms and fundamentalisms offer us protective armor, or for the loose subject-groups proposed by postmodernism.

This dilemma can be expressed in the following way: On the one hand, there is the option of uniting with those who come from the same place, whether it be a nation, a culture, or a community of interests. On the other, there is the option of joining those who are heading toward the same place, even if their destination is hazy and hypothetical. The modern event, in essence, appears as the constitution of a group that cuts across clubs and origins by uprooting them. Whatever their type, their social class, their culture, their geographic or historical origin, and their sexual orientation, that group's participants constitute a troop that is defined by its speed and direction, a nomadic tribe cut off from any prior anchorage, from any fixed identity. To use another image, the modern moment is like an emulsion: the social and cultural liquid is stirred up by movement, producing an alloy that combines, without dissolving them, the separate ingredients that enter into its composition. What I term altermodern is precisely the emergence, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, of an analogous process: a new cultural precipitate, the formation of a mobile population of artists and thinkers choosing to go in the same direction. A start-up, an exodus.

This twenty-first-century modernity, born of global and decentralized negotiations, of multiple discussions among participants from different cultures, of the confrontation of heterogeneous discourses, can only be polyglot. Altermodernity promises to be a translation-oriented modernity, unlike the modern story of the twentieth century, whose progressivism spoke the abstract language of the colonial West. And this search for a productive compromise among singular discourses, this continuous effort at coordination, this constant elaboration of arrangements to enable disparate elements to function together,

constitutes both its engine and its import. The operation that transforms every artist, every author, into a translator of him- or herself implies accepting the idea that no speech bears the seal of any sort of "authenticity": we are entering the era of universal subtitling, of generalized dubbing. An era that valorizes the links that texts and images establish, the paths that artists forge in a multicultural landscape, the passage-ways they lay out to connect modes of expression and communication.

RADICALS AND RADICANTS

To better understand what is at stake in this process of unsticking identities and signs, it is necessary to reexamine modernism, which was haunted by a passion for radicality. Pruning, purifying, eliminating, subtracting, returning to first principles—this was the common denominator of all of the twentieth century's avant-gardes. The unconscious for Surrealism, the notion of choice for the Duchampian readymade, the lived situation for the Situationist International, the axiom "art = life" for the Fluxus movement, the picture plane for the monochrome: so many principles on the basis of which modern art elaborates a metaphysics of the root, a desire to go back to the beginning, to start again and create a new language, free of its detritus. Alain Badiou compares this passion for "subtraction" to an effort of purification, a word whose sinister political connotations he in no way seeks to efface. In modernism, he writes, there is always a "passion for beginning," a determination to create a vacuum, to wipe the slate clean, as the precondition of a discourse that inaugurates and sows the seeds of the future: the root. If "force is attained through the purging of form,"²⁶ then Kazimir Malevich's *White Square on a White Background* "is—in the field of painting—the epitome of purification."²⁷ This perpetual return to the origin on the part of the avant-gardes implies that in the radical system of art, the *new* becomes an aesthetic criterion

in its own right, based on a notion of precedence, on establishing a genealogy that will later give rise to a hierarchy and values. Paradoxically, this "founding father" gesture²⁸ also formulates a possible end of art. An end and a beginning at the same time, the radical artwork constitutes an epiphany of the present. It opens up a territory from which one can face toward the past as well as the future. Thus, in 1921, when Alexander Rodchenko exhibits a triptych consisting of three monochromatic panels—red, blue, and yellow—he is able to assert that it constitutes the end of painting and that "representation will be no more," and at the same time that it inaugurates a new pictorial tradition. And in 1914, when Marcel Duchamp produces his first true readymade, the bottle rack, it could easily be seen as a gesture whose radicality cannot be surpassed, when in fact it will go on to inform an entire segment of the history of art in the twentieth century.

This Darwinian vision of pictorial modernism can be seen quite clearly in the writings of one of the great theorists of twentieth-century art, Clement Greenberg. It is organized around a radical vision, whose fundamental principle is self-purification. It is on the basis of this quest for "pure opticality" that the New York critic is able to develop a coherent historical narrative of artistic development, equipped with both an origin and an end. Painting progresses toward its specification as a medium, eliminating whatever is not inseparable from and necessary to it. The law of modernism, Greenberg writes, implies that "the conventions not essential to the viability of a medium be discarded as soon as they are recognized."²⁹ In this narrative, the root is both a mythical origin as well as an ideal goal.

28. THIS ANALOGY BETWEEN RADICALITY AND PATERNALISM HAS NOT BEEN SUFFICIENTLY EXPLORED. THUS, RADICANT THEORY COULD PROVIDE A POWERFUL TOOL FOR AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF FEMINIST PRACTICES SINCE THE 1970S.

29. CLEMENT GREENBERG, "AMERICAN-TYPE' PAINTING," IN CLEMENT GREENBERG, *ART AND CULTURE: CRITICAL ESSAYS* (BOSTON: BEACON PRESS, 1961), 208.

26. ALAIN BADIOU, *THE CENTURY*, TRANS. ALBERTO TOSCANO (CAMBRIDGE, UK: POLITY PRESS, 2007), 53.

27. *IBID.*, 55.

Although they are situated at the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of their aesthetic assumptions, the theses of the Situationist International are based on a similar radicality. Between 1957, when it was created at the famous Alba Congress, and 1972, when it was abolished on the orders of Guy Debord, the SI evolved toward an ideological purity that prompted it to eliminate from its ranks, first, all professional artists, and then all members suspected of an accommodating attitude toward artistic activity. The radicalism of the SI harks back to that mythical moment when the division of labor was first introduced into the city. Art as an autonomous practice must be abolished and dissolved into lived situations independent of all professional fields or specific techniques. The "root" of Situationism goes back to the historical period in which art was not yet a separate activity, distinct from other forms of human labor. This rootedness in the past also explains the nostalgic tone of many of its productions, especially the films of Guy Debord, which abound in references to the Middle Ages, particularly François Villon, and the seventeenth century in France, from Cardinal de Retz to Bossuet. Roots, roots...

At the core of postmodern discourse is precisely the effort to undermine radicality and all forms of partisan aesthetic anchoring. From the vogue for *simulationist* art in the 1980s (a simulacrum is a signifier without a signified, a floating sign) to the current exaltation of those identities made of signs, reduced to pure exchange values in the marketplace of exoticisms, all radicality seems to have vanished from art. And if the term is still used to describe certain recent works, it must be confessed that this is the dual effect of laziness and nostalgia. For there can be no true radicality without an urgent desire for a new beginning, nor without a gesture of purification that assumes the status of a program. Formal violence, a certain aesthetic brutality, or simply a refusal to compromise are not enough. Missing are the passion for subtraction and the proselytizing impulse: modernist radicality is binding on everyone, and everyone must embrace it or be consigned

to the camp of the tepid and the collaborators with tradition. Radicality is never lonely. Radical modernism could not have existed without the phenomenon of identification between the artist and the proletarian, regarded as the driving force of history—an extension of Karl Marx's call for a return to the origins of social labor, that is, to a precapitalist condition (supplemented by the notion of collective ownership) of the system of production. The transformation of capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century, followed by its undisputed dominance in the present form of globalization, have completed a process of uprooting that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is actually its project: the capitalist machine replaces local codes with flows of capital, delocalizes the imagination, and turns individuals into labor power. It strives, in the final analysis, to produce an abstract painting.

Thus, aesthetic postmodernism is distinguished by the creation of an imaginary universe of flotation and fluidity that reflects this vast process of detritorialization by means of which capitalism accomplishes its goals. Beginning in the late 1970s—with the emergence of artistic practices no longer linked to the idea of radical social change, and in particular with the return of a citational brand of painting that indiscriminately borrowed its forms from various iconographic traditions and historical styles—we start to see signs of a liquid conception of culture, to use a term coined by Zygmunt Bauman.³⁰ The materials of art history turn out to be freely available, deployable as mere signs, as if they had been sapped of their vitality by being cut off from the ideological significations that justified their appearance at a particular moment in history and constituted responses to specific situations. When cited by postmodern artists, the works of Joseph Beuys or Piet Mondrian become empty forms, their meaning replaced by style, by an eclecticism that amounts to reading only the titles of books and to viewing

30. ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *LIQUID LIFE* (CAMBRIDGE, UK: POLITY PRESS, 2005).

forms as mere fashion choices. "What is at stake in this caricature of the humanist dream (the atemporal availability of all cultures, past or foreign)," writes Yve-Alain Bois, "is not so much the homogenization of high and low culture that was feared by Greenberg and Adorno as above all the 'antiquarian' devitalization of history, which is henceforth transformed into mere merchandise."³¹ And the merchandise that art produces is style. Style, defined as a collection of visual identifying marks that are infinitely manipulable: Piet Mondrian reduced to a motif, Joseph Beuys without the revolution...

If the postmodern aesthetic is born of the extinction of political radicalism, it should not be forgotten that it gathered force in the early 1980s, at the very moment when cultural and media production were entering a period of exponential expansion. It is the great cluttering of our era, which is reflected in the chaotic proliferation of cultural products, images, media, and commentaries, and which has destroyed the very possibility of a *tabula rasa*. Overloaded with signs, buried under a mass of works that is constantly expanding, we no longer have even an imaginary form or concept with which to conceive of a new beginning, much less a rational alternative to the environments in which we live. Thus, the end of modernism coincides with the tacit acceptance of clutter as a way of life among things. According to Jean-François Lyotard, postmodernity is distinguished by the fact that "architecture finds itself condemned to undertake a series of minor modifications in a space inherited from modernity, condemned to abandon a global reconstruction of the space of human habitation."³² While the Futurists called for Venice to be razed, it is henceforth a matter of exploring its lanes and bridges. Beginning in the early 1980s,

the problem of clutter is reflected by the heavy presence of images of ruins and debris in theoretical writings and artistic practices. The modernist edifice has crumbled and collapsed, and its signs are floating and adrift, since they are no longer anchored by the weight of history.

In 1980, in a text entitled *The Allegorical Impulse*, Craig Owens describes this fragmentation as the basis of an allegorical language, in contrast to a modernism distinguished by its symbolism.³³ He associates this allegorical language with the "decentering" of language identified by Jacques Derrida as a key figure of postmodernity. Signs are no longer anything more than cultural referents, no longer linked to a reality. It is the decayed ruins of history that, according to Owens, appear in postmodern artworks in the early 1980s. Benjamin Buchloh is not so far removed from this view when he evokes, at the same time, artistic strategies of "fragmentation and dialectical juxtaposition of fragments, and separation of signifier and signified."³⁴

The emergence of China, India, and the great countries of Asia and Eastern Europe onto the international scene at the beginning of this century marks the advent of a new era for the economy as well as for the global imagination. Shanghai is rebuilding on the *tabula rasa* principle, but without any ideology to underpin this great leap forward besides that of profit. Thus, modernism reappears in the ghostly guise of progress, which is here assimilated to economic growth. And the Western world looks on with fascination as China eradicates its history without, however, invoking a radicality of any kind, but simply in order to better drift with the powerful currents of the globalized economy.

31 YVE-ALAIN BOIS, "HISTORISATION OU INTENTION: LE RETOUR D'UN VIEUX DÉBAT," IN "APRÈS LE MODERNISME," *LES CAHIERS DU MUSÉE NATIONAL D'ART MODERNE*, NO. 22 (DECEMBER 1987).

32 JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD, *THE POSTMODERN EXPLAINED TO CHILDREN*, TRANS. DON BARRY ET AL. (SYDNEY: POWER PUBLICATIONS, 1992), 89.

33 CRAIG OWENS, "THE ALLEGORICAL IMPULSE: TOWARD A THEORY OF POSTMODERNISM" [1980], IN *ART AFTER MODERNISM: RETHINKING REPRESENTATION*, ED. BRIAN WALLIS (BOSTON: GODINE, 1984).

34 BENJAMIN BUCHLOH, "ALLEGORICAL PROCEDURES: APPROPRIATION AND MONTAGE IN CONTEMPORARY ART," *ARTFORUM* (SEPTEMBER 1982): 44.

But what, then, has become of the root, the modernist twentieth century's obsession? At one and the same time origin and regulating principle of an organism's growth, identitarian factor and formal template, affiliation and destiny, the root, paradoxically, becomes the very core of the imaginary universe of globalization at the very moment when its living reality is fading in favor of its symbolic value and artificial character. On the one hand, it is invoked as a principle of assignment and discrimination in reaction to this very process of globalization. Racism and traditionalist ideologies, the exclusion of the other, develop in its name. On the other hand, we see a proliferation of measures that aim at standardization, at effacing the old identities and historical singularities in the name of a necessary uprooting. If for modernism, the "return to the root" meant the possibility of a radical new beginning and the desire for a new humanity, for the postmodern individual it no longer represents anything but the assignment of an identity. That identity may be rejected or mythologized, but in either case it functions as a natural framework. By what connections are individuals bound to their social and political environment? The debates on immigration express the aggravated form of this question, while nationalism and religious fundamentalism are its disturbing caricatures.

"I was quite happy to feel like [an uprooted person]," Marcel Duchamp confessed at the end of his life, "precisely because I was afraid of being influenced by my roots. I wanted to get away from that. When I was in the USA I had no roots at all because I was born in Europe. So it was easy, I was bathing in a calm sea where I could swim freely; you can't swim freely when you get tangled up in roots."³⁵

While it is not my intention to conflate identitarian enrootedness (which distinguishes between "us" and "the other" while exalting the

³⁵ JEAN ANTOINE, "LIFE IS A GAME, LIFE IS ART," INTERVIEW WITH MARCEL DUCHAMP [SUMMER 1966], TRANS. SUE ROSE, *THE ART NEWSPAPER* (APRIL 1993): 17.

land and filiation) with modernist radicality (which implicates all of humanity in the fantasy of a new beginning), clearly neither one imagines that a subject—whether individual or collective—could be constituted without some kind of anchor, without a fixed point, without moorings. Or by swimming, as the author of the *Sculptures for Traveling* did all his life.

And yet the immigrant, the exile, the tourist, and the urban wanderer are the dominant figures of contemporary culture. To remain within the vocabulary of the vegetable realm, one might say that the individual of these early years of the twenty-first century resembles those plants that do not depend on a single root for their growth but advance in all directions on whatever surfaces present themselves by attaching multiple hooks to them, as ivy does. Ivy belongs to the botanical family of the radicants, which develop their roots as they advance, unlike the radicals, whose development is determined by their being anchored in a particular soil. The stem of couch grass is radican, as are the suckers of the strawberry plant. They grow their secondary roots alongside their primary one. The radican develops in accord with its host soil. It conforms to the latter's twists and turns and adapts to its surfaces and geological features. It translates itself into the terms of the space in which it moves. With its at once dynamic and dialogical signification, the adjective "radican" captures this contemporary subject, caught between the need for a connection with its environment and the forces of uprooting, between globalization and singularity, between identity and opening to the other. It defines the subject as an object of negotiation.

Contemporary art provides new models for this individual who is constantly putting down new roots, for it constitutes a laboratory of identities. Thus, today's artists do not so much express the tradition from which they come as the path they take between that tradition and the various contexts they traverse, and they do this by performing

acts of translation. Where modernism proceeded by subtraction in an effort to unearth the root, or principle, contemporary artists proceed by selection, additions, and then acts of multiplication. They do not seek an ideal state of the self or society. Instead, they organize signs in order to multiply one identity by another. Thus, Mike Kelley may tackle his distant Irish origins, or he may just as easily reconstruct a Chinese monument located near his Los Angeles home. The radicant can, without injury, cut itself off from its first roots and reacclimate itself. There is no single origin, but rather successive, simultaneous, or alternating acts of enrooting. While radical artists sought to return to an original place, radicant artists take to the road, and they do so without having any place to return to. Their universe contains neither origin nor end, except for those they decide to establish themselves. One can bring along fragments of identity, provided one transplants them to other soils and accepts the fact of their permanent metamorphosis—a sort of voluntary metempsychosis that prefers the play of successive guises and precarious shelters to incarnations of any kind. Thus, there are fewer points of contact with the soil, for the artists choose these contacts instead of enduring them. They drill down into the ground at a campsite; they stay at the surface of a habitat—it makes little difference. Henceforth, what counts is the ability to acclimate oneself to various contexts and the products (ideas, forms) that are generated by these temporary acculturations.

On the basis of a sociological and historical reality—the era of migratory flows, global nomadism, and the globalization of financial and commercial flows—a style of living and thinking is emerging that allows one to fully inhabit that reality instead of merely enduring it or resisting it by means of inertia. So has global capitalism confiscated flows, speed, and nomadism? Let's be even more mobile than global capitalism. There can be no question of permitting oneself to be backed into a corner and forced to embrace stagnation as an ideal. So the global imagination is dominated by flexibility? Let's invent new meanings for flexibility;

let's inject the long term and extreme slowness into the very heart of speed, instead of confronting it with rigid or nostalgic positions. The force of this emerging style of thought lies in protocols of "setting in motion." It is a matter of elaborating a nomadic type of thought that is organized in terms of circuits and experiments rather than in terms of permanent installations, perpetuation, and built development. Let us confront the increasing precariousness of our experience with a resolutely precarious mode of thought that infiltrates and invades the very networks that stifle and smother us. The fear of mobility, the terror that strikes enlightened public opinion at the mere mention of nomadism and flexibility. Recall the anarchist soldiers of Alfred Jarry: when ordered to turn left, they all turned right. Thus, they always obeyed the dictates of power while openly rebelling against them. These notions aren't bad in themselves, unlike the scenario that commandeers them.

Radicant artists invent pathways among signs. They are semionauts who set forms in motion, using them to generate journeys by which they elaborate themselves as subjects even as the corpus of their work takes shape.³⁶ They carve out fragments of signification, gathering samples and creating herbaria of forms. Today, on the contrary, it is the gesture of returning to principles that would seem strange. Painting and sculpture are no longer regarded as entities whose elements it would be sufficient simply to explore (unless one merely considered historical segments of these "origins"). Thus, radicant art implies the end of the medium-specific, the abandonment of any tendency to exclude certain fields from the realm of art. For modernist radicality, the goal was the death of artistic activity as such, the transcendence of that activity toward an "end of art" imagined as a historical horizon in

36 SEMIONAUT: FROM SEMIOS (SIGN) AND NAUTOS (NAVIGATION). SEE THE AUTHOR'S *FORMES DE VIE: L'ART MODERNE ET L'INVENTION DE SOI* (PARIS: ÉDITIONS DENOËL, 1999) AND ALSO *POSTPRODUCTION: CULTURE AS SCREENPLAY. HOW ART REPROGRAMS THE WORLD*, TRANS. JEANINE HERMAN (NEW YORK: LUKAS & STERNBERG, 2002).

which art would dissolve into everyday life—the mythical transcendence of art. Altermodern radicantity is a stranger to such figures of dissolution. Its own spontaneous movement would be to transplant art to heterogeneous territories, to confront it with all available formats. Nothing could be more alien to it than a mode of thought based on disciplines, on the specificity of the medium—a sedentary notion if ever there was one, and one that amounts to cultivating one's field.

Translation is in essence an act of displacement. It causes the meaning of a text to move from one linguistic form to another and puts the associated tremors on display. Transporting the object of which it lays hold, it goes forth to meet the other and presents him with the foreign in a familiar form: *I bring you something that was said in a different language from your own...* The radican is a mode of thought based on translation: precarious enrooting entails coming into contact with a host soil, a *terra incognita*. Thus, every point of contact that goes to make up the radican line represents an effort of translation. Art, from this perspective, is not defined as an essence to be perpetuated (in the form of a closed and self-contained disciplinary category) but rather as a gaseous substance capable of filling up the most disparate human activities before once again solidifying in the form that makes it visible as such: the work. The adjective "gaseous" is only frightening for those who see art as identical with its regime of institutional visibility.³⁷ Just like the word "immaterial," it is only pejorative for those who don't know how to see.

The tree's historicity, verticality, and enrootedness were also the foil for the image of the rhizome, which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari developed in their essay *A Thousand Plateaus*. It is an image that was popularized in the 1990s by the emergence of the Internet, for

37 YVES MICHAUD, *L'ART À L'ÉTAT GAZEUX. ESSAI SUR LE TRIOMPHE DE L'ESTHÉTIQUE* (PARIS: ÉDITIONS STOCK, 2003).

which it provides an ideal metaphor with its fluid and non-hierarchical structure and its status as a web of interconnected significations. "Any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order."³⁸ The radicality of the tree, the multiple simultaneity of the rhizome: what is the specific character of the radican in relation to these other two models of the growth of living things? Above all, unlike the rhizome, which is defined as a multiplicity that brackets out the question of the subject from the beginning, the radican takes the form of a trajectory or path; the advance of a singular subject. "A multiplicity," explain Deleuze and Guattari, "has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions."³⁹ The radican, by contrast, implies a subject, but one that is not reducible to a stable, closed, and self-contained identity. It exists exclusively in the dynamic form of its wandering and the contours of the circuit it describes, which are its two modes of visibility. In other words, it is movement that ultimately permits the formation of an identity. By contrast, the concept of the rhizome implies the notion of a subjectification by capture, connection, and opening to the outside. When a wasp pollinates an orchid, a new subjective territory is created by means of branching, and this territory transcends both the animal and vegetable realms.

The figure of the subject defined by the radican resembles that advanced by queer theory, which views the self as constructed out of borrowings, citations, and proximities, hence as pure constructivism. The radican differs from the rhizome in its emphasis on the itinerary, the path, as a dialogical or intersubjective narrative that unfolds between the subject and the surfaces it traverses, to which it attaches

38 GILLES DELEUZE AND FÉLIX GUATTARI, *A THOUSAND PLATEAUS: CAPITALISM AND SCHIZOPHRENIA* [1980], TRANS. BRIAN MASSUMI (MINNEAPOLIS, MN: UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, 1987), 7.

39 *IBID.*, 9.

its roots to produce what might be termed an installation: one "installs oneself" in a place or situation in a makeshift or precarious way, and the subject's identity is nothing but the temporary result of this encampment, during which acts of translation are performed. Translation of a path into the local language, translation of oneself into a milieu—translation in both directions. Thus, the radigrant subject /appears as a construction or montage, in other words, as a work born of endless negotiation.

All of which raises a crucial question: can we really free ourselves from our roots? That is, can we achieve a position in which we would no longer be dependent on the cultural determinisms, the visual and mental reflexes of the social group in which we were born, the forms and ways of life that are etched in our memories? Nothing could be less certain. Cultural determinisms leave a powerful stamp on us. We experience them by turns as a nature we are unable to shed, a set of programs we must realize if we wish to become full-fledged members of a community, and values and signs that give worth to our singularity. But must we forget where we come from just because we aspire to travel? Radigrant thought is not a defense of voluntary amnesia but of relativism, unsubscription, and departure. Its true adversaries are neither tradition nor local cultures, but confinement within readymade cultural schemata—when habits become forms—and enrootedness, as soon as it becomes a rhetoric of identity. It is not a matter of rejecting one's heritage but rather of learning to squander it, of plotting the line along which one will then carry this baggage in order to scatter and invest its contents. In aesthetic terms, the radigrant implies a nomadic bias, whose most fundamental characteristic would be the tendency to inhabit preexisting structures, a willingness to be the tenant of existing forms, even if that means modifying them more or less extensively.⁴⁰ It can also mean wandering a calculated path by which the artist

refuses to become a member of any fixed space-time continuum, refuses to be assigned to any identifiable and irrevocable aesthetic family.

In any case, the subject of globalization is evolving in an era that favors elective and individual diasporas and encourages voluntary or forced immigration. It shatters our very notion of space. In our imaginary universe of dwelling, sedentariness is no longer one option among others. As heralds of this transformation, contemporary artists have recognized that it is just as possible to reside in a circuit as in a stable space, just as possible to construct an identity in motion as through fertilization, and that geography is always also psychogeography. Thus, it is possible to dwell in a movement of round trips between various spaces. Airports, cars, and railroad stations become the new metaphors for the house, just as walking and airplane travel become new modes of drawing. The radigrant is the quintessential inhabitant of this imaginary universe of spatial precariousness, a practitioner of the unsticking of affiliations. He thus responds—without confusing himself with them—to the living conditions directly or indirectly brought about by globalization.

It is, above all, our modes of representation that are called into question by globalization. More precisely, globalization is the locus of a complete and total shattering of the relations between representation and abstraction. For it is precisely at the level of the representation of the world that modernism is linked to the capitalist machine—on the plane where our general image of the world is produced, and then the various images created by artists, which may echo, confirm, or invalidate that general image. As the propagating agent of an abstract virus (a "deterritorializing" one, to use a Deleuzian term), globalization substitutes its logos, organization charts, formulas, and recordings for local singularities. Coca-Cola is a logo without a location; by contrast, every bottle of Château Eyquem contains a history based on a particular

40 I DEVELOP A TYPOLOGY OF THIS MODE OF PRODUCTION IN *POSTPRODUCTION* (NOTE 36).

territory. That history, however, turns out to be mobile; it comes with the bottle, which is a portable sample of the region. The moment human groups lose all living contact with representation is the abstract moment by which capitalism consolidates its holdings. Thus, globalization carries with it an implicit iconographic project that seeks to replace the representation of lived space-time with an entire apparatus of abstractions, whose function is twofold. First, these abstractions disguise the forced standardization of the world in generic images, like the fence around a construction site. Second, they legitimate this process by imposing against indigenous imaginations an abstract imaginary register that places the historical repertoire of modernist abstraction in the service of an ersatz universalism tinged with "respect for cultures."

But isn't the act of unsticking oneself from one's territory in this manner—freeing oneself from the weight of national traditions—the means to combat that symbolic house arrest that I criticized above? It is necessary to distinguish between the process of setting identities in motion in the context of a nomadic project, and a flexible type of citizenship based on the needs of capital and steeped in a culture unconnected with any soil. On the one hand, we have the creation of a relationship between the subject and the singular territories it traverses; on the other, the industrial production of screen images that make it possible to separate individuals and groups from their environment, to prevent the formation of any vital relationship with a particular place. When the Colombian and Russian miners employed by a Swiss multinational, Glencore, are laid off as a result of moves to new, more profitable locations, what image of power are they confronted with? An abstract one. Interchangeable employees, an unrepresentable power, the administration of an unlocalizable empire. The new powers have no location. They manifest themselves in time. Coca-Cola's power is based on the repetition of its name by advertising, which is the new architecture of power. How can the Bastille be stormed if it is protean and invisible? The political function of contemporary art lies

in this confrontation with a reality that slips away in order to appear in the form of logos and unrepresentable entities—flows, movements of capital, the repetition and distribution of information; so many generic images that seek to escape any visualization not controlled by public relations. The role of art is to become the radar screen on which these furtive forms—spotted and embodied—can finally appear and be named or represented.

The paintings of Sarah Morris represent the sites of power—whether it be the headquarters of a multinational corporation or Chinese urbanism—with the aid of a formal vocabulary borrowed from Minimal art. They bear witness to a renewed relationship between representation and abstraction, a phenomenon that can also be seen in the paintings of Julie Mehretu and Franz Ackermann. Faced with a reality that cannot be grasped by representational pictorial means, the abstract, diagrammatic, statistical, and infographic lexica allow us to cause the furtive forms of command and the structure of our political reality to appear. When Liam Gillick breaks the space of a factory into a series of Minimalist sculptures linked to a narrative, he superimposes the singular on the plural and abstract. When Nathan Coley models all of the religious structures in Edinburgh, he causes the specific history of a city to appear in a blinding image (*The Lamp of Sacrifice*, 2004). When Gerard Byrne reconstructs interviews from the press, with actors in the roles of the interviewed public figures and celebrities, he brings fragments of our history back to life by embodying them. When Kirsten Pieroth explores the biography of Thomas Edison, she personifies something that over time has become an abstract entity. To take abstraction, which has become an ideological instrument, and draw it onto the side of singularity in this way is a plastic operation that possesses a powerful political potential. If the codes of the dominant representation of the world are based in abstraction, that is because abstraction is the very language of inevitability. By presenting the actions of groups and individuals in the guise of a meteorology,

the powers that be are able to perpetuate a system of domination. Thus, the blank spaces that dot the satellite maps of Google Earth correspond to strategic, military, and industrial interests. The function of art is to fill them in through the free play of narrative and diagrams, by using the appropriate tools of representation. The derealizing type of abstraction can only be combated with a different type of abstraction that makes visible what is concealed by the official cartographies and authorized representations.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, modernity in painting meant the conquest of its autonomy *vis-à-vis* ideological determinations, the valorization of form as possessing a value independent of resemblance and the represented subject, which were the basis of painting's exchange value at the time. This autonomy also involved an implicit categorical imperative: life and the artwork communicate, and they do so through channels chosen by the artist. For its part, contemporary altermodernity is born amid the cultural chaos of globalization and the commodification of the world. Hence it must conquer its autonomy *vis-à-vis* the various modes of identitarian assignment and resist the standardization of the imagination by producing circuits and modes of exchange among signs, forms, and lifestyles.

VICTOR SEGALÉN AND THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CREOLE

After all, why should cultural diversity be preferable to the sharing of a single culture common to all peoples? Hasn't globalization, through American economic power, generated a culture accessible to all, thereby realizing the modernist dream of a united humanity? Andy Warhol brilliantly encapsulated this dream: "the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too."⁴¹ With Pop Art, in the 1960s, there emerges the image of the *serial*

individual, in synch with the evolution of social production. The material elements that make up his environment are now factory-produced and available all over the planet. Inseparable from this process of industrialization, twentieth-century abstract painting was established as a common language, an Esperanto capable of being read in the same way in New York as in Delhi or Bogotá, reflecting the advance of "progress" and a new production environment.

László Moholy-Nagy was the first, in the 1930s, to produce works via telephone. Thirty years later, Conceptual art brought this mode of production into widespread use. Lawrence Weiner, for example, puts forth verbal proposals that can be executed (or not) by their buyer, exhibited as formulas, scores, or recipes. These two artists, thirty years apart, employ the same manufacturing principle as Nike shoes or Coke: the parameters of their works are rationalized, and so precisely codified that they can be manufactured by anyone, anywhere in the world. But beyond the strong critical dimension of Weiner's work, artistic projects of this type assumed a very different meaning in an epoch in which art had everything to gain by playing mechanization against the ideology of pictorial expertise, a pillar of cultural conservatism. Times have changed, as has the nature of the enemy and the guise in which this enemy exercises its domination. For twentieth-century modernism, in its effort to combat academic tradition, gladly wielded weapons supplied by industry. The artistic modernity of the last century took on the task of struggling on both fronts at once. On the one hand, Seurat adapted the procedures of industry to the composition of paintings: his scientific pointillism introduced the possibility of an art reproducible from a distance, in which the hand would be reduced to the status of a machine executing a preconceived program. On the other hand, Manet and Pissarro, in a gesture of resistance to the process of industrialization, asserted the presence of the hand in painting by emphasizing the brushstroke.

41 ANDY WARHOL, *THE PHILOSOPHY OF ANDY WARHOL (FROM A TO B AND BACK AGAIN)* (N.P.: HARVEST BOOKS, 1977), 100-01.

This struggle, which was that of the moderns, seems more topical than ever, for the vise formed by traditionalism and standardization is more powerful today than ever before. And yet the conceptual materials that would enable us to loosen this stranglehold must be sought within modernity itself, which problematized colonization at its apogee, nascent industrialization, and the uprooting of tradition in the name of progress. These issues are explored in an unfinished book, consisting of different versions and preparatory notes spanning the fifteen years between 1904 and 1918: *Essay on Exoticism*, by Victor Segalen.

Through this work, the Symbolist-inspired young poet aspired to theorize an experience still not at all common in his day. Segalen had embarked for Polynesia as a navy medical officer and arrived in the Marquesas Islands in 1903, a little too late to meet Paul Gauguin, who had just died, but on whose easel he found—not yet dry, according to legend—*Breton Village in Snow*. Segalen wrote an admirable text, “Gauguin in his Final Setting,” about his visit to the Hiva Oa studio. Inspired by the experience of the painter, whose work in itself constituted a tribute to the so-called savages who inhabited these islands and whose modest journal, *The Smile*, spoke out against the colonial administration, Segalen became a defender of the natives. Discovering the Maori civilization at a moment when the process of its extinction was already well underway, he threw himself into the project of becoming its living dictionary. Thus, in 1907 he published a strange book of stories, *A Lapse of Memory*, which portrays the culture of a people debilitated by colonization. From that time forward, Segalen traveled incessantly. Upon returning to Paris, he studied Chinese and decided to participate in an archaeological mission to the “middle kingdom,” where he was to make long and frequent stays. His capacity for empathy is such that among some Chinese readers, *Stèles*, published in 1912, passes today as a book belonging to their own literary corpus—written in French but on a Chinese wavelength. As if Segalen, infinitely malleable, had acquired the power to connect

his nervous system to cultural spheres as remote as possible from his own, in order to extract from them materials as unmediated as possible by the filter of his European frame of thought.

Over the years, Victor Segalen sought to theorize this relation to the other, this experience of diversity, in the book that he envisaged as his greatest work, but whose fragments were published only after his death under the title *Essay on Exoticism*. The title is ironic: nothing is more foreign to him than what was then commonly called exoticism, with its parade of clichés, which he enumerates with disgust: “palm tree and camel; tropical helmet; black skins and yellow sun.”⁴² On the contrary, Segalen’s point of departure is acknowledgement of the harm done by Western colonization, a position all the more courageous for being still extremely rare at the dawn of the twentieth century, at the height of the so-called civilizing missions conducted by European powers. It is truly an aesthetics of diversity that Segalen means to write, a defense of heterogeneity, of the value of the plurality of worlds, a plurality menaced by the civilizing machine of the West. One of the most surprising facets of this literary project is its precocious diagnosis of the colonial wound and the irremediable harm to be wrought by the westernization of the world. Segalen travels; he reports from the field. He knows that he is moving among images, discourses, and gestures that will soon disappear, but he does not exempt himself, though merely a tourist, from the terrible observations he inventories: in describing these ecosystems devastated by missionaries and military might. A century later, one cannot but admire the contemporary relevance of his thought, which declares that the source and driving energy of all beauty is difference, yet never lapses into idealization of the other. Segalen defines the “sensation of Exoticism” as “the notion of difference, the perception of Diversity, the knowledge that something

42 VICTOR SEGALEN, *ESSAY ON EXOTICISM: AN AESTHETICS OF DIVERSITY*, TRANS. AND ED. YAËL RACHEL SCHUCK (DURHAM, NC: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2002), 18.

is other than one's self."⁴³ Exoticism is "the feeling which Diversity stirs in us," indeed the very "manifestation of Diversity."⁴⁴ Thus, above all other faculties he esteems the capacity to accept the impenetrable, the incomprehensible, the unreadable, in the form of a "keen and immediate perception."⁴⁵

As seen by Delacroix, the Maghreb (North Africa) appeared as a source of exploitable exotic figures: harems, souks, hetaerae, and caliphs supplied him with raw material to add to the historic and literary scenes that had thus far constituted his iconographic repertoire. Paul Gauguin, Segalen's alter ego, did not exploit the cultural context in which he settled; he translated it. One of his masterpieces, the monumental *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897–1898), does not import indigenous motifs into Western painting, but rather tries to treat pictorially his encounter with Polynesian territory. It does so, first of all, by breaking with the temporal linearity that is dominant in the Western pictorial system: according to a convention that was quite tenacious until the twentieth century, a painting is read like a text, the past represented on the left and the future to the right. If at first sight Gauguin's work appears related to the tradition of the "ages of life," closer observation shows that the painter explodes the rules of classical composition, placing the infant on the right side of the painting, an old woman in the lower left, and in the center, in the foreground, an enigmatic worshipper. *Where Do We Come From...* reveals a universe with neither an origin nor a predetermined end: it is an anti-Christian, anti-eschatological manifesto, setting natural harmony against rational discourses, permanent mystery against allegory, and the immemorial against the linearity of progress. It is not a matter of fading into the landscape one is traversing or of

fusing with the other, which would constitute a new source of deceit and hypocrisy: the "feeling of diversity," Segalen writes, implies the need "to espouse a position." Not hybridization: if the book encourages us to seek to understand foreign cultures, it is so as to better appreciate what establishes our own difference. One cannot become Chinese, but one can attain the ability to articulate Chinese thought; one cannot claim as empathy what is merely a tourist's clear conscience, but one can translate. Translation thus appears as the cornerstone of diversity, as the central ethical act of the "born traveler," capable of perceiving diversity in all its intensity. Segalen gives this figure a name, the *exote*: one who manages to return to himself after having undergone the experience of diversity. It is crucial to recognize the rigor of Segalen's theoretical circumspection; it distinguishes his perspective from that of the adventurers of his day, who were typically caught up in romantic identification with the peoples they rubbed elbows with (as was writer-adventurer T. E. Lawrence), but also from the gaze of the missionary coldly observing the tribal peoples among whom fate has cast him, and from the approach of the ethnologist collecting data among indigenous individuals whom he regards as organisms to be observed. Segalen insists on defining himself as an object alien to the societies he encounters: "While experiencing China profoundly, I have never had the desire to be Chinese. While I have felt the force of the Vedic dawn, I have never really regretted not being born three thousand years earlier and a herdsman. Take off from the real, from what is, from what one is."⁴⁶ When a European spends time in Polynesia or in China, two realities are pitted against each other without, however, canceling each other out, for both participate in the same space-time continuum: the *exote* and the exotic coproduce diversity by elaborating, through negotiation, a relational object in which neither of the two parties is effaced. In these early years of the twenty-first century, contemporary theory encourages us to ponder Segalen's lesson and to ask: is the way in which post-

43 *IBID.*, 19.

44 *IBID.*, 47, 66.

45 *IBID.*, 21.

46 *IBID.*, 49.

colonial thinkers envisage the other, in the often simplistic form of the globalized proletariat, nothing more than the compassionate flip side of colonization?

Serge Daney, one of the most important film theorists of the twentieth century, based his critical work on the idea that putting oneself in the place of the other is both a moral error and an aesthetic crime. To designate this new regime of the image—one in which, according to Daney, the demands of communication (to produce an aesthetically efficacious image) have prevailed over cinematic priorities (to construct a sequence shot)—Daney uses the term “visual,” defined as the “sum of substitute images” that are used in order to avoid showing recorded reality. Daney expanded upon this argument at the time of the first Gulf War, in 1991, when television broadcasters around the world continuously replayed a multitude of stock images instead of images of actual combat.⁴⁷ No images of dead Americans, of bombed Iraqi civilians or devastated cities. Television viewers had to content themselves with images of military technology and statements by official spokespeople: the visual against the image; communication which dictates, against the documentary, which translates. In film, the ethical imperative that Daney advocates takes the form of the “shot / reverse shot,” which conveys the possibility of an opposing point of view. Moreover, this figure could be seen as a definition of the aesthetic of diversity sketched by Segalen: the coexistence of points of view within a multifocal space in which each framing is modified by the one that precedes or follows it. Serge Daney recalled that when traveling, he never took photographs, which he considered acts of predation; instead, he would buy postcards, which viewed the territory through the eyes of the inhabitants themselves. This predilection for postcards raises the question of the origin of the image and the role of that origin in constituting its meaning. Diversity is an aesthetics of the origin,

but it underscores that origin only the better to relativize it, presenting it as a simple point on a flickering, moving line. Not freezing the image, but always inserting it in a chain: thus could one summarize a radican aesthetic.

This “opposing point of view” is that of the other. But don’t the very terms in which this goodwill is expressed—other, otherness—represent a blind spot of the West? Aren’t they a natural counterpart of postmodern identitarian thought? In the domain of culture, there is no such thing as otherness, for otherness presupposes an “I,” a speaker who would be the measure of what is other. Postmodern cartography, though rewritten in accord with the critique of modernist universalism, always presupposes a North on the basis of which the postcolonial subject is constructed. By thus positing a priori a dialogue between the colonial West and its periphery, it perpetuates the terms of the identitarian discourse by reaffirming their validity.

Segalen’s theorem is based on an entirely different principle: there is no other; rather, there are other places, *elsewheres*, none of which is original, still less a standard for comparison. The fundamental requirement of an ethics of diversity is to travel in order to get back to oneself, to start off “from the real, from what is, from what one is,” that is to say, the context where happenstance caused you to be born, a context whose value is not absolute but circumstantial.⁴⁸ Segalen’s topic anticipates Bruno Latour’s fundamental idea, that of the need for a “symmetrical anthropology” in which Western society would not benefit from any implicit privilege, as is still the case in the “incomplete relativism” that permeates postmodern thought. The notion of otherness is questionable because it postulates a common ground, which needless to say is Western. This common ground, Latour explains, is precisely modernist universalism, a cultural wolf disguised as a post-

47 SERGE DANEY, *DEVANT LA RECRUESCENCE DES VOLS DE SACS À MAIN* (LYON: ALÉAS, 1991), 187.

48 SEGALÉN, *ESSAY ON EXOTICISM* (NOTE 42), 49.

modern sheep: "thus, until very recently, the entire planet—including the Chinese, of course—was subsumed under the heading of 'cultures' against the background of an immutable 'nature.'"⁴⁹ And yet this "nature" was defined by Westerners as an objective dimension of the world, to which subjects are exterior. This system, Latour adds, makes it possible to classify all cultures in the anthropological museum except our own, for ours plays the role of nature, of the benchmark against which to measure otherness. Latour's thesis is that this implicit great divide between the West and the "others" passes through the intermediary of science, which is born of a desire to model the world mathematically, a desire that implies a radical separation between nature and culture, science and society.

As Segalen saw it, colonization initiated a movement to standardize space-time continuums. At the time, it was a matter of struggling to open trade routes and develop contacts. Global current events prove his point: everywhere, individuals are under house arrest, travel is strictly controlled, and paths of migration are under police surveillance, while merchandise freely circulates in a hyperspace smoothed by the globalized economy. Money, that "general abstract equivalent" (according to Karl Marx's definition), has established a protected zone that contrasts ever more sharply with a political world plagued by incessant problems of translation. Monetary conversion, the transformation of each sign into a market value, represents the exact inverse of this effort of translation. The latter is based on loss—one always loses something in translation—but also on recognition of singularity—one chooses to translate only that which appears unique, outstanding, leaving to software the trouble of converting operating instructions for household appliances into words. Translation is a kind of pass: a deliberate, intentional act that begins with the designation

of a singular object and continues with the desire to share this singular object with others.

"I cannot deny that there exists an exoticism of countries and races," writes Segalen, "an exoticism of climates, of fauna and flora; an exoticism that is subject to geography, to the position in latitude and longitude. It is this exoticism, specifically, which is most obvious and which imposed its name, giving to man, who was too inclined to consider himself as identical to himself at the beginning of his terrestrial adventure, the conception of other worlds than his own."⁵⁰ Exoticism is thus to be understood as a paradigm: there is an exoticism of history (whose elsewhere would be "bygone days"), one for nature (whose furthest extreme would be the inhuman), for time (whose far point would be science fiction), and especially for individuals. Segalen thus appropriates the formula of Rabelais, who was long ago fascinated by "that other world that is Man." However, his argument in favor of diversity does not reside in a vague humanism, still less in an ideology of preservation that would make his stance akin to contemporary "animal humanism." On the contrary, his plea is materialist, and above all *energetic*. Following the intellectual fashion of his day, he saw it as a matter of thermodynamics: "The exotic Tension of the World is decreasing," he cautions. Further on he adds: "Diversity is in decline. Therein lies the great earthly threat. It is therefore against this decay that we must fight, fight amongst ourselves—perhaps die with beauty." For "exoticism, a source of energy—mental, aesthetic, or physical ... is on the wane."⁵¹ For Segalen, this global form of decay is none other than entropy: the multitude is a source of energy, it kindles ideas and forms, works to produce shocks, friction; just as flints produce fire when struck against each other. The multitude of points of view and ways of doing things represents for him the

49 BRUNO LATOUR, *NOUS N'AVONS JAMAIS ÉTÉ MODERNES. ESSAI D'ANTHROPOLOGIE SYMÉTRIQUE* (PARIS: LA DÉCOUVERTE, 1991).

50 SEGALÉN, *ESSAY ON EXOTICISM* (NOTE 42), 68.

51 *IBID.*, 62–63.

very lifeblood of the human spirit, which would become sluggish and uniform were a platform common to all human communities to prevail, in what would amount to a slow movement toward the "Kingdom of the Lukewarm."⁵² Is this realm in fact our own?

Diversity, insists the author of *Steles*, is thus "the source of all energy."⁵³ But he knows that, if singularities generate exotic energy, they are soon to be exhausted under the onslaught of westernization. And yet it is from the possibility of these singularities coexisting, from their jostling together, from their blending, that art, literature, and all forms of culture are born. To westernize the Chinese or the Polynesians is to starve or mutilate so many versions of human life, to doom so many universes. Which, let us repeat, by no means prevents the Chinese, Polynesians, or British from uprooting themselves from their ecosystem to traverse other cultures and plant their seeds in other soils. Segalen gives a precise and suggestive definition of this cultural entropy: "it is the sum of all internal, nondifferentiated forces, all static forces, all the lowly forces of energy ... I imagine Entropy as a yet more terrifying monster than Nothingness. Nothingness is made of ice, of the cold. Entropy is lukewarm ... Entropy is pasty. A lukewarm paste."⁵⁴ Diversity represents the contrary forces, those of negative entropy: it produces energy through the friction between heterogeneous materials. Segalen's approach is a kind of mental ecology: it sketches an idea for durable cultural development, and anticipates in culture the image of global warming as a global process of waning vitality.

Segalen does not content himself with bringing into relief "the purity and intensity of diversity"; he also suggests means of resisting its collapse and even a method for generating it. In a passage written on April 12,

1912, entitled "Expertise and the Collection," he praises the archive and the collection, exemplary tools of production for a generalized exoticism: "the conglomeration of objects" helps arouse the sense of difference, producing it as value. "Every series, every gradation, every comparison engenders variety, diversity."⁵⁵ And "the finer the Difference, the more difficult it is to discern, the greater the awakening and stimulation of the feeling for Diversity."⁵⁶ One might intuitively suppose that a collection serves to classify, reify, stiffen, petrify. Segalen sees in it the opposite: the gathering of the nearly-alike in the context of a series has the effect of establishing rarity, or singularity, as distinctive signs of art. One could compare these fragments to the texts that Walter Benjamin would later devote to the subject of his library and his collections.⁵⁷

Segalen's interest in the archive assumes new meaning today, given the numerous works of art produced since the 1960s that have been constructed on the principle of the collection, from Christian Boltanski's museum showcases filled with trifling mementos to the shelves on which Haim Steinbach juxtaposes mass-produced objects or antiquities. What emerges from these heterogeneous approaches, beyond the boost they give to the idea of autobiography and beyond the archival compulsion, is implicit praise of rarity: in an increasingly standardized world, rarity is all the more noteworthy as an instance of breaking free from the general condition of seriality. Thus, in the works of Kelley Walker, mechanical or digital reproduction becomes an infinitely adjustable mechanism for producing the nearly-alike. This is also the case when Carsten Höller divides one of his exhibitions

52 *IBID.*, 57.

53 *IBID.*, 64.

54 *IBID.*, 48.

55 *IBID.*, 61.

56 *IBID.*

57 WALTER BENJAMIN, "UNPACKING MY LIBRARY," IN *WALTER BENJAMIN: SELECTED WRITINGS*, VOLUME 2, PART 2, TRANS. RODNEY LIVINGSTONE ET AL., ED. MICHAEL JENNINGS, HOWARD EILAND, AND GARY SMITH (CAMBRIDGE, MA: HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2005).

into two precisely symmetrical parts, each of whose elements is doubled, from the invitation card to the hanging of the works.⁵⁸ A glowing tribute to mental disorientation, Höller's work tries to reestablish human beings' relationship to their immediate environment on a foundation of doubt by systematically undermining any "natural" relationship to it.

In making novelty the criterion by which to judge works of art, modernism relies on the linearity of its historical narrative, a narrative that is entirely consistent both with its radical ideology of returning to principles and with the West's progressive vision. Precursors, precedence... How are we to define singularity in a world that has become multifocal, where henceforth only technology is supposed to "progress"? Originality does not suffice, even if it constitutes a precondition. Victor Segalen relies on the science of his time, notably on the works of Albert Einstein, to describe a "discontinuous" world in which there ceaselessly emerge "new partitions and unforeseen lacunae, a system of very fine filligree striated through the fields that one initially perceived as an unbroken space."⁵⁹ What is important, he explains, is to break the monotony of uniformity, to work to discover or construct singularities. They need not be spectacular. To perceive these singularities, one need only change perspective and observe the details of a social formation more attentively. Thus, numerous artists who cull a trivial form from daily life or an anecdote from the past are merely applying Segalen's axiom. A "system of very fine filligree," slender grooves or "striae," a sought-after and valued discontinuity: such is the world that the exote Segalen describes as that of diversity. A grain of sand in the manufacturing engine of the global, singularity depends today neither on precious materials nor on the unique hand of the artist, but on the initiation of an aesthetic event, accomplished through an

individual's encounter with forms: through the production of a new fold (to borrow Deleuze's term again), which generates an irregularity in the cultural landscape. Singularity is tied to events, and it opens the way for aftershocks and variants; but it also takes up the thread of modernity, for it always constitutes a rupture, a discontinuity in the smooth landscape of the present.

Smooth, and smoother every day, for globalization entails the neutralization of spaces where such meetings can occur. Indeed, contemporary culture is produced in places that would have made Segalen scream: the São Paulo airport, the shopping malls of Bombay, New York's Chinatown—spaces that seem to be similar all over the world (what sociologist Marc Augé would call "non-places"), within which, however, there unfolds a game of differences, in which imported cultures cohabit and jostle together. This displacement explains the importance assumed, in recent years, by the theme of creolization, as a historical phenomenon, as a formula for blending, and as a mode of thought. Thus, the Caribbean represents an original scaled-down model of the contemporary world: the cultures of deported African slaves and those of the European and Asian expatriates have acclimated themselves on neutral soil, forming an artificial, purely circumstantial cultural mix but one that is generative of singularity. "Creoleness is the *interactional or transactional aggregate* of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history ... Our Creoleness was, therefore, born from this extraordinary 'migan,' wrongly and hastily reduced to its mere linguistic aspects, or to one single element of its composition."⁶⁰

Migan is a Creole dish that, despite the heterogeneity of the ingredients that compose it, possesses a genuine specificity; making it emblematic

58 CARSTEN HÖLLER, *ONE DAY ONE DAY* (FARGFABRIKEN, STOCKHOLM, 2003; MAC MARSEILLE, 2004).

59 SEGALÉN, *ESSAY ON EXOTICISM* (NOTE 42), 57–58.

60 JEAN BERNABÉ, PATRICK CHAMOISEAU, AND RAPHAËL CONFANT, "IN PRAISE OF CREOLENESS,"

CALLALOO 13, NO. 4 (1990): 891–92.

of the process of "becoming minor" of globalized languages: countering obligatory standardization, creolization infinitely ramifies cultural discourses and brews them in a minority crucible, reconstituting them, sometimes unrecognizably, in the form of artifacts henceforth cut off from their origins. Creolization produces objects that express a journey rather than a territory, objects that are the province of both the familiar and the foreign. Thus, in the work of Mike Kelley, parareligious Chinese practices, folk art, and popular culture no longer represent instances of otherness in relation to a dominant culture, but simply elsewhere or other ways, on the same basis as classical Western culture. They are islands of an urban archipelago, which communicate with each other without ever being reduced to the condition of forming a single territory. From this point of view, Mike Kelley's work is elaborated in the non-place of global creolization—in a radigrant space.

This neutralized place is represented by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster as a process of tropicalization. *Park—A Plan for Escape*, presented at the 2002 documenta in Kassel in the middle of the city's immense wooded park, was a space composed of disparate elements from various countries where the artist has spent time (a telephone booth from Rio de Janeiro, roses gathered in India, rock from Mexico); alongside these elements, film excerpts were projected on a modernist-inspired pavilion. Based on an effort to mine lived moments, Gonzalez-Foerster's work responds to the demand for formal translation described by Victor Segalen as "the direct representation of exotic material as conveyed through form."⁶¹ *Park—A Plan for Escape* thus constitutes a radigrant mental space born of a diaspora of signs planted on a chance soil. Her work's affirmation of the primacy of the void (the idea, repeatedly affirmed across installations such as *Brasilia Hall* and *Moment Ginza*, that the work both creates a void around itself and is at the same time built on a void) enables Gonzalez-Foerster

to compose forms by means of encounters: at the heart of this void, cultural phenomena pour forth in parallel to meet in the potential space of the work. Epicurus wrote that the universe was nothing but a rain of atoms before the *clinamen* (spontaneous deviation) caused a pile-up accident, a collision that was the origin of worlds. Before the encounter takes place, the atoms fall like drops of rain, without meeting; their existence, as elements taking part in the encounter, thus proves to be purely abstract. Gonzalez-Foerster's work refers to this vision of the world. It participates in a materialism of signs⁶² that is the substrate of that tropicalism under whose aegis she places her work. The Tropics of art: a space where forms and signs, utterly entangled, grow and develop with astonishing speed, in the void.

"Why Japan?" asks Roland Barthes in introducing his *Empire of Signs*. "The Japanese sign is empty: its signified flees; there is no God, no truth, no morality within these signifiers that reign without compensation. And above all, this sign's superior quality, the nobility of its assertion and the erotic grace of its lines, are attached to everything, the most trivial objects and behaviors, those that we usually dismiss as insignificant or vulgar."⁶³ In other words, the signs that structure Japanese culture stand out against an empty background, in a pure organization of signifiers installed on nothingness. Its forms are mobile and distinct because they are cut off from all pathos, all original meaning. It is from this perspective that we can approach *Riyo* (2004), a video by Gonzalez-Foerster which consists of a long tracking shot on the river that passes through the center of Kyoto, while the soundtrack reproduces a banal conversation, tinged with seduction, between two Japanese teenagers who have run into each other at a party. In the film, the gap between image and sound, which proves a gulf, offers

⁶¹ SEGALIN, *ESSAY ON EXOTICISM* (NOTE 42), 23.

⁶² FOR A FULLER ANALYSIS OF THIS ALEATORY MATERIALISM, SEE PART 3, CHAPTER 1: "UNDER THE CULTURAL RAIN."

⁶³ ROLAND BARTHES, *L'EMPIRE DES SIGNES* (PARIS: FLAMMARION), BACK COVER.

us a concrete image of that void, which is the condition of any encounter.

Creolization could be defined as a joyous practice of grafting, a productivity engine fueled by the cultural encounter that colonization enabled with its act of breaking and entering, in the postcolonial reflux, in those potential spaces that Gonzalez-Foerster frames and identifies in big cities, in the chinks opened up by migratory wandering. Beyond the Caribbean, creolization functions today as a conceptual model whose figures could constitute the basis of a globalized modernity, a weapon against cultural standardization. Let us remember that twentieth-century modern art was notable as a school of intellectual treachery. Stateless citizens, renegades, exiles, turncoats. In its day, the artistic avant-garde was called cosmopolitan and accompanied by countless criticisms that smacked of anti-Semitism and xenophobia; modernism was the art of the "stateless."

Where culture is concerned, let us hazard the claim that people have always taken pride in betraying their country and its conceptual traditions. Following in the footsteps of Victor Segalen, we will seek to shake figures and signs, to set them in motion, to *risk* them. Besides, by what right should a territory constrain us? Why should the fact of having been born in a place serve as a pretext for denying us the right to be merely temporary sojourners there? To betray one's origins by selling them in the market of signs, to crossbreed these signs with those of more or less distant neighbors, to renounce the value assigned to cultural materials in favor of their convertible, local use value: this is the program of creolization that is taking shape.

Walter Benjamin's formula resonates here: "But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable."⁶⁴ The global individual can no

longer count on a stable environment; he is doomed to be exiled from himself and summoned to invent the nomad culture that the contemporary world requires. It is proving all the more important to crystallize this culture around readable concepts, given that the postmodern world—analytical, relativist, and identitarian—constitutes a natural ally, indeed an ideal terrain, for the development of religious sentiment, as can be observed pretty much all over the world. For the power of religion is that it gives meaning to everything; from roots and origins it derives directions and goals. Nothing escapes the semiotic influence of religion, which explains everything, justifies resistance to change, and delivers its marching orders. We have seen it before: in the past, nothing served to extricate us from such determinisms more effectively than the elaboration of modernity, whose power to uproot people from traditions was able to act as a counterweight to religious fundamentalisms and economic slogans, and to furnish an alternative direction, another prism through which to interpret the world that would be based on neither financial profit nor religious investment. How might this modernity be structurally defined? As a collective setting in motion. Far from aping the signs of yesterday's modernism, it is a matter today of negotiating and deliberating; rather than miming the gestures of radicality, it is a matter of inventing those that correspond to our own era.

The altermodernity emerging today is fueled by the flow of bodies, by our cultural wandering. It presents itself as a venture beyond the conceptual frames assigned to thought and art, a mental expedition outside identitarian norms. Ultimately, then, radican thought amounts to the organization of an exodus.

64 BENJAMIN, "THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION" (NOTE 20), 231.