

SVETLANA BOYM

THE OFF-MODERN

VOLUME 11

INTERNATIONAL TEXTS IN CRITICAL MEDIA AESTHETICS

FOUNDING EDITOR: FRANCISCO J. RICARDO

B L O O M S B U R Y

The Off-Modern

INTERNATIONAL TEXTS IN CRITICAL
MEDIA AESTHETICS

Volume 11

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The Off-Modern

Svetlana Boym

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Figure 0.1 Svetlana Boym, Self-Portrait in St. Petersburg, 1989.

Preface

In the following pages, Svetlana Boym writes a new artistic genealogy of modernity. Moving beyond old debates between modernism and postmodernism, she explores the interactions of art, architecture, literature, philosophy, and technology in the global field of contemporary culture. *The Off-Modern* represents a culmination of lines of inquiry that she developed throughout her career: questions of exile and diasporic nostalgia, productive estrangement amid landscapes of urban ruins, the theory of the avant-garde and the arts of everyday life; these themes and more all find new expression here, reconfigured in the twenty-first-century technosphere.

Readers of Svetlana Boym's previous books will find longstanding inspirations explored in significantly new configurations. Drawing on theories of Hannah Arendt, Henri Bergson, Viktor Shklovsky, and others, she presents the off-modern as an eccentric, self-questioning, anti-authoritarian perspective with roots in the Russian avant-garde, now developed in surprising ways by contemporary artists, architects, and curators around the world. Whereas in her books *Common Places* (1994) and *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) she often drew her theoretical and visual illustrations from such émigrés as the conceptual artists Ilya Kabakov and her friends Komar and Melamid, *The Off-Modern* builds on discussions of (and with) figures as diverse as the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, the Albanian artist-turned-mayor Edi Rama, the South African artist and opera director William Kentridge, the Raqs Media Collective in Delhi, and the creator of the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles.

Svetlana's engagement with these decentered visionaries was an outgrowth of her own evolution as a practicing artist. She had always pursued artistic projects in tandem with her scholarship, notably in her play *The Woman Who Shot Lenin* (1990) and her novel *Ninotchka* (2003), and in various film and video projects over the years. At the time of her all too untimely death in 2015, she was working on a series of autobiographical stories, as well as a film recovering the forgotten history of a refugee way-station in Vienna, legally

nonexistent and hidden from public view, where she and other Soviet Jewish émigrés had been lodged for weeks or months in the late 1970s and early 1980s while sorting out their itineraries as stateless citizens.

During the past decade, Svetlana increasingly devoted herself to photography, while also writing a series of essays that would culminate in this book; early versions of some of the essays here first appeared in *Cabinet, e-flux, Poetics Today*, in an extended essay on Vladimir Tatlin (*Architecture of the Off-Modern*), and in different exhibition catalogs in the United States and Europe. Her haunting photographs often involved the strategic abuse of her long-suffering digital printer, yielding uniquely transformed images (no two prints alike) of a peacock wandering amid scaffolding, clouds reflected in computer screens, and oddly affecting fire hydrants, at once rooted and out of place. Her photographs repay close attention to crucial details often not noticed on a first viewing, and to the patterns—and significant disjunctions—of color, form, and theme that emerge as we read through suites of images (viewable on svetlanaboym.com) such as “Cities in Transit” or “Hydrant Immigrants” (presented here entire in the color plates section). Her work received solo shows in a variety of venues, including Copenhagen, Glasgow, Lithuania, Ljubljana, and New York, and she participated in group shows in Baltimore, Moscow, New Orleans, Paris, and the 2010 Vienna Architectural Biennale, among others.

The Off-Modern is both a manifesto and a memoir, a work of scholarship and a work of art, a book that Svetlana saw as integrating her scholarly and artistic selves. Theory and practice are not so much juxtaposed in the book’s two sections as they are interwoven throughout; only the proportion of text to image changes from the illustrated essays in “Perspectives” to the theoretically suggestive photographs in “Practices.” Throughout the book, Svetlana develops the concept of the off-modern through analysis of decentered artists and theorists of the modern period, from Shklovsky and Tatlin to Georg Simmel and Aby Warburg, in dialogue with contemporary theorists and scientists from Gilles Deleuze to Bruno Latour to Stephen J. Gould. Their ideas are counterpointed against a range of contemporary projects in art, photography, architecture, and urban design, including plans for an expansion of the Hermitage Museum by Rem Koolhaas that will preserve fragments of decayed histories and hints of abandoned futures, a project by the mayor of Tirana to turn his city’s façades into canvases for new art, and Svetlana’s own photographic

series of *objets trouvés* and half-recovered histories. Rejecting postmodern pastiche and dehistoricized irony, Svetlana champions diasporic intimacy, a humane provisionality, and an estrangement for, not from, the world.

Particularly distinctive in *The Off-Modern* is Svetlana's alienated engagement with technology, both in her theory and in her photography. She aligns herself with contemporary critiques advanced by people who themselves work within the new digital mediascape, seeking new ways to harness technology to serve human and artistic freedom. As she says in her chapter "Edgy Geography," "We might be living on the edge of an era when the accepted cultural myths of late capitalism and of technological or digital progress no longer work for us. We are right on the cusp of a paradigm shift, and to anticipate it we have to expand our field of vision." *The Off-Modern* is her attempt to do just this, and the very form of her book embodies her theme. As she remarks, "such an experiment in reinventing cultural history and practice calls for an essayistic genre, porous and non-linear, and not for a systematic typology." She invites us "to exercise a special attentiveness, the vigilance of sense, the virtuality of imagination and engagement in worldly practice," cultivating an openness to "the embarrassment of life caught unawares."

* * *

Svetlana had completed *The Off-Modern* in draft, though she was still playing with its elements, when she was caught by the cancer that ended her life in the summer of 2015. A tireless advocate for the book, Giuliana Bruno made the crucial connection to Francisco Ricardo and his series, as the perfect home for this distinctive project. As I then began preparing *The Off-Modern* for publication, the main question was to work out the plan for the book's images and design, in consultation with Francisco Ricardo and our editor at Bloomsbury, Katie Gallof. It is thanks to their active support that the book includes a generous set of images, both in black and white and in color. Once the overall plan was agreed on, Nicole Burgoyne, who had served as Svetlana's most recent research assistant, did the primary work of selecting the images and determining where best to place them throughout the book. Svetlana was a true mentor to her graduate students, and it is fitting that her final work should be so thoughtfully and effectively curated by Nicole in this way. We are grateful to Svetlana's parents, Yury and Musa Goldberg, for their permission to use her photographs, and

for the support of the estate in the production costs of this cross-media book.

Svetlana and I had discussed her ideas over the years and on several continents, at meetings of the International and American Comparative Literature Associations, and more recently as colleagues at Harvard. One day in New York, she interrupted an argument about postmodernism to photograph the peacock we found strutting amid industrial scaffolding alongside the garden of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine (Figure 27.2). The cathedral was very much Svetlana's kind of site: an anachronistic utopian monument begun in the *fin de siècle* but never completed, slowly decaying while permanently under suspended construction, just the place for a nostalgic peacock to make a home away from home.

In finalizing Svetlana's text, I had little enough to do, other than to decide on the placement of some sections whose disposition had not been settled, to fill in some missing citations, and to go through the draft (as she regularly relied on friends and copyeditors to do) and mitigate her sovereign disregard for the idiosyncracies of English syntax, adjusting prepositions and inserting or removing the definite article as needed. To work through the manuscript line by line and phrase by phrase was continually to be struck by Svetlana's inimitable voice. In this book as in all her writing, to read Svetlana is to hear her, in a conversation that seems to continue unabated even after her physical departure. She might be an off-modern version of Nabokov's early doppelgänger Sirin, who is described in *Speak, Memory* as having unaccountably vanished from the Berlin émigré community after travelling "across the dark sky of exile . . . like a meteor" (288). Yet unlike Sirin, who disappeared "leaving nothing much else behind him than a vague sense of uneasiness," Svetlana left behind many lasting friendships, a wide-ranging body of influential scholarship, a gallery's worth of strikingly original photographs, and the eloquent, edgy, challenging image-text collage that you are now about to read and to see.

– David Damrosch

Part One

Perspectives



Figure 1.1 Svetlana Boym, “Chessboard Collage” combining Victor Shklovsky’s knight’s move and the anamorphic fragment of a photograph of NKVD employees leaving Lubyanka Prison, *Another Freedom*, 2012.

History Out-of-Sync

In the twenty-first century, modernity is our antiquity. We live with its ruins, which we incorporate into our present. Unlike the thinkers of the last *fin de siècle*, we neither mourn nor celebrate the end of history or the end of art. We have to chart a new road between unending development and nostalgia, find an alternative logic for the contradictions of contemporary culture. Instead of fast-changing prepositions—"post," "anti," "neo," "trans," and "sub"—that suggest an implacable movement forward, against, or beyond, I propose to go off: "off" as in "off the path," or way off, off-Broadway, off-brand, off the wall, and occasionally off-color. "Off-modern" is a detour into the unexplored potentials of the modern project. It recovers unforeseen pasts and ventures into the side alleys of modern history, at the margins of error of major philosophical, economic, and technological narratives of modernization and progress. It opens into the modernity of "what if," and not only postindustrial modernization as it was.

The preposition "off" is a product of linguistic error, popular etymology and fuzzy logic. It developed from the preposition "of," signifying belonging as in "being a part of," with the addition of an extra "f," an emphatic marker of distancing. The "off" in "off-modern" designates both the belonging to the critical project of modernity and its edgy excess. "Off" suggests a dimension of time and human action that is unusual or potentially off-putting. Through humorous onomatopoeic exaggeration it describes something too spontaneous (off-the-cuff, off-handed, off the record) or too edgy (off the wall), verging on the obscene (off-color) or not in sync with the pace (off-beat). Sometimes "off" is about the embarrassment of life caught unawares. It is provisional, extemporaneous, and humane. Most importantly, "off" is not a marker of margins but a delimitation of a broad space for a new choreography of future

possibilities. Off-modern isn't antimodern; sometimes it is closer to the critical and experimental spirit of modernity than it is to contemporary neotraditionalism or postmodern simulations.

The off-modern isn't a lost "ism" from the ruined archive of the avant-garde, but a contemporary worldview and a form of historic sensibility that allows us to recapture eccentric aspects of earlier modernities, to "brush history against the grain," to use Walter Benjamin's expression. The off-modern project is still off-brand; it is a performance-in-progress, at once con-temporary and off-beat vis-à-vis the present moment.

After the Russian revolutions of 1917, theorist and writer Viktor Shklovsky proposed to explore the lateral move in cultural history that can rescue a broader range of politics and arts. Modern artistic practice in this case isn't conceived as an autonomous activity (contrary to a common misunderstanding); it is a practice of estrangement and engagement; estrangement *for* the world and not *from* the world. The full implications of this radical world wonder haven't yet been fully explored, because this estrangement for the world doesn't follow systematic logic, and it doesn't fit into a familiar narrative of critical theory that was in part shaped by a mistranslation of Russian and East European formalists and structuralists. Shklovsky's favorite figure for such aesthetic and political practice was the knight in the game of chess. The knight moves forward sideways and traces "the tortured road of the brave," not the master-slave dialectics of "dutiful pawns and kings."¹ Oblique, diagonal, and zigzag moves reveal the play of human freedom vis-à-vis political teleologies and ideologies that follow the march of revolutionary progress, development, or the invisible hand of the market.

Like his contemporaries, Victor Shklovsky was fascinated by modernist science, from Einstein's theory of relativity, to the quantum and wave theories of light and Nikolai Lobachevsky's conception of a non-Euclidian geometry that doesn't accept the central axiom that parallel lines cannot meet. In the words of Vladimir Nabokov: "if the parallel lines do not meet, it is not because meet they cannot, but because they have other things to do" (*Lectures on Russian Literature*, 58). In my off-modern interpretation, Shklovsky's zigzag is a path between two parallel lines, at once jagged and regular. It isn't a simple one-dimensional figure but an opening of an alternative intellectual tradition that brings together physics and poetics—from the ancient swerve of the

Epicurean philosophers to the squiggle of the eccentric Enlightenment, from baroque anamorphoses to the Möbius strip, and from there to Deleuze's folds and veins in marble. The knight's move allows for a coexistence of different models of the universe side by side, not as a mere digital database or a salad bar of philosophical dressings, but as a complex counterpointed composition that invites rigorous perspectivism and creative action.

The off-modern doesn't suggest a continuous history from antiquity to modernity to postmodernity. Instead it confronts the breaks in tradition, the loss of common yardsticks, and disorientations that occur in almost every generation. The off-modern acknowledges the syncope and the off-beat movements of history that were written out from the dominant versions edited by the victors, who cared little about the dignity of the defeated. Off-modern reflection does not merely try to color the blank spots of history green or red, thus curing longing with belonging. Rather it veers off the beaten track of dominant constructions of history, proceeding laterally, not literally, to discover missed opportunities and roads not taken.

An off-modern line of thinking takes us away from postmodernism and its discontents towards a broader reconsideration of modernities in the plural and over a long duration of time, from the early modern of the seventeenth century to the present. It is part of the twenty-first-century cultural reflection on the "unfinished" project of modernity, "uneven" modernizations and "divergent" modernisms.² The off-modern is neither a new spatial turn to the margins or semi-peripheries of the West, nor a return to hip retro media. It tries to rethink the porous nature of historical time, making modernities out-of-sync less eccentric and more symptomatic for twenty-first-century experience.

Most importantly, the off-modern approach breaks away from the opposition between an artist and a master-theorist who maps and typologizes the modern and all its prefixes and suffixes. This is a contemporary exercise in aesthetic knowledge that crisscrosses (but never abolishes) the boundaries between artistic and critical practice; it follows the zigzag movements of an alternative cultural development explored by artists and writers themselves, and often overlooked by the theorists because it exceeds a specific plot of the history of the modern. The off-modern approach zooms in on the transitional periods of modern and contemporary history, moves off-center and foregrounds the heretics and misfits within well-known artistic and cultural

movements. It unearths an alternative genealogy of the critical apparatus of modernity, harking back to Shklovsky's and Hannah Arendt's "estrangement for the world" that I understand as an aesthetic, existential, and political practice of passionate thinking and freedom, which strives neither for utopia nor for artistic autonomy, but for the transformation of this world.

The off-modern approach defies the "distant reading" and remote-controlled historiographic mappings of the modern and contemporary period; instead it engages in the embarrassment of theory and in a double movement between perspectivist estrangement and almost tactile nearness to artistic making. In short, the off-modern artist and theorist share an unconventional bond of *diasporic intimacy* familiar to contemporary immigrants.

Unlike the "altermodern," the term proposed by the writer and curator Nicolas Bourriaud in 2009, the off-modern doesn't define itself merely as a new modernity "reconfigured to an age of globalization," a "new universalism" based on translations, subtitles, and generalized naming.³ The off-moderns aren't "early adapters" to the existing gadgets of posthistorical globalization or internet technology; they search for experimental platforms that would connect the world's public squares with the digital humanities of the future, for which no gadgets have yet been invented. Instead of relying on the subtitled and translated languages of a new universalism, off-moderns focus on accents and affects, on material singularities and alternative solidarities between cultures that often circumscribe the center, creating a broad margin for peripheral scenographies. Examples can be found in the longstanding connections between Latin American, East European, and South Asian modernities that didn't always go via Paris, London, or Berlin where metadiscourse to end all metadiscourses is perpetually enunciated, as if anew.

We will follow here some key aspects of the off-modern project, not "power points" but rather tangents with many possible bifurcations:

1. An alternative genealogy and understanding of the modern project, including art, theory, and history.
2. Eccentric geographies, alternative solidarities, and reemergence of cross-cultural public space.
3. Politics and arts of dissent based on pluralities within cultures and identities, and not only external pluralism or multiculturalism. This

brings forth elective affinities between unlikely international bedfellows, not only anxieties of influence and memories of domination.

4. Prospective nostalgia and critical urbanism that engages architectural and social concerns. A new scenography of “modernization through preservation” where ruins cohabit with construction sites.
5. Alternative *new media* shaped by estranging artistic techniques and not only by new gadgets. Organization of humanistic platforms for knowledge and experience. Neither “hyper-” nor “cyber-” but another prefix that hasn’t been invented yet.
6. Engagement with “human error” and human creativity, with artful and not just artificial intelligence. Reconsideration of affects, and productive embarrassment of theory and technology.
7. Not the end of criticism but passionate thinking, however belated and outmoded.

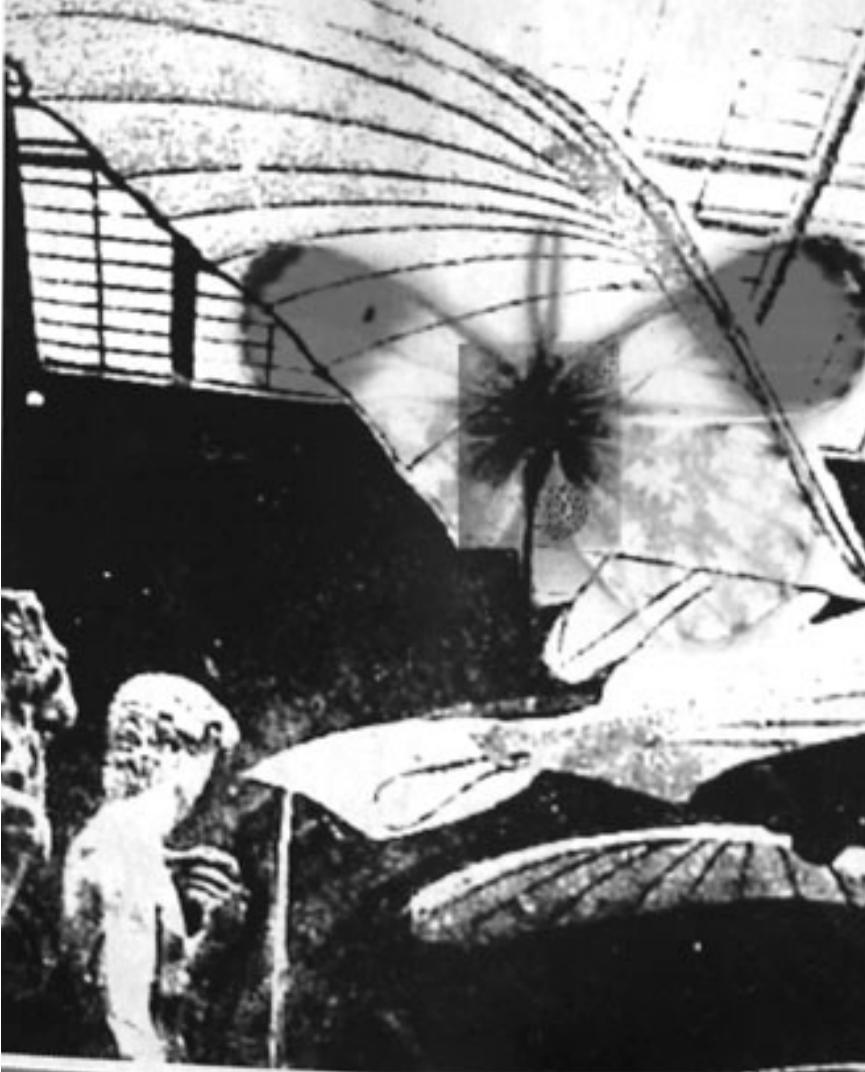


Figure 2.1 Svetlana Boym, “Letatlin with Butterfly,” *Hybrid Utopias*, 2002–2007, photographic print, 17 × 22 inches.

Cultural Exaptation

The off-modern perspective invites us to rethink the opposition between development and preservation, and proposes a non-linear conception of cultural evolution through trial and error.⁴ The off-modern artist finds an interesting comrade-in-arms in contemporary science, in particular in Stephen J. Gould's subversive theory of exaptation that unsettles evolutionary biologists and proponents of intelligent design, technovisionaries and postmodernists. Exaptation places imagination closer to innovation than the brutal struggle for the survival of the fittest, which extends from Darwin's theory of evolution to contemporary market capitalism. Exaptation can be seen as a rescue of the eccentric and unforeseen in natural history, a theory that could only have been developed by an imaginative scientist who sometimes thinks like an artist.

Exaptation is described in biology as an example of "lateral adaptation," which consists in cooptation of a feature from some other origin. It happens when a particular trait evolves because it served one particular function, but subsequently it may come to serve another. A good example from biology would be bird feathers and wings that initially were used for temperature regulation, but later were adapted for flight. Exaptations are structures that become useful by virtue of their having been coopted—that is the *ex-apt* part of the term: they are apt for what they are for other reasons than their original use; they weren't built by natural selection for their current role. "Just because something arises as a side consequence does not condemn it to secondary status," as Gould writes ("The Pattern of Life's History," 59). Exaptation isn't the opposite of adaptation; neither is it merely an accident, a result of human error or lack of scientific data that would in the end support the concept of evolutionary adaptation. (In fact, the word "evolution" itself is a product of linguistic exaptation and errors of transmission. Originally it meant the

unfolding of a manuscript, an opening up of potentialities; the term was not originally favored by Darwin, who only used it a few times at the end of his work, and was adopted by his followers.) Exaptation questions the very process of assigning meaning and function in hindsight, the process of assigning the prefix “post” and thus containing a complex phenomenon within the grid of familiar interpretation.

Exaptation has mostly been studied in biological and technological evolutions. Bizarre as it may sound, our homey microwave ovens started their adventurous life as radar magnetrons. Edison’s phonograph, which evolved into a cinematic apparatus, was born as a recording device for dictation; the internet was introduced as a military communication exchange network. Of course, technological evolution moves much faster than biological evolution does, leaving us many discarded projects and possibilities. A bird’s flight and the unpredictable beauty of a butterfly still amaze us, while Edison’s phonograph and Technicolor film are now part of the museum of “Jurassic technologies” of the twentieth century. (Hopefully the art of cinema isn’t going to end up on the same museum shelf with the toaster ovens).

The (as yet unwritten) history of invention and creativity abounds in unfulfilled projects of the *future anterior*. The artistic equivalent of birds’ wings could be found in the silk wings of Vladimir Tatlin’s flying vehicle Letatlin, one of the most famous “failed” projects. Letatlin (in Russian, a play on the verb “letat”—to fly—and Le-Tatlin, the artist’s pseudo-French signature), a cross between the mythical firebird and the prototype of Sputnik with silk wings, was a technical failure: it didn’t fly, not in a literal sense at least, but it enabled many flights of dissident imagination. Its dysfunctional wings became phantom limbs of experimental architecture, art, and technology in the second half of the twentieth century.

Perhaps the best things in life that money can’t buy—like happiness, love, aesthetic appreciation, and other such useless expenditures—are examples of exaptation. The off-modern foregrounds exaptation and deliberately places the provisional and prospective at the radius for new exploration. Sometimes exaptation can offer an artistic perspective on evolutionary biology that unsettles scientific determinism yet also doesn’t skew empirical evidence. Off-modern thinkers and artists recover many experimental paradigms in modernist science that might have been abandoned by the scientists themselves.

Vladimir Nabokov found non-utilitarian delights in his study of butterflies, but also made a scientific conjecture about the patterns of butterfly migrations around the world that seemed counterintuitive and improbable from the evolutionary or functionalist perspective, but was proven correct through a series of experiments fifty years later.

The strategy of off-modern exaptation is particularly apt at bringing together the *techne* of art and science, and can thus produce an alternative form of new media. As Nabokov explained in “The Knight’s Move,” in the fourth dimension of art alternative geometrical and physical parameters are made probable, and art is where provisionality itself takes form. The off-modern has a quality of a conjecture that doesn’t distort the facts but explores their echoes, residues, implications, and shadows that put the world off-kilter through creative erring.

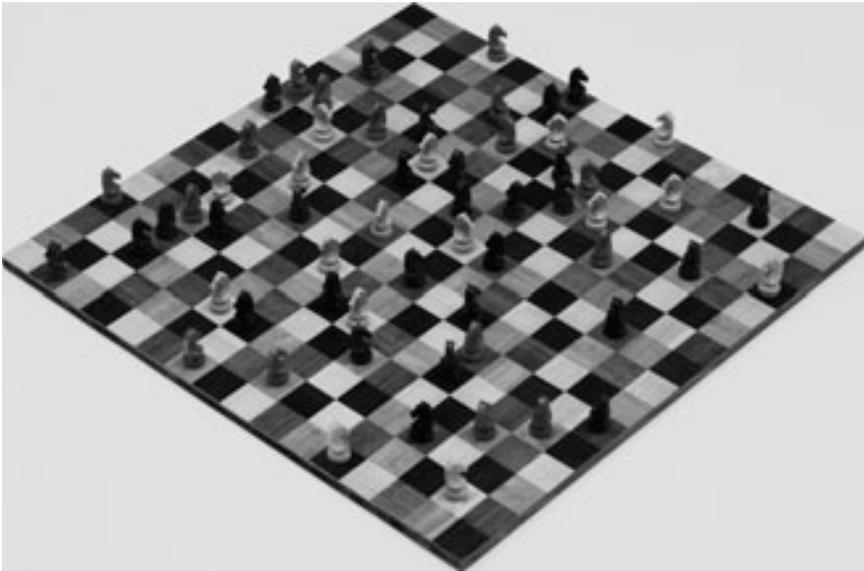


Figure 3.1 Gabriel Orozco, "Horses Running Endlessly," 1995, wood, 3 3/8 × 34 3/8 × 34 3/8 inches. Digital image, ©The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York.

Human Error

To err is human, said the Roman proverb, both excusing and celebrating human imperfection. Today “human error” has become a technical term designating the trace of the irrepressible humanity that even the most advanced machine or bureaucratic apparatus cannot control. Among a few remaining human traits that technology cannot duplicate are a sense of humor that forever resists “disambiguation,” a sudden gasp of affect, a smile, a whim, a swerve. Human “ambiguation” will soon become a retronym like “snail mail.”

Creative minds know how slight can be the line between flying and falling, between a failure and a co-creation with human fallibility. If only we always knew how to transform human error into a cognitive operation and a new form of passionate thinking. The practice of erring traces the jagged edges of evolution, making visible the act of change and its nonlinear outlines. It exposes the *pentimenti*, provisional compositional exercises, the palimpsests of forgotten knowledge and practice. Erring allows us to touch—ever so tactfully—the exposed nerves of cultural and human potentiality, the maps of possible if often improbable developments.

Playing with human error and improbable chance has been the realm of inventors and tricksters who cheated at the border-crossings of knowledge and culture. Of course, not all accidents of fate and after-effects of human blindness are recuperable. One can distinguish between “dumb luck”—the luck of a gambler who lays out his riches at the first opportunity, changing nothing in his worldview or the world around him even if he wins the bet—and a kind of “smart luck” that can be innovative and transformative. In the latter case, the receptivity to chancy error can lead to a kind of imperfect perfect moment, *kairos*, what the anthropologist Lewis Hyde calls “an opening in the weaving of

cloth, the weaving of time, the weaving of fate” (*Trickster Makes the World*, 133). It requires a particular form of attentiveness or fine-tuning to the porosity in the cosmic cloth that can offer adventurous opportunities as well as awareness of the paradoxes and aporias of human existence.

Many scientific and artistic discoveries came about through this particular attuning to failures and errors. French chemist and microbiologist Louis Pasteur made a major contribution to the invention of vaccines while following what appeared at first as a botched experiment with chicken cholera. What Pasteur had to do was to grasp the scope of chance discovery. “Chance favors a prepared mind,” concluded the scientist. The “prepared mind” in this case is an open mind that can reframe a failure into an invention. Similarly, astronomer James Christy, who spent years studying the orbit of Pluto, once stumbled upon an archive of images in the Naval Observatory that were ready to be discarded. The photographs had the following labels: “Pluto Image. Elongated. Plate no good. Reject” (Hyde, 99—100). It took an attentive mind to realize that what appeared as a photographic error, the uncommon elongation was no accident. Pluto had a moon.

Many artists have been similarly “moonstruck” in their quest for chance encounters, not all of them successful. Ultimately, “smart luck” isn’t mere luck; it might not even be about chaos and cosmos but may also offer an insight into the sporadic nature of reality made up of chaotic dissolutions and possibilities, fluctuating together with us. In his study of tricksters and the relationship between art, mischief, and myth, Lewis Hyde writes: “a chance event is a little bit of the world as it is—a world always larger and more complicated than our cosmologies—and that smart luck is a kind of responsive intelligence invoked by whatever happens” (140). So human errors aren’t mere serendipities, examples of statistical randomness, or a psychopathology of everyday life. Erring can trace unexpected connections between different forms of knowledge, art, and technology, beyond the prescribed interactivities of specific technological media; erring can also make flexible cognitive maps based on aesthetic knowledge and ahead of software calculations. This practice is not to be confused with multitasking, which new neurological research shows can actually dull the brain, substituting surfing for thinking and more or less expensive gadgets for a paucity of ideas. Making lateral connections requires concentration, creative distraction, gadgetless daydreaming, and a

longer duration of time than multitasking allows. Multitasking with clouds is, of course, an exception to the rules.

It isn't always possible to make exaptation into a deliberate practice, but at the very least one shouldn't miss a chance to engage in minor dissent, defying the framed world of the technological and bureaucratic apparatus. If we adapt too well—to the market, to the e-world, to the art world, to political regimes, to the particular institutions we inhabit—we might evolve to the point that the adventure of human freedom would become obsolete. The off-modern doesn't rush to imagine the apocalyptic posthuman future that captures the imagination of frustrated television producers. Artistic exaptation is a painstaking practice of human freedom.

Recently Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco made an off-modern chess board whose only pieces were knights. In this uncanny scenario, the knight's move turns into the only rule of the game. As a static sculptural work poised in a perfect balance of provisionality and order, this can be considered the off-modern utopia par excellence. But in the unlikely case that these knight's moves in search of exaptations become institutional practices, the off-modern swerve would cease to exist.



Figure 4.1 Svetlana Boym, “Leaving Santa Barbara #2,” *Images without Black*, 2003, photographic print, 22 × 17 inches.

Nostalgic Technologies

The conception of the “off-modern” itself was a product of human error. The word came to me by accident, as I was dueling with my computer, turning the printer on and off and trying to engage with it in a game of chance to violate its instructions. At some point the color printer produced images without using the black cartridge, spilling out its psychedelic unconscious and turning out a few photographic prints that were unrepeatable and unpredictable, against all laws of mechanical reproduction. Images without black—without melancholia?—led to a project of nostalgic technologies that involved even more physical battles with the printer. In a series of “ruined prints” showing our decaying modern landscapes, I pulled the photographs prematurely from the printer, leaving the lines of passages. “Communication error!” screamed the disgruntled computer voice. This error made each print unrepeatable and uniquely imperfect. The process isn’t Luddite but ludic, not destructive but experimental. *An error has an aura.*

Erring is also erotic; it teases the technological superego of the digital apparatus, subduing the machine and yielding to it at the same time. *Techne*, after all, once referred to arts, crafts, and techniques. Both art and technology were imagined as forms of human prosthesis, missing limbs, imaginary or physical extensions of the human space.

Many technological inventions, including film and the space rocket, were first envisioned in science fiction—imagined by artists and writers, not scientists. The term “virtual reality” has a direct antecedent in Henri Bergson’s discussions of “virtuality,” further developed by Gilles Deleuze in his *Bergsonism* (1966) and elsewhere. Originally virtuality referred to the virtual realities of human imagination and conscience that couldn’t be mimicked by technology. In the early twentieth century, the border between art and technology was

particularly fertile. Avant-garde artists and critics used the word “technique” to mean an estranging artistic device that lays bare the medium and makes us see the world anew. Later advertising culture appropriated avant-garde as one of its styles, as an exciting marketable look that domesticates, rather than estranges, the utopia of progress. New Hollywood cinema uses the most advanced technology to create special effects. If artistic technique revealed the mechanisms of conscience, the technological special effect domesticates illusions and manipulations.

The off-modern emerged at the critical edge of artistic practice and at the aesthetic margin of theory. At the interface between the digital and the material, the metaphorical and the physical. Off-modern new media aren't based on technological progress alone. They are also driven by a meditation on the frameworks of the technology itself. The off-modern doesn't simulate the market, with its derivatives of frenzy and the ecstasy of instant gratification and short-term thinking. Rather it engages in estrangement and oblique expropriation in order to reimagine public space, moving occasionally off capitalism. There might be an unexpected side effect of technology-driven culture, which depends on commercial sharing of personal information, and accelerated growth of gadgets for continuous multitasking that anticipate and exceed the actual human need for them.

A byproduct of the high speed of everything is a renewed need for continuity and slowness, for other more human temporalities that no software of the anticipatory nostalgia industry can possibly simulate. Similarly, together with the culture of “over-sharing” and the profitable transparency of surveyed social sites that almost preclude forgetting, there is a new longing for the imperfect human memory, for a possibility to reclaim the individual right to self-reinvention not determined solely by computer algorithms. More generally, there is a need to protect different forms of cultural communication in the public domain, some of which are not based on the logic of profit-making, media self-referentiality, self-help, or religious inspiration. That space between market, technology, and religion, once occupied by the debated and yet shared public culture, is rapidly shrinking.



Figure 5.1 Svetlana Boym, “Connectivities,” *Black Mirrors*, 2009, photographic print, 17 × 22 inches.

Digital Resident Aliens

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the digital world was seen as the exciting Wild West of innovation and youth culture. Now it is no longer a youth culture but a mainstream culture. Ironically, as cultural institutions and universities invest in online education and digital humanities, the pioneers of digital culture are developing practices of going off-grid for relaxation, and designing new apps that help our attention-deficit-disorder culture take a break from the multitasking that is now proven to impede productivity and that irrevocably limits the plasticity of our brains. As humanists reluctantly post on Facebook and universities want to be “liked” there, the net engineers have developed an app called “Anti-Social.” Sadly, we need the help of the internet to disconnect us from it.

So as humanities administrators are imitating the Silicon Valley executives, the latter are reinventing the humanist wheel of creative drifts, disconnections, detours, and a few apps that help you turn the internet off. In this contemporary situation of digital unease, the off-modern approach can offer us a creative solution to rebuild public architecture and uniquely human forms of thought and experience.

In the last few years a number of major internet experts and pioneers have issued alarming calls about the impact of digital culture on all spheres of human existence, including the capacity for empathy and intimacy, and the ability to think critically and make meaning out of events in the world. Digital culture creates a mass ADD epidemic, and even neurologically affects the plasticity of our brain. This is one of the most major human climate changes that we’ve experienced in the thousands of years of human history. So we find dissidents and apostates in the land of the internet enthusiasts, a fact that shows that digital culture is reaching maturity and exhibits plurality within itself.

One of the “fathers” of virtual reality technology, Jaron Lanier, recently wrote that “the defining idea of the coming era” is “the decay of belief in the specialness of being human.” Lanier describes how he begins his classes at MIT or Stanford asking his students to listen to the lecture and interrupt their multitasking, tweeting, friending, chatting, and instagramming. He explains his reason for this request, and his explanation is paradoxical: “The most important reason to stop multitasking so much isn’t to make me feel respected, but to make you exist. If you listen first, and write later, then whatever you write will have had time to filter through your brain, and you’ll be in what you say. This is what makes you exist. If you are only a reflector of information, are you really there?” (“The End of Human Specialness”).

Lanier comments that a few years ago a remark like that might encounter booing, but more recently, the students have applauded. Lanier emphasizes that the decay in human specialness isn’t caused by the technology per se, but by the culture of technologists, especially the recent designs of what he dubs “antihuman software.” Such designs suggest that information is independent of human experience or perspective. As a result, a human being is no longer a unique individuality but merely a cog in the system and a “component of an emerging global computer” that benefits large companies, proprietors of the central nodes that provide access to the internet and define our hardware and software. This ideology of the global computer is particularly suitable for the new managerial projects that equally instrumentalize human creativity. It’s easier to provide computers that improve education and change our human and social climate.

In his essay “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” Nicholas Carr argues that this new digital ideology is turning us into “pancake people,” thinly spread and (mostly) lean. Scientists document a neurological change in the human brain, limiting the brain’s plasticity and rendering the ADD culture as a new normal, outsourcing human culture and memory and resulting in a decrease in scientific discoveries and human inventiveness. Carr, an early adopter of digital gadgets and a great internet fan who has turned into something of a dissident, warns about our diminishing abilities of reading, listening, contemplation, and judgment, when we treat human experiences and events as mere databases and don’t practice critical thinking. Sherry Turkle, an MIT professor who combines a deep knowledge of technology and psychology, describes how the culture of

internet connectedness creates a crisis in human connectivity. As robots look more and more human, humans start acting more and more robotically. In *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, Evgeny Morozov writes about how internet accessibility does not always translate into public freedom, unmasking the myths behind the internet revolutions.

The answer, of course, isn't to become Luddite or return to a predigital nature. It isn't technology that is to blame but its cultural, social, and political uses. Neither is it merely a question of developing alternative digital platforms for knowledge, though these are useful as provisional practices. Most importantly, it is crucial to move between the digital and public worlds and never cease to make sense out of the accumulation of information. We need to interrupt the new cultural myths that naturalize the homepage and Facebook and that uncannily remind us of the dystopias of the early twentieth century—the totalitarian global computer “Integral” in Evgeny Zamiatin's *We* or the singing, human-all-too-human computer Hal in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. A new pedagogy is needed to embarrass the digital totality.

Perhaps the digital natives can learn something from the digital exiles? Off-moderns are digitally bicultural. They are “resident aliens” in the digital home. We believe in using technology as a medium, but we urge caution against the ideology of the “global brain” and internet monopolies that want to determine the future of the digital world. We don't equate knowledge with knowingness provided by a quick glance at the Wikipedia page, or confuse data collection with reflective judgment and critical thinking—which are becoming endangered skills. Off-moderns insist on thinking with error, play, ambiguity, human memory, crisscrossing digital and public space—just for a rainy day. Off-modern new media combines new digital platforms as well as critical reflection on the new forms of digital mediation that have been domesticated to the point of destroying our intimacies. Off-modern new media is about networking across different genres and mediums, reawakening senses and refining sensibilities, exploring diagonal and zigzag thinking and working on a new public architecture.



Figure 6.1 R. H. Quaytman, *Distracting Distance, Chapter 16*, 2010, oil, silkscreen ink, gesso on wood, 24 3/4 × 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

Edgy Geography

The off-modern perspective affects our understanding of our historical and geographic relationships, as well as our political and even emotional ones, by revealing elective affinities and alternative solidarities through time and space. Off-modern art has both a temporal and a spatial dimension: some projects from different corners of the globe can appear belated or peripheral to the familiar centers of modern/postmodern culture. The off-modern has been embraced by artists and architects from India to Argentina, from Hungary to Venezuela, from Turkey to Lithuania, from Canada to Albania. To give a few examples: the Raqs Media Collective from New Delhi, with their projects of porous time; Argentinian Guillermo Kuitca with his portable homes, mapped mattresses, and his reinvention of the avant-garde; the Hungarian documentary filmmaker Péter Forgács and his documentary histories of “what if,” made with the help of home movies; Albanian artist Anri Sala and his “out-of-sync” videos; New York artist Rebecca Quaytman and her “lateral moves” towards the forgotten tradition of the East European avant-garde; South African artist William Kentridge and his re-animation of atonal Soviet opera; and experimental public performances using mimes and *commedia dell'arte* to enforce urban citizenship and the performance of law in Bogotá, Colombia, organized by the former mayor of the city, the mathematician, philosopher, and unconventional theater director Antanas Mockus.

The seemingly peripheral situation of these artists, architects, and politicians reveals the eccentricity of the center; asynchronicity questions the progress of cultural trends and artistic movements that are supposed to succeed one another like well-behaved citizens in the express checkout line. The off-modern doesn't focus on the external pluralism and values of states, with their political PR and imperial ambitions, but on internal pluralities within cultures, tracing

elective affinities, solidarities of dissent, and diasporic intimacies across national borders.

We might be living on the edge of an era when the accepted cultural myths of late capitalism and of technological or digital progress no longer work for us. We are right on the cusp of a paradigm shift, and to anticipate it we have to expand our field of vision. The logic of edginess is opposed to that of the seamless appropriation of popular culture or the synchronicity of computer memory. This is a logic that exposes wounds, cuts, scars, ruins, the afterimage of touch. The edginess resists incorporation and doesn't allow for a romance of convenience. Clarification: the off-moderns are edgy, not marginal. They don't wallow in the self-pity or resentment that comes with marginalization, even when some of this is justified.

So the off-modern edge is not a fault line, but a space. Thoreau once wrote "I love a broad margin to my life" (*Walden* 147). The off-modern edges aren't sites of marginality but those broad margins where one could try to live deliberately, against all odds, in the age of shrinking space and resources and forever accelerating rhythms.

To be edgy, then, could also mean avoiding the logic of the cutting edge, even if the temptation is great. If you are just off the cutting edge of the butcher's knife, you'll end up being devoured before you are examined. The logic of the cutting edge makes one part of the bloody action movie so common in contemporary popular culture, where tears and affects are only computer generated. Edginess takes more time. Only at the risk of being outmoded could one stay con-temporary.

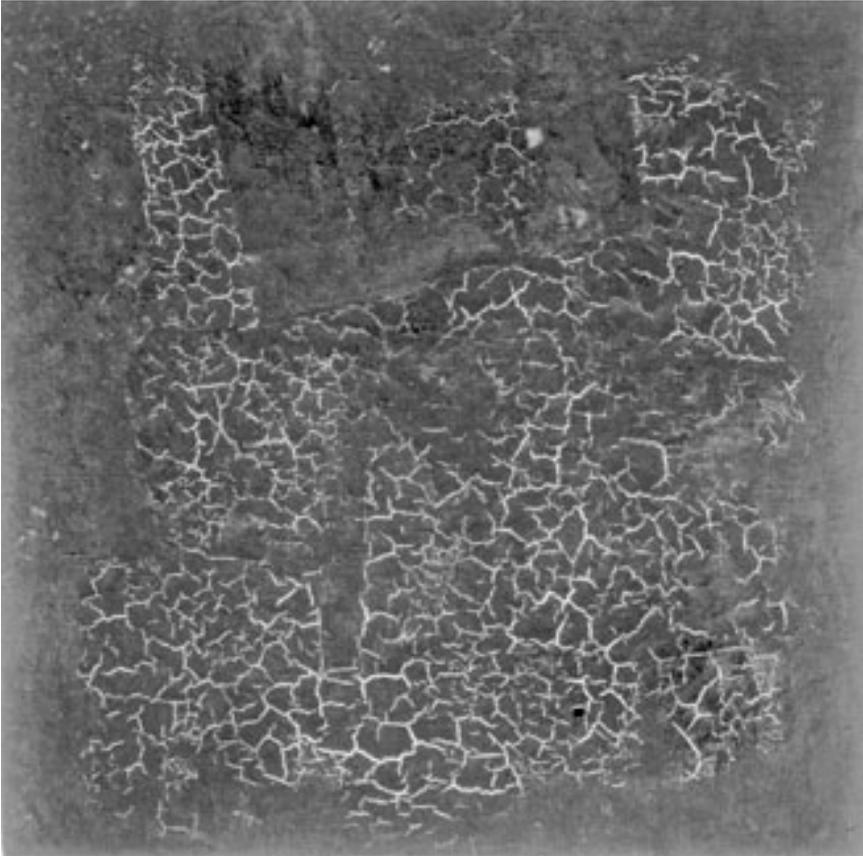


Figure 7.1 Kazimir Malevitch, “Black Square,” early 1920s, found in the collection of the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. Image courtesy of HIP/Art Resource, New York.

Archive of Pentimenti

The off-modern is not posthistorical; it constantly engages with unexplored contexts, the politics of specific places, and inconvenient histories and histories of *what if*. It requires unconventional archeology that traces skeletons in closets, nostalgic bones and phantom limbs. Alternatively, we can call it the archeology of *pentimenti*.

A *pentimento* is defined as the presence of traces of previous work or of an alternative composition beneath a finished work of art, showing that the artist has changed his or her mind in the process of work. For restorers and art historians the discovery of a *pentimento* has often served as proof of the originality of the artist's work, something like a signature of the artist that reveals the imperfections and bifurcations of the creative process that no copyist or disciple can imitate. The word derives from the Italian *pentirsi*, meaning "to repent." In the off-modern context, the *pentimento* isn't treated as an instance of remorse, something to repent and redeem, but as a map of multiple possibilities. Even if we look at the original canvas of the master of suprematism Kazimir Malevich, we find there the traces of the pencil around the suprematist black square; for the "ultimate" work of suprematist art was made without technical props as a labor of the artisan of abstraction. Malevich's other abstract works reveal the figurative ghosts from other paintings. In his case, it is possible that these *pentimenti* of the avant-garde speak also of its forgotten historical context, the hungry postrevolutionary era when a pristine new canvas would have been an unaffordable luxury. Off-modern thinking unearths the *pentimenti*, keeping the histories of "what if" alive as long as possible, but also examines why and how the final compositions take form. The archeology of *pentimenti* combines material history with the virtual reality of imagination and phantasmagoric awareness of smiling ghosts.

The New Delhi media collective Raqs, which embraced the idea of the off-modern when it was still a work in progress, created their own version of an archive of pentimenti, putting emphasis on the porosity of time itself. One of Raqs' early projects that captured the paradoxes of modern conceptions of time and progress was called "antechambers of modernity." These were mysterious waiting rooms with traces of pentimenti and improvised compositions that brought forth a wide range of affects and attitudes towards the modern project itself. They resembled nicely decorated "green rooms" in the nineteenth-century railway stations in colonial India, where the would-be passengers prepared for their journeys with a mixture of anxiety and exhilaration. The Raqs group explains the connection between the conception of improvisation and this peculiar kind of "waiting for modernity":

The relationship between these spaces and modernity is not . . . marked by chronological lag alone. Rather, it could also be qualified by perennial anticipation, or perpetual regret, or enduring scepticism, or sustained enthusiasm, or continuing bewilderment—or any combinations thereof. What you have then is the possibility of a nuanced and fluid spectrum of attitudes towards modernity that can be rehearsed ad infinitum in these "green rooms" or "waiting rooms."

"Meeting in a Waiting Room"

The antechambers of the modern are places where we can take time off to explore the new off-modern trains of thought and to rehearse our unpredictable errands into many dimensions of affect and thought.

Off-moderns explore a different conception of time that includes out-of-sync modernities and modalities, and the recovery of the slow durations of time ("la durée") that Henri Bergson described in *The Creative Mind* as indispensable for the virtual realities of imagination. In their most recent work, Raqs elaborates the idea of porous time that can work in counterpoint to the finitude of space and can allow for generous cohabitations, alternative solidarities, and a new art of slow friendship that our fast culture of one-click obsolescence might not favor: "To co-inhabit a time is not to establish orders of precedence or chronology, but to create structures and processes by which different rhythms of being and doing can act responsively towards each other" ("Now and Elsewhere"). Such "co-inhabitation" in time is something akin to musical syncopation, when two different rhythms enter the frame of the same

composition and influence each other without necessarily conflicting with each other. Syncopation, as we shall see in the discussion of diasporic intimacy, was also a trope of immigration and modern dislocation in space. Vladimir Nabokov described the experience of the twentieth-century exile as a “syncopal kick” that missed a beat, at once a trauma and a creative impulse that he “would not have missed for worlds” (*Speak, Memory* 193). Syncopation precludes synthesis or symbolism and incorporates loss into a fragmented musical composition. “A syncopated mode of curation,” according to Raqs, “can liberate an event or a process from being trapped in only one kind of way of articulating time, essentially, the modern world’s understanding of ‘clock time’” (“Earthworms Dancing”). An introduction of slower temporal processes that are out of sync with the governing rhythms of everyday life allows a reordering in the perception of spatial coordinates and a glimpse into other potential ways of being that alter our habitual frames of references and skirt the improbable.

During an Off-Modern Workshop in the fall of 2011, Shuddha Sengupta presented Raqs’ most futuristic project to date, the *Time Capsule from 2011 (to be opened in 2061)*. He showed us an image of a mysterious box that resembled a suitcase from a 1960s science-fiction movie belonging to an anxious alien with a one-way ticket to the future. The box is sealed, and will remain so for the next fifty years, to be opened eventually by Amália Jyran, collective member Monica Narula’s daughter and the collective’s favorite. According to Raqs, the contents of the box encrypts “the state of play between the ways in which the . . . collective inhabits the present, interprets the past, and faces the future.” The container was interred on June 18, 2011, on the Alby Estate in the city of Moss in the county of Østfold in Norway in the presence of the four-year old Amália, who loves rabbits and ribbons and probably doesn’t yet fully understand her future historical mission.

One of the participants in the workshop wondered why Raqs didn’t chose a more contemporary form of archiving their gifts to the future: “Why inter it in the earth? Why don’t you store the contents of the time capsule on Google Cloud?” Sengupta responded to the question with a question: “What if it rains?”

The artist literalized the digital metaphor in order to interrupt political and technological utopias and point at the paradoxes of contemporary

preservation. Remembering the destruction of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, we know that technology isn't always a panacea or protection for the historical "rainy day." Off-modern preservation offers us alternative ways of making sense of the embarrassing materiality and dissenting histories of our present.



Figure 7.2 Raqs Media Collective, “Time Capsule from 2011,” 2011, aluminum box with contents to be opened in 2061. Image courtesy of Raqs Media Collective and Frith Street Gallery, London.



Figure 8.1 Hans Holbein, “The Ambassadors,” 1533. ©National Gallery, London/Art Resource, New York.

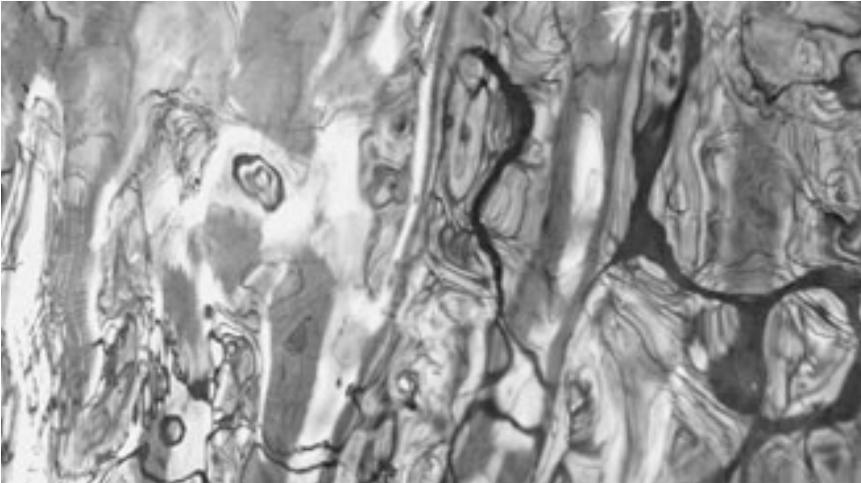


Figure 8.2 Svetlana Boym, “Couple,” *Phantom Limbs*, 2008, photographic print, 26 × 17 inches.

Perspectivism

The off-modern isn't opposed to the postmodern or the modern. It doesn't proceed through antagonism or overcoming. In fact, some of the founding theorists of postmodernism condition were uncomfortable about the arrogant "post" in the "postmodern"; in *The Post-Modern Condition*, Jean-Francois Lyotard advocated the prefix "ana," as in analysis: a research, an exploration. Yet postmodernism operated through the hermeneutics of suspicion—unmasking, subverting, ironizing. Its primary logic was that of a "palinode"—the rhetoric of retraction, of everything that is not "ode" or praise—but also a logic of appropriation and simulation.

The off-modern shares with the postmodern approach an ambivalent attitude—between nostalgia and progress. The difference lies in the logic of operation. Instead of unmasking, the off-modern recovers modern perspectivism, the logic of "making strange" and polymorphous versatility. Off doesn't move through "de-" and "un-." Off is not "anti-." For off-moderns, subversion is sometimes necessary but it isn't a duty. In the early twentieth century, Freud spoke about polymorphous perversity and bisexuality; we now live it and take it for granted; we are all metro- or peri-sexuals. Rather than a perversity or subversion, the off-modern is a form of polymorphous versatility and play of perspectives.

Perspectivism was articulated by Nietzsche as a part of vitalism and life creation—all those aspects of his thought that didn't make it into the postmodern cannon. Perspectivism in Nietzsche mediates between idealist and materialist conceptions of knowledge, between prospectivism and retrospectivism, exploring temporal and spatial multiplicities. Perspectivism developed several centuries before Nietzsche, at the cultural and generic crossroads with the development of the baroque optic of anamorphosis and

along with the rise of the European novel, going back to the wanderings of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza—on the borders of the Christian world and on the edges between life and fiction—and in the serpentine journey of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*—on the free-wheeling border between sense and nonsense. Tracing an alternative genealogy in *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera, one of the eccentric writers who can be qualified as off-modern, saw in novelistic-perspectival thinking a mode of play that went against the grain of the dominant political ideologies of left and right in the 1960s and 1970s, after the crushing of Prague’s “socialism with a human face” by Soviet tanks. The off-modern recovers Don Quixote’s adventurous windmills (sometimes from the perspective of the contemporary damsel, still a little in distress but otherwise pretty self-sufficient). Off-moderns retrace that early modern journey through a devastated and war-torn world that was becoming stranger than fiction.

Perspectivism explores physical and metaphorical limits, touches the edges, to draw wisdom from the experiences of limit and of broadening horizons. The vitalist and human dimension of perspectivism is very important since it engages history, trauma, and loss but avoids the paranoid logic of victimization, by which victims can become victimizers, creating vicious circles of reversal and perpetuation of oppressions. Perspectivism isn’t relativism or an all-inclusiveness of excessive consumer choices; instead it moves from the enlargement of the field of thinking to the act of judging beyond the multiple choices of the market and through an engagement with history.

Off-modern perspectivism is a form of alternative framing that recovers some earlier meanings of the word “frame” that got lost in the process of cultural musealization. Initially, “to frame” didn’t mean to attach a gilded wooden artifact around a picture and thus trap the “most wanted.” Framing meant building, promoting, advancing, and the noun “frame” referred to timber, the building material itself, and not merely the surrounding for a precious object. “Frame” comes from “from,” which meant “forward,” “ahead,” “advance.” I don’t know how and why it evolved into the unfortunate direction of nostalgic introspection. Perhaps *from* and *forward* aren’t mutually exclusive.

The evolution of the word “frame” suggests that foreground and background, center and periphery, substance and edge, can trade places. It’s up to us to behold and recognize those exciting metamorphoses. Off-modern framing

isn't "quoting" or simulating or appropriating in the postmodern fashion. The culture of the past shouldn't be framed as an exotic criminal. Framing is the jointure of building, making, con-spiring and co-creating. Off-modern framing is never final, rather it is a part of an existential adventure in life and thought.

The off-modern perspective has an anamorphic dimension as well. The best-known example of anamorphosis, literally "the image within the image," is Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*. If we look at the picture "straight," we face two highly decorated courtiers celebrating their worldly achievements, but from another, oblique angle of vision, we suddenly discern the image of a skull that doesn't belong to the same illusionistic three-dimensional universe; it functions as a *memento mori* or a figure of *vanitas* that puts earthly riches in perspective. Anamorphosis isn't merely a *trompe-l'oeuil* trick. It played an important role in the baroque optics closely connected to early modern political theory and theory of judgment, most notably in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*.

What characterizes anamorphosis is a coexistence within one painting of two different modes of seeing that can't be streamlined or transcended. Fascinated by this structure of visual ambiguity, many contemporary interpreters tried to decipher the theoretical implications of the anamorphosis. Jacques Lacan gave an intricate seminar on the topic, exploring the symptomatic uncanniness of the visual field.⁵ Anamorphosis is also a favorite cipher in contemporary popular culture that opens the world of detective clues and puzzles. From the off-modern perspective, anamorphosis isn't merely a secret inscription, code, or hidden clue for a total interpretation. Detective or occult interpretation of an anamorphosis ultimately reduces its transformative plurality, its material texture of ambiguity that contains a mystery of multiple potentialities and unfolding horizons. The point isn't to solve the riddle but to think through enigma. Anamorphosis isn't a cool special effect available in the latest version of Photoshop, but a form of perspectival thinking based on resistance to the "disambiguation" required by much contemporary technology. Off-modern perspectivism pursues anamorphic frames-within-a-frame as a genuine possibility of coexistence of different systems of coordinates that can open into the uncharted forms of creative thinking.



Figure 9.1 Svetlana Boym, “Leaving Madrid,” *Cities in Transit*, 2003, photographic print, 17 × 22 inches.

Prospective Nostalgia

Off-modern reflection mediates between memory and freedom. Off-modern nostalgia isn't retrospective but prospective; it recovers unforeseen pasts and future anteriors that can still transform our present. *Prospective* nostalgia isn't merely a wistful acknowledgement that nostalgia would or should be what it used to be. Nor is it an escape from the complexities of the present.

The word "prospective" was connected to the invention of telescopes and spyglasses, and came into broad use in the seventeenth century. It was exactly at that time that a Swiss doctor coined the term *nostalgia* and diagnosed the new modern disease of home-sickness, a longing to return in time and space. Prospective vision is often connected with an orientation towards the future and the foreign horizon, while nostalgic longing is directed towards the past where the lost home is irretrievably hidden. What brings them together in spite of the different vectors of direction is a rebellion against the irreversibility of time, and a striving beyond the temporal and spatial confines of the present.

Prospective nostalgia engages in two interconnected projects: expansion of temporal regimes in the present, and expansion of freedom within history. For prospective nostalgics, the past is neither a database of random facts nor a monumental narrative of development and progress with cycles of violence and inevitable catastrophes. Prospective nostalgics project the specter of freedom into history, which often requires a slower pace of making meaning against the grain of the current culture of access and speed. The experience of freedom is, in Hannah Arendt's definition, "a miracle of infinite improbability," which occurs regularly in the public realm and includes a deliberate action of judgment and co-creation in the world in order to ensure the possibility of a new beginning. With the help of off-modern spyglasses we can detect pluralities within cultures, traditions of dissent, and "the dignity of the defeated" in

history. These fellow travelers were neither victors nor victims, and they often developed a lucid understanding of the traumas of their time, even if their insights and visionary dreams didn't make it into History with a capital "H." Prospective nostalgia's ethics is written with a small "e," and is different from the self-righteousness of those who claim to restore their national heritage, or to wipe it away for the sake of a new development. Prospective nostalgics don't merely recover the geological layers of impersonal pasts, but continue to engage in transcultural and transhistorical dialogues with our distant imaginary friends.

Spyglasses of prospective nostalgia can magnify what is hidden in plain view in our ever-fleeting here and now. The constant drive for obsolescence and renewal obscures the fact that we still live with multiple temporalities that don't fit on the retinal screen of the new iPad Mini. Our landscape is heterogeneous and shaped by the ruins and construction sites of different modernities—industrial, post-industrial, digital, post-digital. We need to think beyond the directional arrows of time pointing at the Past or Future and to inhabit multiple temporal regimes of the Present, with their different pace, rhythm, and duration. There is more to the experience of the Present than a fragrant aftertaste or an afterimage as beautiful as it is blurry. Prospective nostalgics are double agents who crisscross temporal borders in order to expand the broad margin of the here and now.



Figure 10.1 Svetlana Boym, "Aunt Liuba's 'still life,'" *Common Places*, 1994



Figure 10.2 Svetlana Boym, "Aunt Liuba's 'still life,'" detail, *Common Places*, 1994

Ruinophilia

The early twenty-first century exhibits a strange ruinophilia, a material embodiment of the prospective nostalgia that goes beyond postmodern quotation marks. In our increasingly digital age, ruins appear as an endangered species, physical embodiments of modern paradoxes reminding us of the blunders of modern teleologies and technologies alike, and of the riddles of human freedom.

Ruin literally means “collapse,” but actually, ruins are more about remainders and reminders. A tour of ruins leads you into a labyrinth of ambivalent temporal adverbs—“no longer” and “not yet,” “nevertheless” and “albeit”—that play tricks with causality. Ruins make us think of the past that could have been and the future that never took place, tantalizing us with utopian dreams of escaping the irreversibility of time. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin saw ruins as “allegories of thinking itself” (177–78), a meditation on ambivalence. At the same time, the fascination of ruins isn’t merely intellectual but also sensual. Ruins give us a shock of vanishing materiality. Suddenly our critical lens changes, and instead of marveling at grand projects and utopian designs, we begin to notice weeds and dandelions in the crevices of stones, cracks on modern transparencies, rust on withered “Blackberries” in our ever-shrinking closets.

Since antiquity, there has been an isomorphism between nature, architecture, and the human body. In decaying columns one can see tree trunks, while phantom Atlantes and Caryatids haunt porticos all over the globe. The uncanny anthropomorphism of ruins was discovered as early as the sixteenth century in scenes from the anatomic theater, where the dissection of the human body took place against backdrops of classical ruins.⁶ Vertebrae and carcasses overlap in the double vision of ruins. Ruins embody anxieties about human

aging, commemorating our cultural endeavors and their failures. Joseph Brodsky once compared his ruined teeth to the Parthenon; while the comparison doesn't do justice either to classical ruins or to bad Leningrad teeth, it poetically captures their uncanny symmetry.

While half-destroyed buildings and architectural fragments may have existed since the beginning of human culture, ruinophilia did not. There is a historic distinctiveness to the "ruin gaze" that can be understood as the particular optics that frame our relationship to ruins. The ruin gaze is colored by nostalgia, but nostalgia, too, isn't what it used to be. Its object is forever elusive, and our way of making sense of this longing for home is also in constant flux. The ruins of twentieth-century modernity, as seen through the contemporary prism, both undercut and stimulate the utopian imagination, constantly shifting and deterritorializing our dreamscape.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Georg Simmel formulated a theory of ruins that resonates with contemporary preoccupations. According to Simmel, ruins are the opposite of the perfect moment pregnant with potentialities; they reveal in "retrospect" what this epiphanic moment had in "prospect."⁷ Yet they signal not merely decay but also a certain imaginative perspectivism in its hopeful and tragic dimension. Simmel saw in the fascination with ruins a peculiar form of collaboration between human and natural creation: "Nature has transformed the work of art into material for her own expression as she had previously served as material for art."⁸ Such a framing of ruins reveals a multidirectional mimesis: people imitate nature's creativity, but a natural setting endows human creations with a patina of age. The contemporary ruin gaze is the gaze reconciled to perspectivism, to conjectural history and spatial discontinuity.

Two centuries ago, Friedrich Schlegel commented on the pace of transformation of modern ruins: "Many of the works of the Ancients have become fragments. Many of the Moderns are fragments the moment they come into being."⁹ The pace of modern time precipitates both construction and destruction, sometimes imploding temporal duration. Modern ruins are particularly poignant because they are belated and contemporary at once. In his reflection on Baroque drama, Benjamin commented that in ruins "human history is physically merged into the natural setting" (178). There is one important difference between ruinophilia and nostalgia. Ruinophilia is less

afflicted with a personal story; it isn't a longing for home or for identity but more of a material and visceral experience of the irreversibility of time that comes together with care for the world. Ruinophilia can be antinarcissistic, but no less melancholic for that reason; it is about a simultaneous mourning for the world and gratitude for its survival.

The contemporary ruin gaze requires an acceptance of disharmony and of the counterpointed relationship of human, historical, and natural temporality. Most importantly, present-day ruinophilia isn't merely a Baroque meditation on the *vanitas* of all things worldly or a neo-Romantic malaise and a reflection of our inner landscapes of longing. Rediscovered off-modern ruins aren't only *symptoms* but also *sites* for a new exploration and production of meanings. New buildings and installations neither destroy the past nor rebuild it; rather, the architect or the artist co-creates with the remainders of history, collaborates with modern ruins, redefines their functions, both utilitarian and poetic. The resulting eclectic transitional architecture promotes a spatial and temporal extension into the past and the future, into different existential topographies of cultural forms. Thus, the off-modern perspective allows us to frame utopian projects as dialectical ruins—not to discard or demolish them, but rather to confront them and incorporate them into our own fleeting present.

But what about inhabited ruins that persist against all odds in cities all over the globe? Is there a problem in speaking of ruinophilia in referring to places of war and destruction, where toleration of ruins is a tragic necessity of life? The question resonates differently in each particular urban landscape and doesn't have a single technical solution. In his discussion of the theatrical "porosity" of Neapolitan dwellings, Walter Benjamin warned against the exoticization of the accidental and the picturesque that can be an effect of the outsider's gaze, and yet such a gaze also enables us to appreciate without judgment the improvisational quality of the urban environment. Can we approach ruinophilia from outside, avoiding the aestheticization of decay and not becoming disaster time travellers?

Orhan Pamuk has observed that the imperial ruins of Istanbul were co-created by the outsider's gaze and the insider's longing (or the other way around). They were first commemorated by European painters of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, who deemed them charming, but then the natives rediscovered their city through those meticulously depicted panoramas, filling

them with unredeeming collective *hüzün*—untranslatable Turkish melancholia. Ruinophilia can become a form of urban identification that can never be completely naturalized and requires a constant reality check. The meaning of ruins is unstable; their duration is longer than most historical debates and their material presence so intense that they embarrass many ideological or critical assessments that try to pin down their meaning.

My own childhood was passed amid the semi-ruined buildings of Leningrad, marked by the scars of war and of ruthless disrepair. My father recalls living right after the Second World War in an apartment with a closed door that led nowhere; behind it was a ruin, and cohabiting next to it became our family's way of life. We moved to a "communal apartment" located in the turn-of-the-century part of Leningrad, built in the eclectic style that brought together Neo-Renaissance columns, Moorish arabesques, Baroque facades, and Art Nouveau ornaments. It was left in a state of decay, perhaps to underscore the "bourgeois decadence" of that pre-Soviet nostalgia for world culture.

My first year in college in the late 1970s, I worked as a Leningrad tour guide, and I took my tourists in a bus straight to the city's magnificent classical ensembles, following the official historical narrative from imperial St. Petersburg to revolutionary Petrograd and on to the heroic Leningrad that overcame all the wounds of the war. But the tourists weren't blind, and they asked me many questions about those improbably eclectic half-ruined buildings on the side streets, not included in our official landmarks. We were instructed to tell them that those were "bourgeois monuments in the decadent eclectic style that presented no architectural value." Similarly, at the Hermitage, we were taught to guide our tourists from the masterpieces of the Renaissance to the highlights of Realistic art, never taking a detour to the semi-dark rooms of Baroque and Mannerist paintings or to the forbidden avant-garde art kept in the storerooms. Of course, we learned to deviate from the instructions and escaped to the semi-forbidden ruins with their baroque shadow play that seemed much more honest than the brightly lit galleries.

Our "communal apartment" was a somewhat dilapidated place, with a dysfunctional communal bathroom and a shabby kitchen, but the rooms themselves were nicely decorated, often featuring displays of cherished souvenirs with the patina of the past that one woman described as her "mini-Hermitage." These residences were spaces of living contradictions, with dark

back entrances and luxurious front lobbies, with checkered mosaic floors and marble staircases inhabited by drunks, exhibitionists, and dreamers. These eclectic cosmopolitan façades and the bifurcating veins on the ruined marble composed the interiors of our dreams and taught us to live with the urban disharmony that expanded our time and space.



Figure 11.1 Rem Koolhaas, “Project Hermitage 2014,” 2014, digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist and OEM.

Off-Modern Urbanism

The paradoxical after-effects of twentieth-century history can turn postcommunist Eastern Europe into a fertile ground for alternative urbanism. In the early twentieth century, the belated modernization in this region contributed to the flourishing of the radical avant-gardes; their political suppression gave way to subversive everyday survivals. Three aspects of the eccentric modernities in postcommunist Eastern Europe remain enigmatic and unreadable to well-wishing foreign travelers: a strange disregard for the non-state-sponsored and non-corporate public realm in the countries that were supposed to be more collectivist than their Western counterparts; the contradictory heritage of modern architecture; and a deeper connection to art and historical architectural form and its political potentials.

Working in St. Petersburg, architect and writer Rem Koolhaas proposed an oxymoron that marries experimental design and ruinophilia: “modernization through preservation.” His project, Hermitage-Masterplan 2014, attempts to defamiliarize both the narrative of contemporary architectural development and that of the no less contemporary obsession with preservation. It aims to decenter the overly symbolic site of the Palace Square in St. Petersburg. The site is overburdened by its symbolic capital; it was a stage for imperial and revolutionary history as well as of the theatrical total work that restaged the storming of the Winter Palace in 1920, awarding the final victory to the Bolsheviks with Wagner’s music blasting in the background. So to add a new spectacular building here would not only ruin the historic ensemble of the city but would also continue unreflectively the tradition of total work that covered up the palimpsests of an inconvenient past.¹⁰

Koolhaas’ project isn’t architectural in a narrow sense: it combines avant-garde archeology, narratology, curating, and urbanism. The project originated in a practical need, which then acquired an artistic and conceptual framing.

With the addition of the General Staff building, the Hermitage gained 800 rooms in addition to the existing 1,200. The General Staff building, constructed by the Italian architect Carlo Rossi, had been a part of the majestic ensemble of the Palace Square, but its use had been military and administrative. Now it was to become a part of the museum. While visiting the Hermitage in the early 2000s, Koolhaas observed a tension between the highly centralized guided tour, which offered an authoritative narrative of artistic and political history, and the heterogeneous, conflictory nature of the site itself, with many fenced entrances, interior yards, attics and basements perpetually under repair and hidden from view like the building's deviant histories. Wandering through the dilapidated storage rooms, Koolhaas became fascinated by the casual display of uncurated museum pieces that underscored the fragility and arbitrariness of the museum's boundaries and also captured a contemporary moment of historic transition.

To convey this sense of possibilities pregnant in the fleeting and unsustainable present of the dilapidated building, Koolhaas suggested only a minimal strategic intervention into the existing historical architecture, which was not to be restored according to a present imagination of past glory. Petersburg is a museum city, the Hermitage a museum inside the museum city that can become a micro-stage for off-modern urbanism. One of Koolhaas' strategies is the "urbanization" of the project, to open alternative routes through the space that make it more publically accessible and unpredictable, more of an improbable ruin and construction site and less of a spectacular total work. Instead, a certain cultural atmosphere would be preserved, a porous environment that invites new configurations of objects and associations. Part of this new space can be used as a Kunsthalle, a place for experimental encounters of old and new art. Taking as his inspiration Piranesi's Via Appia, the serpentine passage through the ruins of antiquity, Koolhaas' team proposed a more casual Via Appia through the ruins of modernity that would traverse the existing administrative spaces of the General Staff building. The architect insisted that there was no need to build a gigantic, homogenizing museum space that would cultivate megalomaniac art pieces speaking more to national pride or market inflation than to the existing urban imperatives.

To counteract this gigantic scale of development, the architect who practices "modernization through preservation" has to know when to build and when to

restrain from building and clear the stage. Sometimes the goal is not to “add to architecture but simply to add to elimination, to reveal other dimensions and possibilities” (Koolhaas 134). Through this subtle process of elimination and sideshadowing, the off-modern choreographer constructs an experimental veduta, enabling us to look at the density of the present from the perspective of the future and with a pinch of anticipatory nostalgia.

The project began with intense observation of the existing ruined site, similar to the surrealist practice of detecting the ordinary marvelous. Koolhaas’ team became aware of different forms of architectural scenography and lighting in the Hermitage and in the General Staff building that create different textures of interior experience. Koolhaas doesn’t wish to upgrade the Hermitage’s lighting, bringing it up to Western standards. Instead he pays homage to the particularities of the Hermitage environment without passing judgment. He practices the same reflective *chiaroscuro* approach to the museum’s history, avoiding both the obfuscation of the site’s controversial histories and the bright light of total renovation. Koolhaas’ team unearthed many experimental museum projects from the 1920s to the 1960s that had never been realized. In his own presentation, Koolhaas wants to put the museum displays themselves on display and lay bare the frameworks of history and art.

In the current conditions of the unpredictable politics of Russian urban development, it is possible that only elements of Koolhaas’ project will be implemented in practice. Hopefully, its fate won’t be that of Tatlin’s tower, one of Koolhaas’ favorite projects: “The brilliance of Tatlin’s Tower,” Koolhaas has written, “was that it was already built from the moment he first designed it—or perhaps I should say: transcribed it. Tatlin knew this; now so do we.” The Tatlin Tower here is a phantom limb of contemporary architecture; the point isn’t to finally build it with the help of new computer software but to fathom its many potentials. Koolhaas, the writer and critic turned architect, cherishes his connection to the traditions of the avant-garde and their life in the alleys of history. In this project the architect becomes an off-modern historian and a scenographer for an alternative future. He moves in a slow zigzag through the displays of cultural history, dwelling in ruinophilic disharmony to gain an insight into the contemporary.

Off-modern urbanism is about built and lived environments; it brings together many elements that might be in a tangential relationship to what is

conventionally understood as architecture. Its focus is on a new curating of public life. It isn't only about appropriation and recycling of the urban forms of the past, but also about reorganizing the whole urban texture and rethinking the scale of architectural intervention. While sometimes operating at a smaller, more human scale, off-modern urbanism expands rather than contracts the understanding of architectural potentials. It foregrounds environments in transition, ruins and construction sites where multiple industrial and postindustrial modernities coexist. In many cases traditional architectural intervention has to be combined with a nuanced curating of the segment of the urban environment that can become a public realm in miniature. Such microarchitectures can have multiple ripple effects on a larger scale.

There are many interesting examples of such off-modern experimentation in places that go through a period of historical transition, such as the newly renamed or reestablished countries in Southern and Eastern Europe, which might be considered "eccentric" from a mainstream point of view. Here urbanistic practices challenge local laws, social conventions, and hierarchies, as well as the understanding of heritage and history. Some such examples come from Pristina, Tirana, Budapest, and Zagreb. As Croatian architect and activist Marko Sančanin suggests, sometimes what matters is "weak architecture with strong questions." Generating public debate and participation is part of the reinvention of public space through different means, in the countries where such a public realm was forever suspect and underdeveloped. The off-modern allows spaces to open up "off-capitalism," and helps us reimagine a public sphere not driven solely by real estate development and the market.

One of the more ambitious examples of off-modern urbanism is the "Tirana façades" project in Albania imagined by Tirana's artist turned mayor Edi Rama, who managed to accomplish an unconventional artistic facelift of the city center. After fifty years of communist dictatorship followed by postcommunist riots and anarchic democratization, Tirana had become a "dead city," in Rama's words; it resembled a "transit station" where people "were doomed to live." Rama's goal is to offer the city a new artistic public realm that would make it "the city of choice" that can be inhabited anew.

How does Rama propose to do this? Cheaply and boldly, through color and redesign of the façades built in the homogeneous late-Socialist style. He wants to use color not as a symbol but as a signal and bold trigger for the shared

future of the troubled city. His project is to repaint the façades of the city in a radical artistic manner, inviting international as well as Albanian artists to contribute in order to create a striking new look that would spur larger urban development and public debate. Retouching the façades doesn't merely change the "skin of the city" but transforms its internal organs and awakens its dormant psyche. Rama isn't interested in color per se but in debating colors and forms to strengthen creative forms of a new urban citizenship.

For Rama the relationship between the mayor and his people is similar to that of the artist and his audience. Yet this isn't a case of "the aestheticization of politics," but rather of a transformative artistic practice that doesn't aim at creating a seamless spectacle. Rama defines his project as "the avant-garde of democratization." The juxtaposition of the two words is crucial, if controversial. Democratizing goes together with "making artistic," while the avant-garde engages non-militant deliberation. For the mayor, "artistic" becomes almost synonymous with "public"; he aspires to give his city a new agora and an aesthetic public realm.

Rama's project might appear as a utopia of democratization. But it is certainly more imaginative and far less expensive than the realpolitik architecture of Berlin's Potsdamer Platz, with its corporate privatization of the public realm, or the rebuilding of larger-than-life cathedrals and huge underground shopping malls in the nouveau-riche extravaganza of contemporary Moscow. The Tirana façade project is an ironic preservation of modernization. It "preserves" the unloved postwar architecture of the years of the Albanian dictatorship by using it as an experimental canvas for the memories of the future that can bring in emotion, pleasure, and care for the common world. In short, this is a more modest dream than a large-scale collective utopia, but it is a dream worth dreaming.

It's okay to add prefixes to the word "architecture," be they "micro-," "para-," "super-," or "off-." These prefixes question the fixity of architectural superstructure and allow for new experiments. Off-modern urbanism tampers with architectural autonomy and "couples" architecture with artistic practices, social politics, and law, in order to develop new relationships in the world. It creates a "touching architecture" exposing and fostering tangential relationships between architecture and its others. The off-modern approach zooms in on the tangential relationships that produce different forms of

innovation. Off-modern urbanism explores the interfaces between the solid and the ephemeral, and dwells on the urban surfaces and textures that embarrass the virtual slickness of digital models, in order to embrace architecture's unique role in the making of public space. Sylvia Lavin has suggested an alluring term: "kissing architecture"—perhaps a little more daring than my own "touching architecture," but certainly complementary to it. In *Kissing Architecture*, Lavin demonstrates that innovation in architecture might come from the "twosomes," plays of reciprocities between architecture and non-architecture that make us revisit the erotics of urban interstices and erring. Such a "non-tragic" approach defies grand narratives of twentieth-century architectural history, both of modern architecture's failed formal autonomy and of its failed social engagement, suggesting a third way of thinking about urban space that is more flexible, enmeshed, and affectively political, a space of constructive ruinophilia and diasporic intimacies between urban strangers.



Figure 11.2 Rem Koolhaas, “Project Hermitage 2014,” 2014, digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist and OEM.



Figure 12.1 Pussy Riot performance inside Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, February 21, 2012. Photo by ITAR-TASS/Mitya Aleshkovsky.

Embarrassing Monumentality

He stared at the Monument. "It seems all wrong sometimes. I just can't explain it. It makes me feel haywire. Then I get these flashes."

Henry Kuttner, quoted in Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey."

How can we make sense of our disharmonious public realm, with its intentional and unintentional monuments, corporate gated communities and semi-abandoned lots, ruined boundaries and newly constructed walls?

Global cultural space is often imagined as a configuration of cool non-sites turned virtual hotspots for global jetsetters. New forms of mobility and deterritorialization are often viewed in opposition to practices of collective memory and individual inhabiting. Thus an encounter with the material remains of the industrial and postindustrial age and with old public monuments can produce a feeling of embarrassment. At times, we experience a melancholic identification with those awkwardly aging survivors of the twentieth century. Or else we are simply baffled by the incongruity of the outmoded monuments, fragments of past dreams or transient megalomaniacs of history's winners. Yet our embarrassment might be a good sign, suggesting that we haven't yet lost the capacity for taking our public world personally.

Thinking with embarrassment, navigating around the stumbling blocks, might result in a constructive design strategy that brings together experiences of deterritorialization and engagement with material memory, combining global and local defamiliarization. The off-modern spatial action reinvents the drifts and detours of Surrealists and Situationists and the ludic knight's moves of the Russian modernists, suggesting new ways of understanding, building, and acting in the twenty-first-century global public space.

An experience of embarrassment interrupts the act of knowing, producing epistemological hesitation. Etymologically, “embarrassment” comes from the Latin (or, possibly, Celtic) root “bar” (Middle English “barren,” Old French “barrer”). To “embarrass” means literally, “to block,” “to obstruct.” Thus, the word shares the same root with “barricade,” “barrier,” “barrister,” and “embargo.” The etymology is similar to that of the word “scandal,” from Greek *skandalon*, “stumbling block,” originally a snare or trap with a spring. Here we see that the mechanical obstruction of passage comes to mean physical and emotional discomfort produced by introducing something private into a public realm.

Embarrassment reveals a simultaneous excess and lack, an excess of self-consciousness and a lack of self-possession. The disconcerting physicality of embarrassment manifests itself in a hot blush, clumsiness or awkwardness, even stuttering. Moreover, one is never embarrassed in private. The comedy of embarrassment always unfolds in the presence of others, suggesting a complicated economy of the gaze, and an interdependence between the embarrassed, the embarrassed, and the witness. Embarrassing complicates the act of framing and understanding. The hot flush of embarrassment embodies a disconcerting mixed feeling that tampers with the clarity of demarcations.

Embarrassment is one of those hinge concepts that mediates between emotion and consciousness, physical and mental reflection, as well as between one’s inner citadel and the public world. It makes use of mixed feelings, bundled actions, eccentric thinking, and changing scales, mixing human and monumental proportions. The framing of embarrassment can work as a trap with a spring that can embarrass the artist and his spectators and critics. Embarrassment is a chain reaction that offsets the conventions of representation and the boundaries between people and things, between the virtual and the material realms.

With its inevitable physical attributes, embarrassment enters aesthetics only at the end of the eighteenth century. One of the first instances of a use of the word comes from Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*: having to share a bedroom with a stranger at an inn, “I found myself as much embarrassed as it was possible the lady could be herself.” In her novel *Emma*, Jane Austen speaks aptly about “the little zigzags of embarrassment” in which human interaction in a carriage (between Emma and Mr. Elton) mirrors the twists and turns of the bumpy road. Many writers and poets who introduced embarrassment were

accused of effeminacy and emasculation. (Charles Darwin, however, believed that a capacity for embarrassment was an important modern development. According to this somewhat self-serving argument, the English people, particularly prone to blushing, unlike darker ethnicities and races, are farther ahead in the march of evolution.) The representation of embarrassment is a most alien element for the aesthetics of classical *sang-froid*; it moves towards the disproportionate, the uncool, and the excessive, which has been linked to the cultural myth of feminine art.

Embarrassment isn't the same as shame; it has fewer metaphysical connotations. Shame has to do with right and wrong, or good and evil (or their perception), and is linked to theology and an internalized sense of the sacred and the profane, to conceptions of sin, providence, and a fall from grace. Embarrassment appears to be beyond good and evil, at least at first glance. It can be but doesn't have to be linked to the metaphysical realm; rather, it is a part of the mystery of human interaction in the liminal realm between the public and the personal.¹¹

Starting with the mid-nineteenth-century polymath John Ruskin and culminating with turn-of-the-century Viennese critic Alois Riegl, art historians observed the affective, mysterious, and occasionally embarrassing "age value" of monuments, which eludes those who believe in complete restoration of the imagined original state. In "The Lamp of Memory," Ruskin speaks about the "glory of the Age: the deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity" (132).

Alois Riegl introduced affective categories into the discussion of monumentality engaging paradoxes of human time. According to Riegl, the "historic value" in traditional preservation aims at "the most complete conservation in the present state," restoration of the precise historical moment that "requires that the natural course of decay be stayed as much as humanly possible" ("The Modern Cult of Monuments," 32). On the other hand, "age value" acknowledges the unsettling experience of modern time and the vanishing sensuality of the public world. One of its components is a mysterious "mood value" or *Stimmung*. Instead of returning to aesthetic or historic unity, the mood value allows us to contemplate monuments taken out of their original contexts and displaced into the life cycles of nature and human time. Mood value blurs

the boundary between intentional and unintentional monuments, preserving not only didactic history but the patina of time. More broadly, mood (*Stimmung*) allows us to contrast the melancholic sense of the irreversibility of human life with the long durations of our dreams and the slower paces of other epochs, frozen in ruined marble or concrete. It can be further cultivated and curated by restaging the material fragment of history in the new scenography of modernization through preservation.

I use “embarrassing” as a verb of action and as an adjective. One can distinguish two major strategies, one consisting in the embarrassing of existing monuments and the other focused on the uncanny discovery of the embarrassing monumentality in the unmonumental postindustrial landscape, marking new eccentric unintentional memorials and overlooked non-sites.

The most radical example of the first strategy of embarrassing an existing monument was the punk-rock group Pussy Riot’s performance in February 2012 in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, praying for the Mother of God to save Russia from Vladimir Putin. Their action defamiliarized the sacred symbol of the Cathedral and treated it as a site of contested memories, a place where many past ruins were erased when the new remake was built in the late 1990s; it came to symbolize a perfect marriage of church and Putin’s state. The performance embarrassed this symbolic meaning of the remade monument through the clash of scales. Only forty seconds long, their ephemeral low-voice performance in the megalomaniac cathedral cost two members of the Pussy Riot group two years in prison. The performance and the trial revealed major cultural taboos and the way in which, in Putin’s Russia, an artistic gesture of symbolic violence is punished with physical violence. Arrested for “hooliganism” and for “incitement of religious hatred,” the women artists insisted that their action wasn’t anti-religious but political, and was specifically directed against the monument of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. They claimed to continue both in the Russian tradition of the *yurovivy*—blessed fool—and in the tradition of Guy Debord and the dissidents of Soviet times.

I will focus primarily on the strategy of finding the embarrassing monumentality in the unmonumental and unspectacular landscape of post-industrial ruins. We don’t have to associate embarrassment solely with the blushing ingénue in a Masterpiece Theater adaptation of Jane Austen (not that there’s anything wrong with that). In the American postwar context, it was the

celebrated land artist Robert Smithson who mobilized the hot flashes of embarrassment in his pioneering 1967 essay “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” anticipating by forty years the alternative architectural preservation projects of the early twenty-first century. The off-modern archeology of embarrassment leads us to Amerossia, the alternative continent of the Cold War era that didn’t exist on any official map but was affectionately described by Vladimir Nabokov. The dialogue between Smithson and Nabokov, one of Smithson’s favorite writers, expands our understanding of the relationship between site and non-site, global and local, intertextual and infrastructural connections between writing, visual arts, and built environments.

At first glance, in spite of Smithson’s frequent quoting of Nabokov, the connection seems tenuous. Robert Smithson is best known as an American land artist fascinated by entropy, whereas Nabokov is a cosmopolitan writer and “epicure of time” who hoped against hope for an outmoded immortality. True, Smithson claimed that he had a Slavic mother from Passaic, and Nabokov persuasively argued that he gained so much weight after moving to the US that he had become two-thirds American. More importantly, Smithson uses Nabokov as a guide in his journey through the unmemorial American landscape. Smithson’s motto comes from Nabokov: “The future is but the obsolete in reverse.” This is a case of a creative misreading, both embarrassing and emancipatory. The journey through postindustrial Amerossia questions the boundaries between the memorable and the forgettable, between curated and abandoned in public space.

“A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” has an epigraph from Nabokov: “Today our unsophisticated cameras record in their own way our hastily assembled and painted world” (*Collected Works* 68). Smithson photographs his native Passaic with Nabokov’s émigré camera. Today we think our cameras are sophisticated enough that we don’t have to think about those issues of mimesis, but in fact, to paraphrase Nabokov, the real remains in quotation marks even if we tend to be less critical about the new frameworks of technology. Smithson’s essay is an uncanny Odyssey that evokes Nabokov’s guides for home and abroad, such as the “Guide to Berlin” where Nabokov names ruined pipes in the city of exile, and the story “Visit to the Museum” where the writer never names his native city, unveiled to him at the end of the

surreal museum tour. The boundaries of museum exhibits and trash, as well as the memories of home and exile, are often dislocated in Nabokov and Smithson.

Smithson travels to the place of his birth, Passaic, New Jersey, with a one-way ticket:

I bought a copy of the *New York Times* and a Signet paperback called *Earthworks* by Brian W. Aldiss. I looked at a blurry copy of Samuel F.B. Morse's *Allegorical Landscape* . . . the sky was a subtle newspaper grey, and the clouds resembled sensitive stains of sweat reminiscent of a famous Yugoslav watercolorist whose name I have forgotten.

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The writer is multitasking without technological gadgets, drifting between the shades of grey of allegorical and not so allegorical landscapes from the Hudson Valley to Yugoslavia, and constantly migrating from one medium into another.

The first "monument" he describes is a decaying industrial bridge, built circa 1899, which is actually the year of Nabokov's birth. Both are contemporaries of the previous century: "The Passaic (West) end of the bridge rotated south; while the Rutherford (East) rotated north; such rotations suggested limited movements of the outmoded world" (70). One could refer to such a bridge as a "Monument of Dislocated Direction." Incidentally, these are two places where Smithson's family lived; so the dislocation begins at home, and asks Smithson's favorite question: Where is time? The bridge of dislocation is a potent metaphor or a mental map or "non-site" for Smithsonian storytelling.

The next monument is "the great pipe" that is in some enigmatic way connected to "the infernal fountain" (71). "It was as if the pipe was secretly sodomizing some hidden technological orifice and causing a monstrous sexual organ (the fountain) to have an orgasm. A psychoanalyst might say that the landscape displayed 'homosexual tendencies' but I will not draw such crass anthropomorphic conclusions. I will merely say 'it was there'" (71).

Smithson pokes fun at psychoanalytic overinterpretation, a laugh that he might have shared with Nabokov, who also had fun at the expense of the psychoanalysts. Yet one doesn't have to be a psychoanalyst to observe that sometimes the pipe isn't just a pipe, and the artist doesn't merely say that it was there. Rather, he comes out of the closet as a storyteller, making embarrassing anthropomorphic metaphors into the infrastructure of his fictional home. In

Fragments of a Lover's Discourse Roland Barthes describes obscenity as excess and eccentricity, something off the scene that is linked to affect and embarrassment. What is obscene in the late twentieth century is not Georges Bataille's story of a pope sodomizing a turkey but the affect and tenderness that return against all odds.

The mood of the tour isn't debunking, subverting, critiquing, or sabotaging, but rather a tender and humorous naming of modern refuse that is taken out of the context of utility and production; the artist is cultivating the *Stimmung*, the mood value in his off-beat chance encounter and quasi-anthropomorphic intercourse with the industrial ruin.

In his essay "Entropy and the New Monuments," using the formal logic of monumental crystallography, Smithson proposes an extraordinary "ha-ha concept" of laughter. He distinguishes six main crystal systems: the ordinary laugh is cubic or square (isometric), the chuckle is a triangle or pyramid (tetragonal), the giggle is a hexagon or rhomboid (hexagonal), the titter is prismatic (orthorhombic), the snicker is oblique (monoclinic), the guffaw is asymmetric (triclinic) (*Collected Works* 21). Being an off-modern, I like the oblique shape of the snicker, but mostly this ha-ha theory reveals the off-modern multimedia strategy of drifting between theory and form, between laughter and the monument. Smithson demonumentalizes the monument and monumentalizes laughter. What always intrigues him is the matter per se, in this case the matter of laughter, which isn't a laughing matter, at least not in the conventional sense. In "What is a Museum," a dialogue with Allan Kaprow, Smithson observed: "The varieties of humor are pretty foreign to the American temperament. It seems that the American temperament doesn't associate art with humor" (*Collected Works* 50).

Through his exploration of the mood value of the unmemorial and the ha-ha concepts of laughter, Smithson comes face to face with the major aporia of the monument or ready made that is embarrassing for many artists. "The ready made are, in fact, puns on the Bergsonian concept of creative evolution with its idea of ready made categories. Says Bergson, "The history of philosophy . . . shows us the eternal conflict of systems, the impossibility of satisfactorily getting the real into the ready made garments of our ready made concepts . . ." (*Collected Works* 13). But it is just this impossibility that appeals to Smithson himself. The monument is a "bar" in the larger drift of embarrassment that is

enabling and estranging at once. In Smithson's own installations the bar can become a mirror that multiplies uncanny reflections, bringing in more literary allusions to Borges and Lewis Carroll.

And yet all roads in Smithson lead to the actual town of Passaic, New Jersey, the American Rome. In the early twentieth century, this was a prosperous manufacturing town that employed many immigrant workers of Slavic and Austro-Hungarian origin, a city that shares the history of decline with many similar industrial towns across the United States. Smithson's tour of its monuments can be placed in the context of the fierce discussions during the 1960s between developers and preservationists that took a new turn with the Landmarks Preservation Act. As Jennifer Roberts observes, in taking his journey to Passaic, Smithson leaves Greenwich Village, just declared to be a historic landmark, and doesn't go to the recently destroyed Penn Station but to Grand Central Station, and then travels to the site of industrial decay, Passaic. I don't share Roberts' view that Smithson merely de-historicizes and "neutralizes memory and sentiment," and that his camera is "amnesiac."¹² In his journey Smithson eschews the opposition between development and historic preservation, but he doesn't take it merely in the direction of oblivion. He takes a detour both from the relentless progress of modernization and from the emphasis on the "historic value" of necessary but sometimes literal-minded historic preservation. Instead he pursues the elusive *Stimmung*, the mood value that swings between melancholic forebodings of entropy and ludic estrangement, and opens scenographies for the ruins of the future. Moreover, Smithson's borrowed camera "remembers" many foreign perspectives from different times and places. Going back home, Smithson embarrasses the familiar landscape and finds the stranger inside himself.

Here I would extend the pipeline from Smithson to Nabokov. Nabokov's "Guide to Berlin" resembles Smithson's "Tour of the Monuments of Passaic" and anticipates it by some forty years. The author of this early text of 1925 is not the successful American writer Nabokov but a poor unknown young immigrant, who like many others lives in nondescript boarding houses in Berlin, and who publishes under the pseudonym Sirin. The landmarks of this guide don't include a Victory column but only a large black pipe, an ordinary Berlin street car, and a pub across from the Berlin Zoo that Nabokov calls an "artificial Eden, unfortunately behind bars." If Smithson's Passaic looks like

entropic Rome, Nabokov's Berlin resembles Smithson's Passaic. The first site in the "Guide to Berlin" is a gigantic black pipe that lies along the outer edge of the sidewalk near the boarding house where the author rents a room: "Today someone wrote OTTO with his finger on the virgin snow and I thought how beautiful that name with its two soft Os flanking the pair of consonants suited the silent layer of snow upon that pipe with its two orifices and its tacit tunnel" (*Stories* 155–56).

We note that the description is alliterative and isomorphic, with many *oo*-s and *tt*-s that mirror the lonely pipe. This is not a Duchampian fountain or a constructivist *objet trouvé* but a poetic pipe that allows an immigrant to inhabit temporarily his nondescript rental "home." A graffito offers a fleeting urban illumination, a minor detour into the ordinary marvelous. The irony of the Nabokov-Smithson relationship is that Nabokov's own pipes are unphotographable. Nabokov's textuality plays "against the camera." The writer's pipe draws our attention to the materiality of language itself, both native and foreign. Inspired by Smithson's reluctant anthropomorphism, we can observe that the virginal snow on Nabokov's pipe is described with tender polymorphic eroticism.

Nabokov's émigré narrator has a poet companion with whom he shares his tour of Berlin's monuments, who says that he's "a very poor guide. . . . It's of no interest,' my friend affirms with a mournful yawn . . . 'A boring foreign city and expensive to live in, too'" (159). This is a nice perspective on Berlin in the time of the Weimar Republic from the perspective of a poor immigrant. Nabokov collects his "ready mades" like displays for the museum of the future, but does so in a manner opposite to the "new objectivity" or other constructivist approaches. He wants to imagine:

I think here lies the sense of literary creation: to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times; to find in the objects around us the fragrant tenderness that only posterity will discern and appreciate in the far off times when every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right.

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Nabokov and Smithson propose different endings to their journeys around the monuments of immigrant Berlin and native Passaic. Smithson ends with a *mis-en-abyme* of entropy. His last monument is the sandbox where no

Maxwell's demon can prevent the movement of entropy. Even if we film it, the film itself will age with time, and we might add, computer software might become obsolete even faster. Nabokov too stages a *mise-en-abyme* of mirrors, but to a different end—to offer an imperfect safeguard against entropy. The narrator of the “Guide to Berlin” finds a consolation to his anticlimactic immigrant existence—he eavesdrops on a German boy seen in a mirror and imagines the boy dreaming of him in the future. In other words, Nabokov's story doesn't end with ironic entropy but with ironic tenderness. Instead of anticipating ruination, Nabokov aspires to anticipatory nostalgia. His ultimate desire is to bend the irreversibility of time and the short temporality of mortal existence, and to “glimpse somebody's future recollection” or provoke it through fiction.

And here we come to Smithson's creative misappropriation of Nabokov. Smithson loves to quote Nabokov's “the future is but the obsolete in reverse,” and from this quote he often moves into insights from dystopian science fiction and goes on to develop his ideas on entropy. Entropy for him is a form of resistance to capitalist development and naïve humanism. Nabokov, on the other hand, finds resistance to endless modernization in the sheer “epicurianism of time,” and mocks the banality of generic science fiction as he once mocked “the copulation of clichés” in pornographic narratives. Smithson's scholars have rarely looked into the context of the quote about the obsolete in reverse. It comes from Nabokov's story “Lance” (1958), which is an anti-science fictional tale of the journey to another planet that anticipates Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The story's hero, Lance, an astronaut of wonder who resembles the medieval Lancelot, travels into the radically unknown and the unforeseen. Upon his return to his nice middle-class British family, he tries to communicate to his earthly parents the incommunicable wonder and panic that he witnessed and the death of his comrade. But nobody can listen to him or even grasp his urgency to communicate. Lance-Lancelot is “embarrassed” (to borrow the word from the story) about his non-belonging to the human community as he stumbles against the bar of human communication and time. The quote about the future that is but the obsolete in reverse doesn't come as a reflection on entropy but rather as a comment on the radical estrangement that temporal and spatial displacement can offer (*Stories* 642). Or perhaps the two narrative drives—towards ironic entropy and towards anticipatory nostalgia, towards

the future becoming a ruin and the present becoming a souvenir—are in the end parallel and overlapping potentialities, bifurcations of the same extraordinary drift that (to quote Nabokov) moves into “*uncommon sense*.”

Nabokov’s unforeseen journeys expand our understanding of drift and detour as practiced by Surrealists, Situationists, and conceptual artists of the 1970s. A journey from site to non-site includes a lateral move that incorporates the banal, unremarkable, unintentional memorials and trash, but it doesn’t end there. It moves beyond spatial mapping into the dimensions of time and fiction. Inspired by Nabokov and others, in “A Provisional Theory of Non-sites,” Smithson writes:

It could be that “travel” in this space is a vast metaphor. Everything between the two sites could become physical metaphorical material devoid of natural meanings and realistic assumptions. Let us say that one goes on a fictitious trip if one decides to go to the site of the *Non-Site*. The “trip” becomes invented, devised, artificial; therefore, one might call it a non-trip to a site from a Non-site.

(*Collected Writings* 364)

Such drift is not about linking the sites in a database, but about crossing media boundaries as well as boundaries between cultures, developing eccentric off-modern solidarities. This practice transforms Robert Smithson from an American earth artist into the non-site specific Amerossian artist.

Smithson suggests that the middle of nowhere is a good place for a gallery or a museum, while Nabokov turns a provincial museum into a non-site from which one can travel back to the city museum of his childhood—St. Petersburg that became anonymous Leningrad. Together they offer us a wide array of strategies for remapping monuments and post-industrial non-sites and the zigzag paths of freedom. Their tours manage to cheat on the implacable logic of commodification that makes every artistic monument of the avant-garde into a spectacular icon; they focus on the ironic and tender narrative journey and share oblique laughter that exposes the instability of any artifact. Embarrassing monumentality doesn’t have to carry high production costs.

In the end, Nabokov and Smithson are off-moderns *avant la lettre*. If we were to crystallize provisionally a joint monument for the two artists, it might not look like the Bridge of Dislocating Directions but like a spiral with fragile reflective surface. Both Smithson and Nabokov were fascinated by Gustave

Flaubert's unfinished mysterious project called *La Spirale*. In Nabokov's definition, a spiral is a figure of a "cryptic disguise," a possibility of freedom, mimicry, laughter, and transformation that resists synthesis. Unfinalizable drift, both vertical and horizontal.

Embarrassing monumental drift reappropriates aspects of aesthetic practice such as estrangement, slowing down and working against instrumental and goal-oriented temporality, enabling reflection and judgment. This might become a necessary exercise for contemporary architects who wish to be contemporary but also a bit out of time and open to innovation. Embarrassment doesn't allow a smooth transition into the utopian or virtual, and insists on the stumbling encounter with the materiality of public space.

This embarrassing drift affects the understanding of media, technology, and the museum space. Museum space is not expropriated but repurposed and restaged; instead of a shrine it becomes a laboratory where display is put on display and offers a different kind of pedagogy.

Off-modern drift engages mixed media, mixed feeling; radical perspectivism, porous time; mutual embarrassment of artistic and theoretical practices. Drifting defies the idea of "project" and product, evoking different experimental temporalities—a longer duration of quest and a self-conscious ephemerality.

Robert Smithson on how to end an essay: "This little theory is tentative and could be abandoned at any time. Theories like things are also abandoned . . . Vanished theories compose the strata of many forgotten books."

Vladimir Nabokov on how to end a book: "And this is the only immortality you and I will have, my Lolita."



Figure 12.2 Robert Smithson, “The Fountain Monument—Bird’s Eye View,” 1967, photographic print. Art ©Holt-Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.



Figure 13.1 Anri Sala, “Déjeuner avec Marubi,” 1997, still from a film, edition of six. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris/ADIAF.

Tact and Touch

One question haunts the off-modern historian and demands urgency. How can we touch and open up the violent histories of the past? Why is it dangerous to translate physical violence into metaphysical violence? Why is there a disjuncture between the witnesses and the theorists of violence? Those who haven't experienced violence first hand often long for vicarious wounds and radical gestures, while those who have come into a direct contact with violence seek a fragile restorative touch, preservation of penitenti and affects. The history is rarely written by the witnesses, but their accounts always surprise us and unsettle our theoretical metaphors.

When I traveled to Sarajevo after the devastating siege of the city during the Yugoslav war, I was struck by the revulsion against violence among the citizens and local artists. They worried about turning the violence of history into the unaesthetic videogame violence of ready-made sensationalism. They didn't want to be seen as victims of trauma in need of mass psychoanalysis, or as extras in the background of a history lesson about ethnic violence. Rather, Sarajevans wanted to be heard on their own terms and with their very own black humor. This required a particular kind of tactfulness not known to political art.

Speaking about cultural misunderstanding when it comes to historical disasters: the artist Anri Sala—originally from Albania, now residing mostly in Paris and Berlin—remarked during our conversation in 2007 that he was struck by one request addressed to Western aid organizations by the victims of the Sumatra tsunami that September. This person asked the aid organizations not to send them psychoanalysts. They could deal with the disaster collectively by not probing too much into personal traumas, resorting instead to the familiar forms of collective mourning that don't require transgressing personal

boundaries, but only if they preserve their own borders. “Do you mean we have to be *tactful*?” I asked, almost reluctantly, embarrassed by my choice of the word, but letting it stand. “Yes, we have to be *tactful but impolite*,” answered Sala.

Impolite tactfulness isn't part of an old-fashioned comedy of manners, but of the contemporary cross-cultural dialogue that often takes place against a background of non-virtual violence. Can art be tactful without also being touchy-feely? Can tactfulness, something almost embarrassing in contemporary art, become an edgy alternative to postmodern irony and simulation? Could it be that, in a culture that demands either corporate caution or a sellable sensationalism, there is a taboo on tactfulness that exposes, rather than covers up, the edge of the acceptable? Like embarrassment, the realm of contemporary tactfulness belongs to the unstable “iconology of the interval,” to the human balancing act of social trial and error that no technology can imitate. Tactfulness is a form of shimmering, a hide-and-seek of empathy and understanding.

“Tact” derives from “touch,” but at first glance the concept seems to have reversed its meaning and to signify a delicate distance and respect, a displacement of contact away from the domain of physicality into the domain of the sociable and aesthetic arrangement of everyday life. But this is only at first glance. The more we look into the problem of touch itself, the more ambivalent it becomes. It was already Aristotle who observed the elusiveness and mystery of touch in his *De Anima*. Unlike the case with other senses, we don't know what the “organ of touch” is, and whether it is superficial or deep, visible or hidden. Can touch really only be skin-deep, or is there a mysterious psyche somewhere who guides us? Touch is both the most physical and the most enigmatic sense; it embarrasses any attempt at framing and exposing the vulnerable zones of contact.

Jacques Derrida wrote that tact is “a sense of knowing how to touch without touching, without touching too much where touching is already too much.”¹³ Tact, in other words, is connected to the art of measuring what can't be measured. Derrida sees at the core of tact a taboo on contact, a certain interdiction or prohibition, an abstinence. But in my view, in the case of artists from traditions other than Western Europe or the United States, where violence isn't an armchair historical fantasy, tactfulness is less about abstinence than about a conscious reticence, less about interdiction than about deliberate

choice to touch without tampering, to play on border zones without crossing them, to explore the shades of ambivalence, which can be more scandalous than a clear transgression. Tact points to the untouchable but also begs us not to forget the effect of touch, not to rush into transcendence or transgression. The tactile is still there in artistic tactfulness, which makes it neither too cool nor too hot, but never lukewarm either. Tactfulness shouldn't be confused with cautiousness; the predominant genre of sellable art is in fact a cautious sensationalism. The device of violating inhibitions has become more conventional in contemporary art than the edgy exploration of border zones, as if just a little off-the-scene of the crime or revelation.

For Anri Sala, tactfulness is a way of relating not only to the past of his country and his family but to the medium itself. Tactfulness involves a respect for the fragile boundaries of the other, but also an intimation of the untouchable and unpredictable. Sala's film *Intervista* deals with memory that is out of sync. The film begins like an Albanian version of Antonioni's *Blow-up* and then turns into a personal detective story and a drift into the political history of communist Albania. At the opening of the film, the young filmmaker discovers film footage from the 1970s that shows his mother, Valdet Sala, as an ardent young communist standing right next to the Secretary of the Albanian Communist Party, Enver Hoxha, one of the bloodiest dictators of the era. Valdet Sala is talking to the dictator with heartfelt enthusiasm. But there is a glitch. The sound is missing.

In his most serious conversation with his mother, Sala decides to film the conversation by himself, without his cameraman, so that it becomes an intimate setting. She is on her couch, but this is no psychoanalytic cinema. Her face is shot in an extreme close-up, but at an angle, reminiscent of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*. And the closeness doesn't offer revelation: the mother speaks about her ambivalences, fears, and mixed feelings. Against the dark background, her face emerges like a mask, behind which certain things remain inscrutable.

Sala exposes the scars but tries not to wound further in the process. Nor does he offer a palliative against memory and history. His is an unconventional aesthetic treatment.

Tactfulness affects artistic conceptions of time, space, language, and narrative, and the temperature of communication. It operates through tactics, not strategies, and eschews infomercial sound bites. Tactfulness takes time,

introduces a different temporality that is deliberately not in sync with the pace of contemporary media culture, digital instantaneity, communicative speed. It slows down communication. It dwells in the non-signifying and non-symbolic spaces of conversation, in the interstices of language. These include technical and communicative glitches and affective moments of embarrassment, sudden fear, or astonishment, and all the other uncodifiable moods. Tactful art doesn't repress but represents silences in communication and the shimmer of revelation and concealment. Tactfulness has a certain rhythm, an alternation of beat and off-beat. It resists the logic of simulation and control, upsetting both conceptual distance and emotional closeness and sentimental manipulation.

Impolite tactfulness is part of the new media being explored by many international artists. New media in their case does not mean the most recent thing in gadget technology, but new forms of mediating technology itself. In tactful art, there is always a space of co-creation and mystery. Anri Sala believes in treating the cinematic frame itself with tactfulness and humility. He says that for him "fiction (in a broad sense of the word) should be smaller than the frame," and so should the authorial signature as well. The untouchable and unpredictable are allowed to come in if there is space for them. It is a space in which nothing is scripted, a non-iconic space where the wind of the unpredictable can blow into the frame and surprise the filmmaker himself. When the camera is tactful towards its subjects, it doesn't violate their boundaries but intimates their potentialities and the untouchable spaces around them; the filmmaker isn't trying to instrumentalize the individuals for the sake of a higher truth or a slick film, but to dwell in the mystery of communication.

Derrida observed that tactfulness is always about "touching the law" and, therefore, it is about the "endurance of limit as such." Artistic tactfulness as a tactic involves a continuous play with the laws of art, of language, of public space, of history, of memory. The most interesting form of tactfulness isn't one that leads to a comedy of manners or psychological subtleties but that questions the syntax of language itself and moves towards the *alogistic*. This term has its origins back in the Russian avant-garde, and one of its early proponents was Kazimir Malevich, though he didn't stay there but marched on to suprematism and oblique figuration. Alogism puts the emphasis on the off-beat and on the art of syncope. It isn't about leaving things intact but about touching without

violation—revealing the psyche of things, people, cities, architecture, without possessing them. Tactful mediation takes place in the space between respect and astonishment.

Is this feat of artistic tactfulness singular, or is it also obliquely connected to the artist's personal and historical background? Any artist or writer coming from an eccentric background (eccentric vis-à-vis the West European/American mainstream) knows how difficult it is not to be placed in the category of an “exotic other” and thus to become forever a hyphenated artist marked with national qualifiers. These artists were not necessarily framed by their contexts but often exceeded the frame. Today, Sala is an international artist, a wanderer, a border crosser, an explorer, and a tourist. Yet his fascination with the edges of language and image, and his resistance to explicitly political and commercial speech, might have been shaped by his early encounter with life under dictatorship, with its hidden violence and perversion of language in the public sphere that sometimes went together with intimate and rich friendships in private. The scars of memory and history in Sala are not to be rapidly healed but to be touched upon over and over again—tactfully. Sala is less interested in the issues of artistic “isms” or institutional critiques that concern many Western conceptual artists; instead he is engaged in rethinking aesthetic practice in a broad sense and in opening the uninhabited spaces of language.

In all of his projects, Sala disorients assumptions of contemporary art and theory. In his early project “Déjeuner avec Marubi,” Albanian women reframe the icon of Western modern art, Manet's once-scandalous painting *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. By dressing up the nude woman in Albanian clothes, Sala returns this collage artwork back to Western audiences. In the film *Làk-kat*, shot in Senegal, he shows kids learning the words in Wolof that stand for the many gradations of whiteness and blackness. During our conversation, the artist observed that because of his Albanian background he doesn't feel that he fits into the Western colonial paradigm, and that he is just as interested in what colonialism did to the Europeans, in this case to the French, as well as to the Senegalese. His films deal with the global circulation of language and linguistic embarrassment. Speaking about the relationship between “the West” and Eastern Europe, Sala describes it as a hypothetical dialogue, well-intentioned but frequently one-directional: “When we [artists from Sarajevo, Tirana,

Belgrade, or Senegal] asked the West the questions they didn't know the answers to, we had to rephrase our questions." Through his films Sala turns the tables and asks us to rephrase the questions we ask of art, East or West.

In conversation with Anri Sala in Venice in April of 2008, we tried to define tactfulness and failed over and over again. I decided to record our informal interview in hopes of a future intellectual revelation. Upon my return home, I discovered that my interview was missing the sound. Inadvertently, our interview ended up being off record, and all I had were scribbles on a sheet of paper, variations on the theme of impolite tactfulness. As we'd gotten more and more lost on Venetian streets with names like Calle Amor dei Amici and Calle della Vida, we realized that we could only come up with definitions via negatives. Tactfulness is neither "loud visuality" nor "spectacular clarity." Nor is it the art of caution. Tactful art isn't driven by the plot but by unexpected detours and details. It doesn't move fast and exceeds the frame. Tactful filming defies complete authorial control or mastery of the ceremonies. Tactful art is neither quite sacred nor profane, neither messianic nor eschatological. What if tactfulness should not be defined by neither/nor but by and/and, or almost and yet?

The art of tactfulness eschews both the media-driven sensationalism of the new and of nostalgia and "ostalgia" alike. If there is nostalgia in Sala's film, it isn't a longing for the particular lost homeland but for that slow time of one's East European childhood that allowed for a long duration of dreams escaping into landscapes without propaganda and advertisements, those missing landscapes that haven't been curated yet.



Figure 14.1 Svetlana Boym, "Portable Home," date unknown, photographic print, 17 × 22 inches.

Diasporic Intimacy

Ruins and construction sites suggest temporal configurations of the off-modern in space. What would be their equivalent in the realm of affect and human relationships?

When we go *off*, can we ever feel at home anywhere? What kinds of new solidarities and intimacies do we share when we follow the zigzags of our global wanderings through time and space? Polish-American artist Krzysztof Wodiczko has said that an immigrant in today's cities is an "unintentional prophet" who dreams of a better private refuge, but also of a better public democracy that could welcome strangers like himself (Leger 14). The immigrant's unintentional prophecy reveals something fundamental about the conditions of "native" existence and sets that existence off-kilter. The off-modern immigrant who speaks with an accent in both foreign and native languages is a bit of a trickster who teases us with her tongue-tied confessions that tamper with our sense of intimacy.

"Intimate" refers to the "innermost," "pertaining to a deep nature," "very personal," "sexual." Yet, "to intimate" also means "to suggest" or "to imply." The thirst for intimacy is thoroughly modern and new, yet it has often been accompanied by the lamentation of loss and a recognition of modern estrangement. I will speak about something now that might seem paradoxical—a "diasporic intimacy" that isn't opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarization but is constituted by it. Diasporic intimacy can be approached only through indirection and intimation, through stories and secrets. They are often told in a foreign or accented language that demands and defies precise translation. Diasporic intimacy doesn't promise an unmediated emotional fusion but only a precarious affection—no less deep, while aware of its transience. In contrast to the utopian images of intimacy as transparent, authentic, and ultimately

belonging, diasporic intimacy is dystopian by definition; it is rooted in suspicion of a single home, in shared longing without belonging. It thrives on the hope of the possibilities of human understanding and survival, of unpredictable chance encounters, but this hope isn't utopian. Diasporic intimacy is haunted by the images of home and homeland, yet it also discloses some of the furtive pleasures of exile, and a concern for the fragility of worldliness and a shared world.

When we are home, we don't need to talk about it. "To be at home"—*byt' doma*—is a slightly agrammatical expression in many languages. It's as if it can't be learned; we just know how to say it in our own native tongue. To feel at home is to be comfortably unaware of things, to know that things are in their places and so are you. It is a state of mind that doesn't depend on an actual place. The object of longing, then, isn't really a place called *home* but this sense of intimacy with the world; it isn't the past in general, but that imaginary moment when we didn't know the temptation of nostalgia.

So much has been made of the happy homecoming that it is time to do justice to the stories of non-return, or return to a place where one has never been, which can be a little off the common map. In the years since the end of the twentieth century, millions of people have found themselves displaced from their places of birth, living in voluntary or involuntary exile. Their intimate experiences occur against a foreign background. They are aware of the foreign stage set, whether they like it or not. Moreover, immigrants to the United States bring with them different traditions of social interaction, often less individualistic than the one they find on arrival; as for writers, they carry the memory of oppression but also of a social significance that they could hardly match in the more "developed" West. In contemporary American pop-psychology, one is encouraged "not to be afraid of intimacy." This presumes that intimate communication can and should be made in plain language and consists in "saying what you mean," without irony and doublespeak. Immigrants—and many alienated natives as well—can't help but dread this. It is very confining not to have a space to be "off."

Ordinary exiles often become artists in life who remake themselves and their adopted second homes with great ingenuity. Without a virtual "second life," their material existence is often stranger than fiction. Exiled writers and artists turn a non-return home into a central artistic drive, transforming a

homemaking foregone into a strategy of survival in their texts and artworks. An inability to return home is always a personal tragedy, but it can also become an enabling force. That doesn't mean that there is no nostalgia inherent in it, only that this kind of nostalgia precludes a restoration of the past and goes off on a diagonal opening up of the folds of potential worlds.

Diasporic intimacy is neither the touchy-feely imperative of the breath-freshener commercial nor the fraternal/sororal warmth of a minority group. Diasporic intimacy doesn't promise a comforting recovery of identity through shared nostalgia for a lost home and homeland. In fact, the opposite is the case. It could be seen as the mutual enchantment of two immigrants from different parts of the world, or a sense of the precarious coziness of a foreign home. Just as one learns to live with alienation and reconciles oneself to the uncanniness of the world around one and to the strangeness of human touch, there comes a surprise, a pang of intimate recognition, a hope that sneaks in through the back door. It punctuates the habitual estrangement of everyday life abroad.

A cultural genealogy of diasporic intimacy leads us away from the "history of private life." We have to look for its modern beginnings in the alienating and illuminating experiences of the modern city, in the double bind of modernity and nostalgia reflected in the consciousness of urban wanderers at once estranged from and engaged with life around them. Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire discovered a "love at last sight" that produces a sexual shudder with a simultaneous shock of recognition and loss. Rather than a melancholic sorrow, "love at last sight" reveals itself as a miracle of possibilities.

What might appear to the "natives" as an aestheticization of social existence strikes an immigrant as an accurate depiction of the condition of exile. That is, of course, when the first hardships are over and the immigrant can afford the luxury of leisurely reflection. Immigrants always perceive themselves as on stage, at once an actor and a spectator, their lives resembling some mediocre fiction with occasional romantic outbursts and gray dailiness. Sometimes they see themselves as the hero or heroine of a novel, but such ironic realizations don't stop them from suffering through each and every novelistic collision of their lives. As for sexual shock, it becomes commonplace. What is much more uncommon is a recognition of a certain kind of tenderness that can be more striking than a sexual fantasy. Love at last sight is the spasm of loss after revelation; the tenderness of exiles is about a revelation of possibility after loss.

It is when a loss has been taken for granted that one can be surprised that not everything has been lost. Tenderness isn't about complete disclosure, saying what one really means, getting closer and closer. It excludes absolute possession and fusion. It defies symbols of fulfillment and isn't very goal-oriented. In the words of Italo Calvino, "Tenderness . . . is nothing but an infinite, insatiable metonymy" and a "miraculous crystallization of presence." In tenderness, need and desire are joined. Tenderness is always polygamous, non-exclusive. "Where you are tender you speak your plural." The reciprocal enchantment of exiles has a touch of lightness about it. As Calvino points out, "lightness does not mean being detached from reality but cleansing it from its gravity, looking at it obliquely but not necessarily less profoundly" ("Lightness").

Diasporic intimacy is belated and never final; objects and places were lost in the past and one knows that they can be lost again. The illusion of complete belonging has been shattered. Yet one discovers that there is still a lot to share. The foreign backdrop, the memory of past losses and recognition of transience, don't obscure the shock of intimacy, but rather heighten the pleasure and intensity of surprise.

The home that one leaves and the "home away from home" that one creates sometimes have more in common than one would like to admit. A portable home away from home, which an immigrant ferociously guards, preserves an imprint of his or her cultural motherland. Exiles may be bilingual, but they rarely can get rid of an accent. A few misplaced prepositions, a few missed articles, definite or indefinite, betray the syntax of the mother tongue.

In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai has suggested that in light of globalization, mass immigration, and the development of electronic media, one has to redefine the notion of the "locale." It is no longer a specific place where one belongs, but rather a social context that one could export into diaspora. Yet art depends on the materiality of the place, sensual perceptions, smells and sounds. I don't know of any nostalgia for a homepage; the object of nostalgia is precisely the non-virtual, low-tech world. In this case the locale isn't a mere context, but also a remembered sensation and the material debris of the past life: things that in the past made one sick of home can frame the homesickness of the future.



Figures 15.1 and 15.2 Krzysztof Wodiczko, "Alien Staff," 1992.
Images courtesy of K. Wodiczko and Galerie Lelong, New York.

Immigrant Arts

Can the immigrant then be *a* key figure for understanding twenty-first century modernity, or does the experience of immigration complicate and embarrass theoretical metaphors? How does art mediate across borders and speak in immigrant tongues with multiple accents?

Metaphorically the connection between migration, art, and the conception of the human condition harks back to antiquity. At least since Aristotle's *Poetics*, artistic language has been connected to estrangement and foreignness; exile has been seen as a metaphor for the human condition since the biblical expulsion from paradise, and the experience of modernity has frequently been compared to "transcendental homelessness." Nostalgia as a modern disease was the deacease of the first migrant workers, Swiss governesses, mercenary soldiers, only later becoming a critical trope for poets and philosophers and the most manipulated emotion for nationalist politicians. I would propose different forms of mediating the experience of "immigrant arts" without transforming an immigrant into a mere metaphor of universal longing.

It is this ambivalent relationship to home and abroad and the appeal to public practice of immigrant arts that we find in Krzysztof Wodiczko's project "Alien Staff." The artist is himself an immigrant, but he doesn't engage in translating and interpreting immigrant arts. Instead, he creates new performative media for them that creatively estranges the native's view of the immigrant and the immigrant's own quest for identity. Wodiczko developed the art of "xenology" and a special form of "portable public address" for immigrants to interact in the public realm and to expand its potentials in order to include, but not tame, the strangeness of others. In his urban experiments in New York, Warsaw, Barcelona, and Boston, he selected a group of immigrants

from all over the world and offered them a special “xenolong,” made of interchangeable cylindrical containers for a few souvenirs and memorable objects from elsewhere and other times, and “speech-act equipment” that includes a small high-tech monitor and a loudspeaker. This equipment resembled a biblical shepherd’s rod, or an oversized prosthesis, at once premodern and futuristic. The small video monitor presented the story of migration, which had been prerecorded by the same person who brought it along with her, lightly. The immigrant participant approaches urban dwellers (whether natives or other immigrants) and shares with them the prerecorded tale of migration, offering some spontaneous reflections on her life and on the ways of talking about it. Thus, the immigrant story is not singular, not “one”; she is a little out-of-sync with her own storytelling, which remains a work-in-progress.

The most striking part of the project is an unusual interplay of proximity and distance. The immigrant, herself a stranger, invites strangers in the public space to come close to her and to watch together with her the small flickering monitor, not an anonymous security camera but an eccentric record of personal insecurities and tribulations. After watching the immigrant video, the new acquaintances enter into a conversation about it, seeking not the truth but a better human understanding. Wodizcko has commented on the paradoxical nature of storytelling: “As one of the rabbinical scholars said: ‘The one who believes the story is a fool, but the one who denies the story is a wicked nonbeliever.’ Storytelling is a manipulation, as is every work of art. It attempts to concretize metaphorically, not directly, the truth of human existence” (“Identity and Community: Alien Staff,” 116).

Why can’t the immigrant tell her story to the stranger on the street directly, in “real time,” “reporting life”-style? Perhaps this is due to the fact that immigrant time and life can only be described in a syncopated syntax that questions familiar formats of mainstream media and their tight conventions of packaged spontaneity. The speech-act equipment is a conversation starter, but it is also a marker of distance, a shield of immigrant dignity that protects her from spontaneous rejections and excessive emotion. The distancing gives an immigrant a possibility of self-invention, of a double estrangement—from her own story and from the confessional storytelling that might be utterly foreign to her. Immigrants don’t always say what they mean or what the other would

like them to mean, they articulate their particularities and distinctions with reticence or excess, always a little disproportionately. Sometimes she doesn't fit into the category of "the other," mimicking the natives with excessive zeal, wishing them "a nice day" with an embarrassing sincerity and a hyperreal smile. The performative aspect of Wodizcko's "speech-act equipment" consists in the fact that it redefines the public realm, making it more inclusive and diverse in forms of expression. The immigrant can't take refuge in the immigrant community or in her own inner citadel, she has to communicate with the locals against all odds, while the locals have to find time and space for addressing the strangers in others, as well as in themselves. Through this process a paradoxical transformation takes place: the "immigrant" stops being a mouthpiece for any immigrant community, but rather presents himself as a singular human being who once upon a time "happened to become an immigrant, rather than one who conforms to any preconceived category of immigrant" (116).

The speech-act equipment is an example of off-modern media; in it "modernity quotes prehistory," to quote Walter Benjamin. With the help of these eccentric machines, the nerd meets the anthropologist and the prophet. Such media draws attention to itself not by virtue of its accessibility and cheerful helping apps, but on the contrary, through difficulty and embarrassment. The screen is too small; it requires bodily engagement and proximity to the stranger. In this case, the media is not the message; the message comes with the human messenger, the immigrant whom the equipment doesn't merely "frame" but also liberates for a dialogue. As an artwork it is rather altruistic. The curiously designed prostheses are only alibis and inviting decoys whose function is to become superfluous, to estrange technology and foreground the human encounter. Perhaps it gives us a proper perspective on how to view technological apparatus in general, and how to reinvent new media and alternative mediations? In the process of storytelling the immigrant stops being merely "an immigrant," and the "speech-act equipment" stops being a technological curiosity, and instead in the process of this disappearance they open up a space for a transient diasporic intimacy that allows us to extend ourselves in time and space.

What makes such experience crucial for artistic practice is the fact that it remains mysterious, partially foreign, not fully assimilable and yet not

untranslatable. It offsets the boundaries between effect and knowledge and is about embarrassments, touching mishaps, faux pas, involuntary violations of tact and etiquette. It isn't by chance that xenology engages with first-generation immigrants, thus throwing off familiar theoretical paradigms.

Often the artists and theorists who speak of immigration and nostalgia are metaphorical immigrants, or sometimes immigrants of the second or third generation, who came to the new country when they were very young or were the children of immigrants. Their nostalgia becomes the blueprint for discussions of longing and exile as a metaphor for the human condition and for homeless modernity. The perspective of the first-generation immigrant doesn't allow for the universalization of nostalgia, but at the same time doesn't dwell only in cultural differences and national particularities, suggesting instead cross-cultural bridges.

The immigrant of the first generation is a creature of double estrangement who carries a burden of ambivalent knowledge of culture and politics. She is aware of the complexity of everyday life and politics in the abandoned homeland, and of the strangeness of the remodeled second home. She is "off" in both her native and adopted lands, and builds new solidarities through elective affinities and across national lines. In contrast, the immigrant of the second (or second-plus) generation is actually a native who speaks the new language without an accent, while having only a limited knowledge of the utopian mother tongue. And yet he experiences a profound sense of loss. Haunted by the utopian imagination of the other place and the other time, the immigrant of the second generation shares the frame of references and the syntax of longing with the natives, which makes his story more widely acceptable than the tongue-tied accented tale of the first-hand experiences of transplantation. These singular stories, filled with tragic and comic experiences that can't be quite rendered in the foreign tongue, are punctuated by an untranslatable sense of humor that the immigrant trickster can't always share with the serious natives.

Sometimes, the relationship between nostalgia and the knowledge/experience of living in the homeland is in an inverse proportion. The immigrant of the second generation is more nostalgic for the home he has lost precisely because he doesn't have adult experiences of the contradictory existence in the mother country. For him the lost homeland isn't a plural and contradictory

place with internal dissent and everyday survivals, but often a mythical home to escape to from the everyday boredom of habitual comfortable existence.

Our first-generation immigrant carries with her a personal history of “syncopal kicks,” their physical discomforts and embarrassments, and can offer some more unusual and radical models for artistic practice. She is like a sad clown playing with multiple estrangements, as well as with multiple belongings.



Figure 16.1 Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt, and friends, c.1966: Nicola Chiaromonte, Mary McCarthy, Robert Lowell seated. Heinrich Blucher, Hannah Arendt, Dwight McDonald, and Gloria MacDonald standing. Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library (Ref#6.83).

Alternative Solidarities, Feminine Friendships

What new solidarities and forms of understanding can one develop through diasporic intimacy? I believe that the immigrant arts open up new forms of solidarity based on strangeness. Solidarity is a strange word that combines solidity and porosity in its very meaning. It was coined for the *Encyclopédie* (1765) as *solidarité*, “mutual responsibility,” a coinage from *solidaire*, “interdependent, complete, entire,” from *solide* (see *solid*). Solidarity suggests a new crystallization of relationships that combine integrity and interdependency. It is opposed both to complete individual autonomy and to community of any kind that is based on a unified collective ethos and some kind of *volonté générale*. Solidarity combines estrangement and engagement, suggesting interdependency without the loss of singularities and multiplicities.

One can see alternative geographic connections, for example between Latin American and East European artists, or Indians and Albanians. Alternative solidarities between artists, not structures of influence or hierarchy—not even the fortuitous *hazard objectif* of curatorial intuition that places artists together—but inner artistic dialogues about multiple belongings that can open into an alternative off-modern history of an avant-garde that never completely ended.

Solidarities can be of a political and personal nature; sometimes they call for strategic public allegiances, other times for the celebration of personal elective affinities and a revival of outmoded and yet not obsolete conceptions of friendship. We live in the world of friending, not friendships. “Friend” has become a euphemism—for something more or less than friendship; a “friend” is a conspicuous casual acquaintance who overcrowds our homepage or an inconspicuous lover who likes to escape home.

The word *friendship* shares etymologies with *freedom* in English and *Freude* (joy) in German, and with affectionate love or *philia* in Romance languages

and in Greek. In Russian, the word for “friend,” *drug*, is related to “the other,” but not a foreign other, for which there is another word, *inoi*. The aspect of otherness is important because there are many things friendship is not. Friendship, in my understanding, is neither a conventional intimacy, nor a brotherhood or sisterhood, nor a networking opportunity. Rather, it is an elective affinity without finality, a relationship without a plot and a place in our society, an experience for its own sake.

The philosophy of friendship goes back to ancient Greece, where friendship was part and parcel of both the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, of politics and of philosophy, with which friendship (*philia*) shares its root. Philosophies of friendship alternate between the political and the apolitical, between the worldly and the utopian. Yet even contemporary philosophies of friendship written by Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Giorgio Agamben speak mostly of male friendships. Somehow friendship between women is deemed to lack philosophical gravitas, even though ancient Greece had the occasional heroine—from Diotima, the teacher of Socrates, to the anonymous “Thracian maiden” who, as immigrant political theorist Hannah Arendt noted, laughed while the philosophers barricaded themselves in fortresses or romantic huts on the tops of mountains.

The alternative off-modern friendships can be based on unconventional models of female friendship, such as I propose was Hannah Arendt’s own friendship with the American writer Mary McCarthy.¹⁴ Hannah Arendt wrote that friendship of a serious kind is what makes life worth living. Yet she also emphasized that friendship shouldn’t be confused with romantic love for a “single one,” which for her can become “a totalitarianism for two” because it makes the whole world around the lovers vanish. Nor is friendship the confessional intimacy advocated by Rousseau, an echo chamber of one’s overflowing narcissism: “We are wont to see friendship solely as a phenomenon of intimacy in which the friends open their hearts to each other unmolested by the world and its demands” (“On Humanity in Dark Times,” 24). Friendship for her is, in fact, precisely about being molested by the world and responding in kind—by expanding, so to speak, the dimensions of existence and by co-creating on the worldly stage. This stage has a particular scenography. Neither brightly lit nor completely enlightened, it has a scenography of chiaroscuro, of the interplay of light and shadow.

Writing about men and women in “dark times,” Arendt observed that in circumstances of extremity, illumination doesn’t come from philosophical concepts but from “the uncertain, flickering and often weak light” that men and women kindle and shed over the lifespan given to them. This luminous space where “men and women come out of their origins and reflect each other’s sparks” is the space of humaneness and friendship that sheds light on the world of appearances which we inhabit. In other words, friendship is not about having everything illuminated or obscured, but about conspiring and playing with shadows. Its goal isn’t enlightenment but luminosity, a quest not for blinding truth but only for occasional lucidity and honesty.

Hannah Arendt’s own unlikely relationship with Mary McCarthy offers an interesting example of an unconventional elective affinity. The two women, one immigrant philosopher and the other expat writer who theorized and practiced friendship in a passionately non-euphemistic manner, had the type of relationship that can be described through a series of expressions whose oxymoronic character allows us both to get to its passionate core and avoid the touchy-feely confessional mode for which the two women had little patience. Those will be luminous opacity, diasporic intimacy, asymmetrical reciprocity, impolite tactfulness, homoerotic heterogeneity. The story of such friendship between writers and artists works like *fermenta cognitionis* (fermenting fields of cognition), producing and rescuing insights and intimations that, in Arendt’s description, aren’t “intended to communicate conclusions, but to stimulate others to independent thought, and this for no other purpose than to bring about a discourse between thinkers” (10).¹⁵

Postmodern aesthetics, as well as that of high modernism, was often in practice the aesthetic of cool with a precise etiquette and hierarchy; the off-modern dares to be embarrassing. Through embarrassment we gain access to the other less visible forms of modern expression and reveal the unspoken laws of social and artistic etiquette. Embarrassment is risky and unstable; it has to be handled with tact but without reverence. After all, off-modern thinkers are allowed to have bad table manners.



Figure 17.1 Vladimir Tatlin, “Model of the Monument to the 3rd International,” 1919–1920. Image courtesy of bpk, Berlin/Art Resource, New York.

Estrangement for the World

What if we rethink the history of modern art, and instead of placing the emphasis on form and function (the “formalist theology” according to Harold Rosenberg) we focus on trans-formative estrangement, creative perspectivism, and renewal of vision?

This will be not a foundational or metaphysical project but an experimental and phenomenological one that begins with the embarrassment of theory. We reconsider some aspects of the history of the avant-gardes, such as the relationship between art and politics; our key term will not be utopia but freedom, and we will open up and recover a broad field of the left democratic politics of the modernist writers who went against the grain of the dominant versions of the left, right, and center. Along those lines we will deviate from the familiar story of the “dehumanization of art” in the modern context, exploring modernist humanism and human erring that find many echoes in the recent off-modern projects of William Kentridge and the Raqs Media Collective and other experimental interpreters of the Russian avant-garde. Our other concern will be with third-way thinking and the forms of unconventional modernist humanism and existential dimensions of modern aesthetic practice.

The off-moderns “invent their own precursors” in Borgesian fashion, but not to suck the life out of them in a gleeful postmodern manner, with the severed heads of quotation marks and lots of disco music in the background. Instead of the familiar tale of avant-garde movements and isms each with a promising new beginning, catharsis, and denouement, from rise to fall (into bourgeois decadence, madness, comfortable institutionalization, etc.), the off-modern story seeks elective affinities, alternative solidarities, and diasporic intimacies of multicultural immigrants across national borders. In other words, we pursue what still troubles us today.

In the Anglo-American and Western European contexts, the history of artistic modernity was mostly written through the agonistic struggles of the avant-garde and the advent of “formalist theology” elaborated in the wake of the founding of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which gave a safe haven and helped to institutionalize many refugees from the European wars. According to Clement Greenberg, modernist art practice should be autonomous, inward, self-referential and self-critical. This is a kind of art that constantly and radically “questions its essence as art” in order not to become kitsch, a “parody of catharsis” (Adorno). Obviously, avant-garde art goes beyond its critique, be it that of the modern world or of traditional art. Still the “formal theology” and the avant-garde spirituality are conceived as an almost messianic quest for ultimate authenticity, a quest that is responsible for the quick succession of isms that supersede one another.¹⁶

One aspect of this history is a form of radical disfiguration that turns a living human body into a “stumbling block on the road to self-sufficiency of art” (Kuspit) and thus doesn’t allow art to confront existential human needs. Of course, this might read as a somewhat reductive understanding of the avant-garde project; already the early twentieth-century philosopher José Ortega y Gasset had demonstrated that “dehumanization of art” had been a complex phenomenon and has to do with the critique of a particular form of traditional humanism for the sake of a more authentic understanding of human potential.

I propose to follow the transformations of human potential by crisscrossing the boundaries between the avant-garde, modernism, and experimentalism, and instead of debating formalist theologies revisit some less-known practices of the original formalists, the St. Petersburg Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOYAZ), looking especially to Shklovsky’s theory and practice of estrangement and to Tynjanov’s elaboration of eccentric cultural evolution. From this perspective the conception of formalism is a product of cross-cultural misunderstanding. By recovering what was lost in translation in the Western migration of Russian Formalism, the off-moderns rethink the relationship between autonomy and commitment, between making artworks and engaging in aesthetic practice as well as the relation between technology and technique. Many OPOYAZ ideas didn’t have a status of autonomous theoretical concepts and didn’t amount to conventional systematic or structural thinking, unlike the theories of Roman Jakobson that were developed by

Claude Lévi-Strauss and the French structuralists. Some of the most striking insights of the OPOYAZ were the offspring of Shklovsky's and Tynjanov's artistic practices; both theorists were also brilliant modernist writers who pursued mystery as well as mastery and practiced paradoxical storytelling as well as academic writing, responding acutely and lucidly to the post-Revolutionary situation in Soviet Russia. Theirs was not estrangement from the world, but estrangement for the world.

One of the predecessors of the off-modern is Vladimir Tatlin's "Monument to the Third International" (1919–1925), known also as "Monument to the Liberation of Humanity." What matters for us here is the tower's paradoxical history, its status as one of the most famous unbuilt monuments of the twentieth century, which became a phantom limb of non-conformist art in post-war Eastern Europe and remains an inspiration for off-modern urbanism. According to Shklovsky, the tower made us rethink the very conception of the architecture, combining "poetic function" and new technology.

Shaped as a spiral, a favorite Marxist-Hegelian form, the tower culminated with a radical opening on top, suggesting unfinalizability, not synthesis. A contemporary of Tatlin, the theorist of constructivism Nikolai Punin, described the monument as the anti-ruin par excellence. In his view, Tatlin's revolutionary architecture reduced the Classical and Renaissance tradition to ashes, and the "charred ruins of Europe are now being cleared" (Punin, 2). In his design for the tower, Tatlin sabotaged the perfect verticality of the Eiffel Tower by choosing the form of a spiral and having it leaning to one side. Yet uncannily Tatlin's monument wasn't free from the ruin's charm. In its attempt to be the anti-Eiffel Tower, the project started to resemble the leaning Tower of Pisa, or even the Tower of Babel.

Moreover, in the case of the Tower of Babel, the tale of architectural utopia and its ruination is mirrored by the related parable about language. The Tower of Babel, we recall, was built to reach heaven. The failure of this architectural endeavor and God's dividing up humanity into many languages ensured the survival of art and humanity that actually enjoys the multiplicity of languages in spite of the hopes for unity. Every builder of a modern tower dreams of touching the sky, and, of course, the gesture remained forever asymptotic.¹⁷

Tatlin's tower was never built. The failure of its realization wasn't due merely to engineering problems and concerns about feasibility. The tower was both

behind and ahead of its time, clashing with the architectural trends of the Soviet regime. Its model was exhibited and used during the parades celebrating the October Revolution, so it existed only as an incomplete theatrical set, a part of official street theater, not gigantic but human-scale, a testimony to revolutionary transience.

Tatlin's Tower was "translated" into Western languages in a Babelian fashion: much has been lost in translation. In 1920, articles about the Tower appeared in the Munich art magazine *Der Ararat* and caught the attention of the emerging Dadaists: "Art is Dead, declared the Dadaists. Long Live the Machine Art of Tatlin!" (Strigalev and Harten, 37). Yet to some extent, the Dadaists' celebration of the death of art via Tatlin's spiral guillotine was an act of cultural mistranslation and reflected a common Western misconception about the Russian avant-garde. By no means was Tatlin a proponent of machine-assisted artistic suicide, especially not at the time of the revolution, when the "death of art" was more than a metaphor. Instead, Tatlin argued against the "tyranny of forms born by technology without the participation of artists." Tatlin's own slogan—"Art into Life and Art into Technology!"—doesn't suggest putting art in the service of life or technology, nor does he suggest putting life in the service of political or social revolution. Rather, it proposes to revolutionize technology and society by opening horizons of imagination and moving beyond mechanistic clichés. In this case, the two meanings of the word *techne*—that of art and that of technical craft—continuously duel with one another: art estranges technology, while new technology provides inspiration for artistic experimentation. Tatlin's projects of Letatlin and the Tower belong to an alternative history of technology, an enchanted technology, founded on charisma as much as calculus, linked to premodern myths as well as to modern science. Yet they are not so alien to the history of Soviet cosmonautics; in the exploration of the cosmos, science merged with science fiction, and ideology occasionally sounded like poetry. The tower resembles the ruin of a mythical space station from which the Letatlins could fly into the sky.

On the other hand, the Tower became a twentieth-century artistic myth and an inspiration for the unofficial art of the postwar era, nostalgic for the boldness of the revolutionary imagination, not for the revolution itself. Artistic and social revolutions ended up like thesis and antithesis. At the end, the unbuilt monuments to collective utopia turned into mementos of individual dreams,

suggesting a different history of the transformation of experimental art into the art of dissent.

From the very beginning, the Tatlin Tower engendered its double—a discursive monument almost as prominent as its architectural original that explored the side alleys of utopias and revolutions and their unfinalizable spirals. Victor Shklovsky was one of Tatlin's few contemporaries who appreciated the paradoxes of the tower. Its temporal vectors pointed toward the past and the future, toward “the iron age of Ovid” and the “age of construction cranes, beautiful like wise Martians” (Shklovsky, “The Monument to the Third International,” 69–70). Paradoxically, while describing meanings and functions of the tower, Shklovsky speaks of poetry, not of technology, and develops his idea of the poetic function, not architectural functionalism: “The word in poetry is not merely a word, it drags with it dozens of associations. [Tatlin's] work is filled with them like the Petersburg air in the winter whirlwind.” Shklovsky ends his essay by laying bare the Tower's unconventional materials: “The monument is made of iron and glass and revolution” (71). The air of the Revolution functions as the project's immaterial glue. In the end, the “Monument to the Liberation of Humanity” became a monument to the fragile poetic function that defied revolutionary purposefulness.

In the meantime, Shklovsky himself created a verbal monument to the first Soviet Statue of Liberty, which had a short and tempestuous life. The monument represents the writer's own postrevolutionary anxieties and dreams of dissent both personal and political. (Shklovsky was a Socialist Revolutionary, not a Bolshevik, and supported freedoms of press and assembly and a non-state-controlled public realm.) In 1918 in Petrograd the monument to Tsar Alexander III was covered up by a cardboard stall with all kinds of slogans celebrating liberty, art, and revolution.¹⁸ The “Monument to Liberty” was one of those transient non-objective monuments that exemplified early post-revolutionary visual propaganda before the granite megalomania of the Stalinist period. This is how Shklovsky introduces the story:

There is a tombstone by the Nicholas Station. A clay horse stands with its feet planted apart, supporting the clay backside of a clay boss . . . They are covered by the wooden stall of the ‘Monument to Liberty’ with four tall masts jutting from the corners. Street kids peddle cigarettes, and when militia men with guns come to catch them and take them away to the juvenile detention

home, where their souls can be saved, the boys shout ‘scram!’ and whistle professionally, scatter, run toward the ‘Monument to Liberty.’

Then they take shelter and wait in that strange place—in the emptiness beneath the boards between the tsar and the revolution.

Khod Konia [*The Knight’s Move*], 196–97

In Shklovsky’s description, the monument to the tsar isn’t yet destroyed and the monument to liberty isn’t entirely completed. A dual political *symbol* turns into a lively and ambivalent urban *site* inhabited by insubordinate Petrograd street kids in an unpredictable manner. In this description, the monument acquires an interior; a public site becomes a hiding place. Identifying his viewpoint with the dangerous game of the street kids hiding “between the tsar and the revolution,” Shklovsky is looking for a third way, the transitory and playful architecture of freedom.¹⁹ This is a kind of “occupy” tactic, to use a contemporary term, occupying monumental propaganda. He performs a double estrangement, defamiliarizing both the authority of the tsar and the liberation theology of the revolution. The “third way” here suggests a spatial and a temporal paradox. The monument caught in the moment of historical transformation embodies what Walter Benjamin called “dialectic at a standstill.” The first Soviet statue of liberty is at once a ruin and a construction site; it occupies the gap between the past and the future in which various versions of Russian history coexist and clash.

Shklovsky’s parable about the transformation of the historical monuments betrays the precariousness of the writer’s own political situation. It is little known that the founder of the Formalist theory had an adventurous albeit brief political career and wrote some of his early texts at the front during World War I. His love for poetry and poetics was hardly academic. Severely wounded twice, with seventeen pieces of shrapnel in his body, Shklovsky recited the avant-garde poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov while being operated on in the military hospital, hoping perhaps that this could help him estrange or at least distract himself from the pain. Shklovsky embraced the revolutionary spirit, but as one of his critics would later comment, he “confused the revolutions.” Or perhaps he got it right? Although a supporter of the February Revolution of 1917, he didn’t initially embrace the events of October 1917 and the storming of the Winter Palace. Shklovsky joined the Socialist Revolutionary party, the party that won the majority at the Constitutional Assembly, the revolutionary

parliament that took place right after the storming of the Winter Palace. It is a well-established but frequently forgotten fact that the Constitutional Assembly was brutally dispersed by the Bolsheviks, thus putting an end to the variety of left and social democratic politics in Russia. Many leftist artists in Russia were not in the teleological line of constructivism that formed the dominant Western narrative of the Russian avant-garde, nor were they apolitical. There was a plurality of political and artistic positions in postrevolutionary Russia, and we still know less about those who didn't make it into the history of victims and martyrs.

After voting against the dispersal of the Constitutional Assembly, Shklovsky joined the anti-Bolshevik underground (together with the writer Maxim Gorky, the future classic Soviet Socialist realist writer). In much of Shklovsky's post-revolutionary autobiographical writing, the discourse on public freedom is present between the lines of his texts, often through references to the French revolution and theories of the social contract. This was his own version of "socialism with a human face," if one were to apply an anachronistic definition. Threatened with arrest and possible execution, Shklovsky crossed the Soviet border on the frozen Gulf of Finland and eventually found himself in Berlin. The parable about the Monument to Liberty becomes an allegory of the revolution and its many lost opportunities.

The term "estrangement" became a crucial component of Shklovsky's formalist theories. In light of Shklovsky's life and revolutionary politics, we must ask: how is this estrangement made? Can its history be recovered and continued? In Shklovsky's early essay "Art as Technique," "estrangement" suggests both distancing (dislocating, *dépaysement*) and making strange. Estrangement brings forth a new beginning and a transformation of vision, echoing Hannah Arendt's definition of freedom as a miracle of infinite improbability. In Shklovsky's view, shifting perspectives and making things strange can become an antidote to the routinization and automatization of modern life that leads to mass apathy and disenchantment: "Habituation devours things, clothes, furniture, one's wife and the fear of war" ("Art as Technique," 12). Artistic estrangement can make one's wife more lovable and the fear of war more real. It offers the very opposite of anesthesia: a creative awakening. By making things strange, the artist doesn't simply displace them from an everyday context into an artistic framework; he also helps to return

sensation to life itself, to reinvent the world, to experience it anew. Estrangement is what makes art artistic; but by the same token, it makes life lively, or worth living.

It is not by chance that Shklovsky refers to Aristotle's observation that poetic language is always to some degree a foreign language, saying that in some way one has to discover a foreigner within oneself before practicing estrangement in the world. Foreignness here is of a poetic and productive kind, alluring rather than alienating.²⁰ In this respect, estrangement is the password for creative immigrants of the world. Unlike Bertolt Brecht's V-effect (possibly influenced by Shklovsky via Tretiakov), Shklovsky's original conception isn't didactic; it is based on shared curiosity. It isn't totalizing but is closer to the paradoxical logic of the dialectic on a standstill than to anything Hegelian.

In hindsight, we see that estrangement wasn't strictly speaking a mere technique or set of stylistic techniques that define a structure of an autonomous artistic corpus. Rather, this is an artistic, and later political and existential, practice, a form of phenomenological experiment in living and thinking. It is not a foundation of a theoretical movement (unless it is off-modern), but a productive embarrassment of theory that can inspire free thinkers and artists. Shklovsky's initial conception of estrangement was intended in opposition to the economic and utilitarian discourse of efficiency and useful expenditure. The device of estrangement places emphasis on the process rather than the product of art, on retardation and deferral of denouement, on cognitive ambivalence and play.

Thus, estrangement lays bare the boundaries between art and life but never pretends to abolish or blur them. It doesn't allow for a seamless translation of life into art, nor for the wholesale aestheticization of politics. Art is only meaningful when it is *not* entirely in the service of real life or realpolitik, and when its strangeness and distinctiveness are preserved. So the device of estrangement can both *define* and *defy* the autonomy of art.

Shklovsky's understanding of estrangement is different from both Hegelian and Marxist notions of alienation.²¹ Artistic estrangement is not to be cured by incorporation, synthesis, or belonging. In contrast to the Marxist notion of freedom that consists in overcoming alienation, Shklovskian estrangement is in itself a form of limited freedom, endangered by all kinds of modern teleologies and utopian visions of the future.²²

Right after the October revolution, the practice of estrangement and formal analysis offered a critique of the aestheticization of politics in the form of a total work of art, a concept which influenced the creation of mass propaganda art in Hitler's Germany and Stalinist Russia.²³ In fact, the foundational Soviet myth of the victorious Bolshevik revolution was created with the help of aestheticization of politics and an erasure of the diverse history of left and center-political movements in the early twentieth-century Russia to which many experimental artists and writers belonged.

How was the dominant version of the Bolshevik history made, the one to which we are so habituated? It turns out that it was created out of the absence of documentation and through a direct exercise of political power and violence, ennobled and covered up in magnificent artistic spectacle. While there is plenty of documentary footage of the February revolution and of the many mass demonstrations that spring, there is virtually no visual documentation of the actual events of the storming of the Winter Palace. The *Times* of London for October 1917 reports "tumults" in Petrograd on the back pages, but nothing about the greatest "revolution" of the century.

This lack of documentation and of actual public memory was supplemented with a vengeance by the retrospective "scripting" of the October Revolution, which awarded a decisive victory to the Bolsheviks led by Lenin. (In fact, the Bolsheviks didn't win the majority during the Constitutional Assembly of October 1917, after which the Assembly was dispersed with the violent intervention of the Baltic sailors called up by Lenin. One of the few remaining photographs of October 1917 is that of the pillaging of the Constitutional Assembly.) The theater director Evreinov restaged the Storming of the Winter Palace in 1920, complete with ten thousand extras and Wagnerian music blasting through Palace Square. The plot of the performance and not of the actual storming of the Winter Palace formed the future iconography of the revolution. (Soon after the performances, the director Nikolai Evreinov himself emigrated from the Soviet Union and never came back to see the habituated repeat performances of his oeuvre.)

Twice as many people took part in the reenactment of the Storming of the Winter Palace as in the original act, and the reenactment had ten times more spectators, who ten years later confused their memories of the performance with actual participation in the revolution. Later on, many of these same

people were used as extras in Eisenstein's *October* and were described as "witnesses," even though they were witnesses to the performance, not to history. Thus, the foundational event of twentieth-century communist history—the October Revolution—became a prime example of "mis-memory" and mythification. As Umberto Eco has commented, the *ars oblivionalis* doesn't function through *damnatio memoria* but through false synonyms. Eisenstein's *October*, produced ten years after the revolution and its restaging in 1918, makes no qualms about changing historical facts; rather he celebrates the invented tradition with artistic exuberance, using literary and artistic sources as inspirational documents. We know that Eisenstein's "dialectical montage" was expanded by the Soviet state, not always in a very dialectical manner: for example, Trotsky was erased from the plot of the film and recent history was re-cut according to Stalin's new iconography. In the new Soviet culture the experimental technique of montage was used to create mass visual propaganda, often at the expense of the original creators of revolutionary montage.

Shklovsky offered a critique of Evreinov's attempt to portray the revolution as a victorious total work, saying that it resulted in "vaudeville with a grandiose answer." He also laid bare some of the devices of Sergei Eisenstein's historical performance. While discussing various errors in Eisenstein's *October* as well the fact that the shooting of the film on location in the Winter Palace caused quite a lot of destruction, just like the original event, Shklovsky came to an estranging conclusion. He suggested that Eisenstein's historical errors and the inconsistencies between his theory and practice revealed more than the artist might have intended and contributed to Eisenstein's invention of a new visual language. In other words, the errors and deviations from dialectical montage and from the Hegelian-Marxist vision of history led to the invention of an unprecedented visual revolution where baroque excess cohabits with the ideological montage.

Already in the 1920s Shklovsky observed that artistic errors on the one hand and documentary images on the other can defamiliarize the mythological version of history. In 1923 Shklovsky observed that after the revolution, Russian life had almost turned into a strange art, endangering all aspects of everyday existence (*A Sentimental Journey* 271). Estrangement itself had been expropriated by the Soviet state, which assumed authorship over a glorious new vision of Soviet reality, a "totalitarian fiction" (Arendt), or as I would prefer

to say, an authoritarian one, that radically defamiliarized the everyday perceptions and experiences of ordinary citizens. Therefore, artists had to perform a double estrangement in order to repossess their artistic and existential devices, or to use Lenin's phrase, to "expropriate the expropriated." For the strange state art transferred into life differed dramatically from their expectations, threatening not only artists' professional practices but also their very existence.

With Shklovsky and Hannah Arendt in mind, we can distinguish two kinds of estrangement: estrangement *from* the world and estrangement *for* the world. Estrangement from the world has its origins in the Stoic concept of inner freedom, in the Christian conception of freedom and salvation, as well as in romantic subjectivity and introspection. It suggests a distancing from political and worldly affairs. Conversely, estrangement for the world is a way of seeing the world anew, a possibility of a new beginning that is fundamental for aesthetic experience, critical judgment, and political action. It is also an acknowledgement of the integral human plurality that we must recognize within us and within others.

The relationship between aesthetics and politics has to be reexamined through experiences of freedom, dissent, and estrangement, away from Benjamin's misleading aphorism about aestheticizing politics versus politicizing the arts. The word "aesthetics," like the word "politics," has been much maligned and too frequently used as an insult. I understand aesthetics in the original sense of the word as a form of knowledge that proceeds through an always unexpected interplay of sense, imagination, and reason; the study of the aesthetic isn't the same as connoisseurship of the beautiful or an analysis of autonomous works of art. In the center of the eccentric off-modern exploration is the zigzag thinking of the aesthetic practice that moves beyond the tired opposition between autonomy and engagement; such practice of swerve and play remains porous, defying the totalizing aestheticization and mastery of the world as well as the self-deprecating post-modern simulations. This is a form of playful and affectionate perspectivism that informs imagination and judgment, creativity and responsibility. We don't have to be embarrassed for aesthetic practice; let it embarrass us instead and catch us off-garde.



Figure 18.1 William Kentridge, “I am not me, the horse is not mine,” 2008, installation: video, eight projections, color, and sound (stereo), duration: six minutes. ©Tate, London 2015.

Defamiliarized Human

In the twentieth century, the word humanism like other “isms” has become suspect. The Renaissance dream that the human is the measure of all things has slowly unraveled. Its history is often told with a familiar wistful sound-bite of the rise and fall of human mastery. Once upon a time this anthropocentric vision was revolutionary, it marked a break from a medieval religious worldview and enabled new arts and sciences. From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, the Faustian power struggle for world domination was accompanied by a critique of such rational megalomania and the exploration of senses, affects, irony, and the tragic theatricality of worldly existence. Philosophers of history after Hegel placed the history of Antiquity, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment into the narrative of development and progress. The turn of the previous century witnessed another crisis of the anthropocentric universe, which was attacked from all sides by Darwin, Freud, Marx, Einstein, to name just a few. Man was neither a master of the species and nor a master of his or her own domain. By the late twentieth century this critique was amplified by feminists, environmentalists, and animal rights activists. The history of twentieth-century visual arts, at least the way it was written from the perspective of the Western museum, was a progression of formal experimentation on the road of abstraction and later towards conceptual art. Such a history frequently cut off hybrid bifurcations and inconvenient figurations. Postmodernity brought with it a critique and a fascination for the society of the spectacle and returned to a parodic figuration of the human form; a form among many in the Potemkin village of the disenchanting world.

At the same time philosopher Bruno Latour raised a provocative late-twentieth-century question: Have we ever been modern? Instead of mourning the end of modernity, Latour questioned its prominence, and pushed further the critique of the already much-maligned Enlightenment. His new constitution

of things decenters and even displaces human agency.²⁴ Following this story, human modes of thinking and experience would soon appear outmoded, like snail mail, a retronym of sorts. (Until recently we wouldn't add the word "human" to thinking, now we have to.) Instead we are witnessing today something like an "anthropological" turn in the arts, no longer anthropocentric but eccentric; it often goes together with an interest in other forms of life, the environment, and semi-feral animals—all of them in an oblique yet critical relation to our new digital predicament. Computer scientists and artificial intelligence engineers desperately seek to develop algorithms to teach the computer "human skills," but some of those skills remain enigmatic and untranslatable. Non-algorithmic creativity, thinking with affects, ambiguity, humor, and irony, with freedom and responsibility—in short all that constitutes artful human intelligence—remain a challenge to the artificial kind. Off-moderns defamiliarize the received wisdom about humane intelligence and affect, subject and subjectivity. They are less interested in the figurative representations of the human form and more in forms of passionate thinking and experience.

Sometimes it takes an artist and not a theorist to exercise a prospective nostalgia and look back at the contradictions of dehumanization so prominent in many non-canonical modernist and avant-garde works. William Kentridge has addressed them in his installation "I am not me, the horse is not mine" at the Tate Modern (2008) and in his spectacular set for Dmitri Shostakovich's semi-forgotten experimental opera "The Nose," staged at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 2010. Shostakovich's opera was composed in the transitional period from the avant-garde to Socialist Realism; it wasn't performed for over forty years, and remained eccentric to the history of modern art. Performing a knight's move, Kentridge reanimates this experimental work, enmeshing it in the eccentric off-modern tradition from Cervantes to Tatlin. The artist who was actively engaged in the Anti-Apartheid movement has a rare insight into the history of the avant-garde. "I am interested in a political art, that is to say in an art of ambiguity, contradictions, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings. An art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism at bay," says Kentridge ("Five Themes"), keeping in mind "the dignity of the defeated" avant-gardists and fellow-travelers. Kentridge foregrounds the improbable potentials and "sober absurdity" of the

“human transformation” and in the twentieth-century artistic and political experiments, more relevant today than the theoretical debate over the trajectories of the avant-garde. The little man of Russian literature, from Gogol to Mandelshtam, Kafka’s Herr K and Chaplin’s tramp, find a new artistic refuge in Kentrige’s installations.

This off-garde humanism comes through small gestures and altered scales, as if by a *via negativa*. If we look back from the off-modern perspective, we see that it might not be Malevich’s black or white square, but Charlie Chaplin’s Tramp from an old black-and-white film that is a hero of modern times. His comic excess lays bare the habitual modern inhumanity. Efficient to the point of madness, too machine-like because all too human, Chaplin’s little man estranges and cheats the system, at least for the duration of the film.

Russian writers of the 1930s loved Charlie Chaplin and saw in him their fellow-traveler. Shklovsky too used the device of estrangement to confront the violence of production and the violence of the Revolution and later of the growing Stalinist repressions. Estrangement doesn’t reinforce dehumanization but defamiliarizes habitual inhumanity and lays bare the subjugation of the individual. Shklovsky’s experimental autobiographical text *Sentimental Journey* abounds in descriptions of violence, presented in the most stark and unsentimental fashion. Violence is by no means excused or glorified as a part of the “necessary revolutionary sacrifice” for the sake of humanity’s future liberation. Nor are the numerous descriptions of dismembered bodies presented as examples of modernist aesthetic disfiguration or the “dehumanization of art.”²⁵ In describing pillage, slaughter, pogroms, and the daily cruelty that he witnessed at the front, Shklovsky redirects his estrangement. It no longer “dehumanizes” in Ortega y Gasset’s sense, but rather makes real the “fear of war” that has become so habitual for soldiers and for the ideologues of violence.²⁶ Thus, the technique of estrangement lays bare the senseless dehumanization of war.

It is as if only through estrangement could the revolutionary writer Shklovsky rediscover that he is an eccentric humanist after all, an embarrassed humanist who knows the pitfalls of human-all-too-human approaches to existence but who is also not satisfied with mere negativity. Shklovsky describes the estranged psyche of a friend who, awaiting his death sentence, suppressed the will to live, repressed the thoughts of his family, and was solely afraid that

before his death the executioner would make him take off his boots and that he would get entangled in the shoelaces. Reporting the practices of War Communism, the execution of poet Nikolai Gumilev, and the death from hunger of another poet, Alexander Blok, Shklovsky appeals to his countrymen:

Citizens!

Citizens, stop killing! Men are no longer afraid of death! There are already customs and techniques for telling a wife about the death of her husband.

It changes nothing. It just makes everything harder.

A Sentimental Journey, 238

Haunted by the brutal materiality of war, Shklovsky sticks to the “literature of facts” and resists the transformation of violence into metaphor or a mere means to a beautiful end: “I wrote [*A Sentimental Journey*] remembering the corpses that I saw myself” (60). Shklovsky’s “sentimental journey” is hardly sentimental in any conventional way, but it is extremely sensitive; it doesn’t try to domesticate the fear of war; it individualizes the dead and the wounded, humanizing them through art. The uncommon form of “modernist humanism” foregrounds the crooked timbre of humanity against different forms of managerial, technological, and totalizing political practices that instrumentalize human beings for whatever good cause.

“Material being conditions consciousness but conscience remains unsettled,” wrote Shklovsky in 1926, paraphrasing Karl Marx.²⁷ This unsettled conscience will transform the arts of estrangement into the arts of dissent in the 1960s and the 1970s. Modernist humanism was often expressed through a “via negativa” and in a minor key; it operated through the estrangement of cruelty, non-instrumentalization of the human being, and resisted any kind of revolutionary teleology that justifies violence.

Shklovsky’s contemporary, poet Osip Mandelshtam, developed his own version of humane revolution. In his visionary 1922 essay “Humanism and the Present” (*Gumanizm i sovremennost’*), Mandelshtam doesn’t think of humanism in terms of nineteenth-century psychology and biography-centered literary culture. His modern humanism is a form of social architecture that doesn’t use human beings as material for authoritarian pyramids but exists for humans and on the human scale. The “contemporary” for Mandelshtam is always a little out of step with the present moment, to rhyme with the past and

the future. Mandelshtam extends his temporal range from Assyria and Babylonia to the contemporary moment, challenging the use of the word “revolution” and putting it in the service of humanism, never subscribing to the doctrine of necessary violence of the revolution:

There are epochs which maintain that man is insignificant, that man is to be used like bricks or mortar, that man should be used for building things, not vice-versa—that things be built for man. . . . Nevertheless, there is also another form of social architecture whose scale and measure is man. It does not use man to build, it builds for man. Its grandeur is constructed not on the insignificance of individuality but on the highest form of expediency, in accord with its needs.

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Mandelshtam rescues the humanistic architecture of the Renaissance and the revolutionary conception of “home” in England; for him home is not a bourgeois refuge but a revolutionary island of horizontal, human-scale culture.

Joseph Brodsky called Osip Mandelshtam a Russian-Jewish “homeless poet,” a dreamer of the international poetics of the “world culture”; he wasn’t declaratively political and yet became one of the very few writers in the Soviet Union to write a satirical epigram on Stalin, for which he was severely persecuted and sent to the Gulag. Like his friend Shklovsky he had unconventional politics, more committed to civic courage than to a particular party, and remained in his own words “out of pace” with his brutal century. Mandelshtam practiced estrangement together with “nostalgia for world culture” in a rather radical manner, insisting that a poet always has to renew his beginnings and move in “honest zigzags,” “flirting with foreign speech” (“Fourth Prose,” 312–25). A modernist humanist artist like Mandelshtam’s “Dante, the Dadaist,” is a bit of a misfit, someone who deviates from the etiquette of accepted behavior, doesn’t have good manners, and engages not in making perfect new forms but in revealing the poetical laboratory of practices and experiences that resist authoritarian architecture and the instrumentalization of humans. Mandelshtam believed that what mattered in art was not the formal creation but the “impulse formation” that brings together poetic and material practices, on a human scale. These impulses are never straight or algorithmic; rather they shape “honest zigzags” of creative practices, intricate like the veins in the stones of the Black Sea that make furrows of cultural memory.

Such reflections veer beyond the autonomy of poetics into existential and political practice and the arts of dissent. It is not by chance that non-abstract modernist art became extremely suspect and was persecuted by the totalitarian regimes, much more so than its realistic counterpoint. Modernist reflections defamiliarized the mechanisms of ideological manipulation and instrumentalization not always visible behind beautiful visions of justice, equality, or national prosperity. By the early 1930s, this version of estrangement for the world became an intellectual crime and was silenced in one part of the world and later marginalized in the other, not making it into the dominant story of the formal transformation of modern art.

Reflecting upon his theory of estrangement sixty-five years later, Shklovsky attempted to dispel historical misconceptions about the Formal method and the relationship between art and the “world”: “*Ostranenie* is a form of world wonder, of an acute and heightened perception of the world. This term presupposes the existence of so-called “content” if we understand by “content” deferred, slowed-down, attentive examination of the world.”²⁸ Thus, *ostranenie* was never an estrangement from the world and a retreat into the mythical ivory tower, but an exercise of wonder through the “attentive examination of the world,” estrangement for the sake of the world’s renewal. While only half-understood and discarded as outmoded in the late twentieth century, it opens its potentials for the twenty-first century, defamiliarizing our modes of making meaning and changing the history of the present.

Perhaps it takes an artist and not a theorist to account for the artistic richness, contradictions, and lateral possibilities that are present in the Russian avant-garde. William Kentridge’s contemporary off-modern humanism violates the etiquette of the art theory and remains a kind of theoretical misfit. Kentridge draws from a large arsenal of non-canonical avant-garde and modernist works in art, literature, and music, engaging with peripheral modernities and challenging the periodization of art history. Defamiliarizing the inhuman works through rethinking scale, organization of space by offsetting the total work. In the twenty-first century such dissenting humaneness catches us off-garde and appears to us as a kind of love at last sight in our so-called posthumanist age.

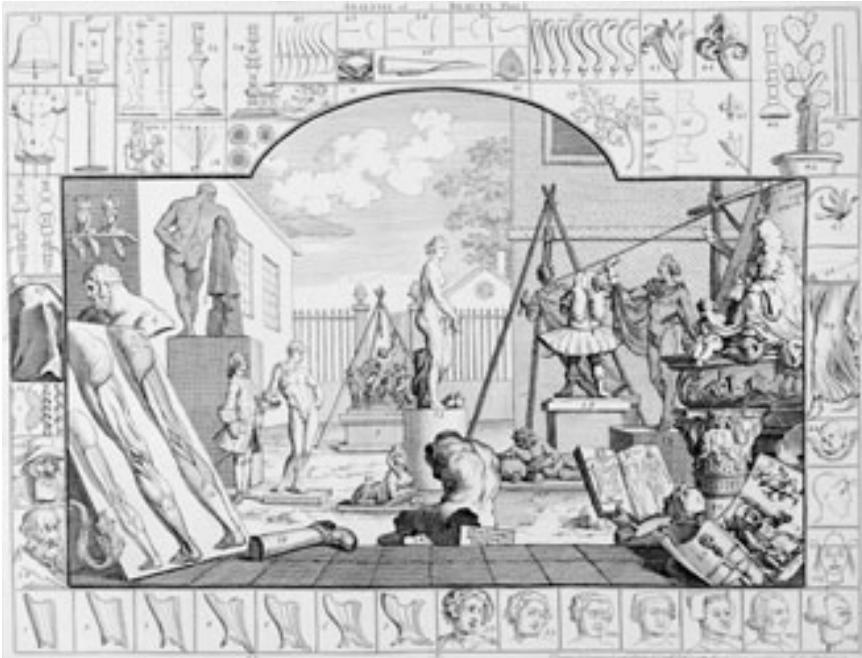


Figure 19.1 William Hogarth, “Analysis of Beauty,” Plate I, 1753. HIP/Art Resource, New York.

Squiggles, Spirals, and Serpentine Dances

The knight's move of revolutionary estrangement and the serpentine "road of the brave" harks back to the prehistory of our discontinuous modern archive. Serpentine forms, spirals, and zigzags traverse world cultures, connecting ancient Mesopotamians, Native Americans, South Asians, Hebrews, and Chinese with experimental traditions in European aesthetics—from Michelangelo to William Hogarth, Laurence Sterne, and Aby Warburg. Sometimes the serpentine figure refers to the intricate symbolic relationship with divinity, and at other times it stands for mystery and intricacy itself, for the pleasure of the chase and the quest for meaning and understanding. It has the shape of an ultimate hieroglyph, without a singular meaning. There is something tantalizing about this serpentine figure, which at times is drawn with extreme virtuosity, and at other times resembles a doodle, an unintentional play of the pen that imitates the winding of thought or the ephemerality of a cloud composition. This quality of the serpentine line has made some philosophers and theologians despise it with a passion, looking for a charismatic invisible hand that twists the lid shut on the open form, eliminating the serpentine temptation from intellectual history.

One of the earliest examples of a philosophy of swerves is Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, a rare combination of erotic poetry, philosophy, and proto-quantum physics that has been recently revived in Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve*, which gives an insightful account of the adventures of Lucretius's book in early modern intellectual history. Lucretius (ca. 99–55 BCE) was a Roman poet and philosopher, a creative interpreter of Epicurus who presented a poetic account of the swerve of matter both in physics and in the human actions that defy both philosophy and religion. Lucretius began with his idea of minimal indeterminacy in the motion of atoms, the improbable swerve (*clinamen*) "at no fixed place or time." This atomistic theory bears an uncanny resemblance to the indeterminacy postulated by modern quantum physics, as well as to

debates on free will and freedom of individual action. Perhaps it isn't by chance that such a radical account could be rendered only in a beautiful poetic form that glided over its philosophical contradictions with brio.

Before physical scientists embraced some of Lucretius' radical ideas, he found his followers among philosophers of the Renaissance and writers of the Enlightenment—from Giordano Bruno to Jonathan Swift. In his essay *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), the painter, writer, caricaturist, and aesthetic theorist William Hogarth produced the most intricate celebration of the serpentine line as a swerve of beauty and liberty that connects natural and human forms with the form of imagination itself. In his striking elaboration of intricacy that precedes Kantian aesthetic theory, Hogarth connects beauty, play, and a disinterested pleasure to the process of chase itself:

It is a pleasing labour of the mind to solve the most difficult problems; allegories and riddles, trifling as they are, afford the mind amusement. . . . Intricacy in form, therefore, I shall define to be that peculiarity in the lines . . . that *leads the eye a wanton kind of chase*, and from the pleasure that gives the mind, entitles it to the name of beautiful.²⁹

Intricacy, an unfashionable and nearly obsolete concept today, might sound like a belabored virtuosity or ornamentality. In fact, intricacy foregrounds entanglement, embarrassment, complexity, and mental intrigue. Complication and complicity suggests the logic of pleats and folds. Intricacy is about chiaroscuro and shadowplay, insight through lucid reflection, not through blinding illumination. Intricacy involves mental intrigue; it is about the process of plotting without a single masterplot, about the pleasure of narrativity without an overarching narrative. This is an early practice of Sklovskian estrangement: an intricate intrigue without a happy ending, exactly what the entertainment industry despises. Intricacy characterizes a human logic of ambiguity and multiplicity for which no single technological algorithm has yet been invented.

The line of beauty transforms itself into a mysterious and humorous squiggle in Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy*, an inspiration for all experimental fiction from the eighteenth century to our days, including for Shklovsky's *Sentimental Journey*. The squiggle, a figure of liberty and liberality, mediates between a structured spiral and a spontaneous doodle, between form and informality, between script and improvisation. The squiggle makes us

think about deviation and detour from the straight line and from mainstream ideology of any kind, but in retrospect it also reveals that these deviations can turn into an intricate structure in their own right that requires a complex understanding.

The squiggle is an artistic hypertext that allows us to make many eccentric connections and alternative solidarities throughout the modern tradition. Gustave Flaubert's last unwritten book, the culmination of his career, was to be called *La Spirale*; Flaubert himself didn't have a chance to elaborate it, but like Tatlin's spiral Tower this unwritten spiral novel became an inspiration for others. For Vladimir Nabokov, the spiral is a key figure of the fourth dimension of fictionality; the spiral is a "spiritualized circle" (interestingly, "spiritualized," not spiritual, it's about spirituality in process). It is not about any institutionalized religion but about the "cryptic disguise" that joins the author and the reader in the process of mimicry and play.

We can imagine an unconventional archive of those spiral and zigzag moves that amount to an alternative archeology of modern practices. For the art historian Aby Warburg, the ultimate work of memory, his Atlas of Mnemosyne, was an assemblage of the intricate gestures, "pathos formulas," and serpentine dances that linked different cultures together. All the pictures in the Atlas were set in panels that worked as dark anamorphic abstractions in counterpoint to the images, or as a mysterious scenography, as Warburg himself referred to his Atlas. This Atlas of Mnemosyne wasn't organized through a conventional typology but through elective affinities. Set against a prominent black background, these diverse images, from Botticelli's nymphs in undulating cloth to women golfers from contemporary newspapers, amount to an imperfect phantasmagoria of world culture, or as Warburg himself called it, a "ghost story for very adult viewers."³⁰

The most striking experience that inspired Warburg to rethink the connections between West and East, between antiquity and modernity, was his visit to Native American villages in the Pueblo region of the United States, where he witnessed the actual serpent ritual performed in times of drought. The ritual mediated between image, symbol, the actual animal, and the human dancer. It began with an elaborate depiction of rattlesnakes through many zigzags. Once the picture was completed, the Hopi dancers would begin to circle hypnotically around it, imitating the serpentine moves. Then they would disappear and return with poisonous snakes that were let loose on the sand

painting, writhing ferociously as if merging with their depiction until the two were indistinguishable. The serpents were then removed one by one in the mouths of the dancers to the edge of the mesa and sent back to the desert as special envoys to bid the Gods of Rain to end the drought.

Warburg gives a twentieth-century interpretation of the ritual. For him, it has an intricate logic: “the masked dance is a danced causality.” Causality here is that of “as if,” of another kind of “sympathetic logic” of synchronicity that doesn’t exclude contradictions the way the Western system of logic does. This sympathetic mythic logic goes beyond violence and organizes a transitional cultural space, the space of reflection. It doesn’t matter so much what the serpent stands *for*, what matters is that it stands *with* the dancer, and to quote Yeats, you cannot tell the difference between “the dancer and the dance.” Warburg gives his own non-linear, “shizoid” interpretation of this practice, connecting the serpent dance to the rituals of the Maenads in Greek tragedy and to modern technology, especially seismography. Seismograph for Warburg is both a technological invention and a metaphor for the modern poet, a seismographer of the soul.

Warburg’s reinvented serpent dance is a hybrid cultural practice that isn’t about the exoticized mythological “soul of the Indian” that many Western interpreters searched for; it performs their particular way of organizing chaos in the natural world through a spiritual distancing from violence, offering an alternate route to human dignity. In Warburg’s view this could teach Westerners a lesson in the new human science that he invented and called “the iconology of the interval,” one that cherishes in-between spaces and alternative logical routes.

These off-modern non-systematic thinkers left their eccentric heritage for us to decipher and actualize. They become our con-temporaries not because they captured the trendy zeitgeist of their era or fit into our retro fashion, but because they rhymed different times for the sake of the future. If we were to conceive of a house for this tradition, it could be the baroque house envisaged by Gilles Deleuze in one of his last books, *The Fold*. Here we find ghosts of our early twentieth-century nomads refracting their various theories. Each intricate line leads to another labyrinth, “forming a webbing of time embracing all possibilities” (62). The surface in this house is made of baroque folds that “unfurl all the way to infinity.” But notwithstanding all fancy rhizomatic networks, the off-modern house is also a space for the sympathetic logic of human errors and for embarrassed insights that don’t break away from the endangered human architecture.



Figure 19.2 Aby Warburg, *Atlas of Mnemosyne*, Panel 46, 1924–1929. Image Courtesy of the Aby Warburg Institute, London.



Figure 20.1 The Salon de Fleurus, 2012. Photograph by Joshua Bright/The New York Times/Redux.

The Off-Modern Museum

Where can the folding histories of modern pentimenti and of humorous squiggles be housed? What kind of architecture can contain them?

There is a hidden Museum of Modern Art in New York that not many people know about. Information about it is spread by word of mouth, often among art-obsessed immigrants in New York City who come from countries that no longer exist or that have changed their identities and orientations. It has no "Visitors' Information" and no museum shop. To get there you have to call A who can contact G who will open the door for you from the inner yard. There off Spring Street in SoHo you find yourself in the "Salon de Fleurus," named for the apartment-salon on the Rue de Fleurus in Paris where the great American expatriate writer Gertrude Stein received guests for tea and talk. It was here that the works of "modern art" were displayed, deliberated about, and reframed, before the institution of "Modern Art" came into existence.

As you enter the rooms on Spring Street you find yourself in a familiar universe. Imagine that Gertrude Stein is your eccentric aunt who invites you for afternoon tea and reluctantly shows you around. A few Picassos here and there, not the major works (those have been sold) but studies in brown and grey, a good early Juan Gris ("Malevich? No, no, you must have seen it somewhere else"), Matisse, Cézanne. The frames are the gilded rococo of international yard sales, unless, of course, these are the originals. The other objects are familial, like those of any aunt, the porcelain figurines, chatchkas of unidentifiable origin, presents from long-lost friends. Everything is covered by a patina of time, or maybe dust, because Aunt Gertrude and Aunt Alice don't invite their old Polish cleaning woman anymore. The patina isn't that of the past but of another time altogether, the time of Gertrude Stein's repetitions and her representations of the present. You know that you can't be rude and ask the question: Are the pictures real? "Well, in some sense they are," Gertrude would

respond. There is plenty of aura here, maybe the result of poor lighting and a certain etiquette of tactfulness: most of the things are visible, but it would be impolite to come closer to them and trespass the unspoken conventions of time out of time and space out of space. Picasso's famous Cubist masterpiece now appears in sepia as if in an old photograph, Cézanne finds his place in the cabinet of chatchkas and curiosities.

The guardian of this Salon and the master of ceremonies, Goran Djorjevic, explains that Gertrude Stein's home on the Rue de Fleurus was de facto the first museum of modern art in the world, before the Museum of Modern Art was established in New York to save the European avant-garde and to institutionalize, for better or for worse, a certain version of modern art.³¹ We only have a photograph, and verbal descriptions, of Gertrude Stein's salon. The Spring Street Salon de Fleurus is a ruinophilic reconstruction of the old photograph, and it looks pretty close. The works aren't simulacra or postmodern replicas in the 1980s fashion of Sherry Levine and others. They are neither quotations nor gimmicks of authorship. The whole notion of replica and copy, simulation, kitsch, appropriation, might not be appropriate here.³² This is instead a conjectural life of modern art, the history of "as if" which in this case lives—literally—side by side with the history of "as is." The postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion wouldn't help us understand the particular affectionate temperature of personal dedication to art that is at stake here. This is a labor of love of the *société anonyme* from a Balkan country that no longer exists. Only the lingering conviction persists that transhistorical and transcontinental artistic solidarities of "apartment art" exhibits in the countries of late socialism can still find their eccentric place off Broadway in New York City.

The museum has an edgy existence in time, space, and cultural contexts. It is neither a one-time happening nor a temporary installation of a delimited duration. While it was a part of the Whitney Biennial in 2002 and a part of the exhibit "Fictions" in Ljubljana, Salon de Fleurus now survives in New York for an indefinite time. Its space isn't virtual, and it isn't a performance space but an actual salon where deliberation continues and a few potted plants manage to survive. We are, in effect, in the first living Off-Modern Heritage Museum. This isn't a space of make-believe but rather a space of "what if?" and a crack in time, where the parallel existence of modernity uncannily overlaps with our own.

* * *

Guided along as it were
a chain of flowers into
the mysteries of life.

Such is the slogan of the Museum of Jurassic Technology that emerged in Culver City, California, just as mysteriously as the Salon de Fleurus in New York. The real dinosaur in the room is the conception of the museum itself as a space where the Muses can play again. You learn from the pamphlet-guide that the Museum of Jurassic Technology tries to recapture something that has been lost in official museums: "In its original sense, the term museum meant a spot dedicated to the Muses—a place where man's mind would attain a mood of aloofness above everyday affairs." With its roots in the early days of the natural history museum, the museum preserves their spirit, described as "incongruity born of an overzealous spirit in the face of unfathomable phenomena." It brings together a traveling diaspora of different collections, from the baroque theaters of Athanasius Kircher, the scientist, master of theatrical ceremonies, specialist in catoptric optics, and founder of Rome's earliest Wunderkammer, to the nanosculpture of the Armenian artist Sandaljian and X-ray flowers. The goal as stated in the pamphlet-guide is "to reinhabit wonder" and to create an experience of the old Cabinet of Wonders, the prototypical museum, where works of art and technology and eccentricity could exist side by side. It is as if the museum guides us back to the time when the separation between Art and the arts, *Techne* and technology, Muses and museums wasn't yet as clear as it is today. Wandering into the museum, one is never sure where the exhibits begin and end, what explains a display and what is the display. Is a pamphlet a product of the curator or of an artist?

The collection does not distinguish between natural and man-made wonder, and exhibits amazing techniques and inventions from eccentric times and places that don't lead to the "development of technology" as we know it. The museum is modern because it uses the techniques of modern fiction, in which arts and sciences cohabit next to each other and where positivist science was only one narrow road out of many possibilities. Who would have thought that the pedants would win, and of all the possible roads of wonder, the most narrowly specialized one would be chosen and called "progress"? One of the important "Jurassic technologies" is a technique of modern wonder.

Who is the author of it all? Like the Salon de Fleurus, the Museum of Jurassic Technology dares to be an ambivalent institutional space, not run by a committee with the necessary bureaucratic transparency. Instead, its organization has a lucidity and the play of modern fiction. Are these Jurassic artifacts characters in search of an author?

The director of the museum is David Wilson, documentary filmmaker, creator of panoramas, and an artist in life, who, in private, is an unassuming and engaging man. Lawrence Weschler, author of a thoughtful and poetic book about the museum, tries to track down the mystery of the museum's creation, to no avail. Weschler writes: "The visitor to MJT continuously finds himself shimmering between wonder (at the marvels of nature) and wondering (whether any of this could possibly be true)" (*Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, 60). And it's that very shimmer, the capacity for such delicious confusion, that constitutes part of the human condition. Yet he tries "to break the façade of ironyness" of the director and to get to some kind of evidence, which is never provided.

Maybe it's the immigrant in me, but I take the right to ambivalence to be self-evident and never try to push for "unveiling" or demystification. For the experience of wonder isn't the same as a crossword puzzle where you enter all of the necessary words and "break the code." Maybe, like an actor in Greek tragedy we can reveal more about ourselves and our human errors when we are masked than when we say what we mean? I spent a day in the museum, drinking tea with the artist from the Republic of Georgia who has a little tea room on the top floor, and then meeting the director himself, who at that time seemed to be living in a trailer in the yard of his own museum. In the evening I followed the director's advice and went to a lecture on "Crocheting in Hyperbolic Space," where I sat next to a man who looked and talked like Werner Herzog; next to him sat this man's Russian companion. We were encouraged to work together and learn how to make physical models for the hyperbolic imagination. We didn't bother introducing ourselves, but in the middle of our practice I mentioned that we had all met at dinner after a film retrospective in Cambridge, Massachusetts (the retrospective and the dinner were in honor of Werner Herzog), to which the man with a heavy German accent and a wink in his eyes replied that he hadn't ever traveled to Cambridge. We proceeded to make an imperfect mock-up of hyperbolic space.

* * *

What the Salon de Fleurus and the Museum of Jurassic Technology have in common is that they dare to disorient the visitor instead of presenting a didactic narrative, but it is precisely this disorientation that is part of their “aesthetic education.” One is struck by a common feature of the two museums, a blend of off-modern art and off-modern technology: they are lit differently than we’re accustomed to in museums of modern and contemporary art. Their shadowy luminosity reminds us sensually of different types of bodily experiences of astonishment and surprise. I remember how the director of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Mikhail Piotrovsky, commented that the issue is not that the Hermitage is “badly lit” but that our eyes have become accustomed to a different quality of light that is too bright, so that we no longer accept the space of chiaroscuro. These two uncommon museums also confuse the curatorial hierarchies between museum administrators, guards, artists, and curators.

There is no puzzle and no code of irony to be deciphered, rather these places ask the visitor to yield and dwell in a space of “why not” and “what if.” Both the Salon de Fleurus and the Museum of Jurassic Technology de-institutionalize the museum and show unusual creative options for museums not run by committees but by mysterious “sociétés anonymes,” whose operations aren’t “transparent” in the traditional understanding of the word. The authorship of these museums is like that of modern experimental fiction, and it wouldn’t occur to any of us to press Borges to reveal which of the names mentioned in his story “Tlön, Uq̄bar, Orbis Tertius” are “real,” though some in fact are, including that of his friend the writer Bioy Casares. Similarly, the collection of Jurassic technologies doesn’t consist of fakes or simulations, but mostly of rare artifacts that do exist, since reality is stranger than fiction and much more surprising than a simulation. On the other hand, there might also be an object or two whose existence, as in Tlön, depends on the subjectivity of the viewer. Why is it so surprising that different modes of veracity—fictional and scientific—might exist side by side, estranging one another?

Wonder brings us to the antechamber of modern technology. Wonder is modern, not Jurassic; it is perhaps the culture of the twenty-first century that tends to obviate wonder. It became one of those “retronym experiences” that one has to dissimulate either as cynicism, sensationalism, or authenticity, or an

endless “over-sharing” of the minutiae of one’s not particularly curious self. The off-modern follows the off road of wonder, not quite sure where it leads.

Off-modern museums recover an ancient art, the *ars amandi artorum*: the art of loving art and not only oneself. It is about the experience and the redistribution of the sensible, in which wonder, ambivalence, irony, tenderness, surprise work in a new mix, but according to different laws than we’ve gotten used to.

Off-modern museums aren’t always housed and named as precisely as are the Salon de Fleurus and the Museum of Jurassic Technology. One can imagine many living urban off-modern museums. In fact, outside the West European and in particular the American context, the forms of existence of modern art were quite diverse, varying from apartment art to small off-the-wall gatherings, and the response to museumification is also quite different. It isn’t by chance that artists from Venezuela to Russia have recently created mini-museums of modern architecture or art, as if the immigrant artist has to recreate the imaginary context of another experience of modernity and carry it like a portable home.

The off-modern museum is an affectionate space between public and private (but neither publicized nor privatized), between the institutional and the unofficial, between history and fiction, between virtual and real space. It doesn’t have to be modern in the established sense, but can sometimes be temporary-contemporary too.

Off-modern museums aren’t very expensive; in fact one could invite artists and writers to trace off-modern paths within existing institutions. One can also imagine artists/curators/writers guiding people through living urban museums, creating “passages.” In New York, for example, one could travel from the secret gardens in the Lower East Side preserved on odd lots as little Puerto Rican Edens, to billboard and window art further uptown, to unofficial memorials like the ones that emerged after 9/11 and other disasters. The off-modern museum might be a space where ruins and construction sites cohabit, producing living wonder and transformative disorientation.

Sometimes it is all about alternative forms of display and about casting a different light—both metaphorically and literally—on art and artifact. Since the Renaissance, light has been known to affect the surface of paintings, but that didn’t mean that artists chose to protect their works against the light of time and the wear and tear of history. Instead, many dreamed of co-creating with the process of aging and historicity itself. Some experts suggest that enigmatic Michelangelo elaborated his special “last touch,” *l’ultima mano*,

and worked on the last layer of paint and glue to configure the chiaroscuro of the future. The oblique light of the off-modern museum strives neither towards the solemn darkness of the past nor towards the brightness of the cheerful present. It tampers instead with the elusive aura of different times, reminding us of other ways of looking and seeing.



Figure 20.2 The Museum of Jurassic Technology, 2006. Photograph by Jennifer Bastian.



Figure 21.1 Svetlana Boym, “New York 1,” *Diptych Enigmas*, date unknown, photographic print, 17 × 22 inches.

Hypertextual Design and Essayistic Drift

The off-modern frame is perspectival and hypertextual; it mobilizes imperfect maps of cultural memory, on and offline. The conceptions of the off-modern have become an object of collective debate, a conversation among artists and thinkers from India to Albania, from Mexico to China, a shared condition—a state of conversing and reflecting together. It remains a process of trial and error for which no algorithm has been yet invented. Such an experiment in reinventing cultural history and practice calls for an essayistic genre, porous and non-linear, and not for a systematic typology. Theodor Adorno wrote that in the essay, “thought’s utopia of hitting the bull’s eye unites with the consciousness of its own fallibility and provisional nature” (“The Essay as Form,” 164). So the essay is not about asserting the truth of giving a definitive form or definition of the concept, but about estranging truths and transforming concepts. “The essay becomes true in its progress,” writes Adorno (161).

The challenge of the off-modern project lies in the attempt to name the areas of knowledge and experience that haven’t yet been described, or that have been culturally neglected. If we bring what is “off-ramp” or even off the grid into the body of knowledge, will we devalue its eccentric specificity? Only if we believe in the logic of non-contradiction and not a logic of heterogeneity that includes sense and sensibility. Susan Sontag describes this kind of sensual knowledge that mediates between judgment, intuition and affect. For her there is something both imperative and embarrassing in the act of naming what appears to be a historical sensibility: “A sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea. . . . To snare a sensibility in words, especially one that is alive and powerful, one must be tentative and nimble” (“Notes on ‘Camp,’” 276).

The off-modern is a framework of perception, and a form of historic sensibility understood as an emotional consciousness, a new art of thinking, a passionate intellectual *techne* of our time, and not as a personal accident of taste or a sentimental afterthought. The off-modern is a collective historical sensibility that has temporal and geographic extension. In order to be inclusive, the project has to remain incomplete, intuitive, and imperfect, but never unrigorous. An aesthetics of failure is a part of the success of off-modern experimentation, improvisation, and humor. Beckett recognized this in his famous call for improving the art of failure in his 1983 *Worstward Ho*: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better” (2). A perfect nursery rhyme for off-moderns.



Figure 22.1 Svetlana Boym, “Chessboard Collage” (2), combining an author’s photograph of a Venice antique store, one of the last known images of Osip Mandelstam from the files of the NKVD, and a fragment from the photography of Aby Warburg’s archive, *Another Freedom*, 2012.

On *Off*

Off: a detour.

Off—the tip of your tongue tenses without touching anything. You're just about to bite your lower lip and suppress idle talk. But then reluctantly you let the sound go through. "*Off*" comes out almost as a sigh of relief.

Off is a product of a linguistic swerve, a mysterious evolution from the preposition of belonging to the signpost of mischievous eccentricity. It reminds us of the ancient theories of swerving, of atomic indeterminacy and enigmas of freedom.

"*Off*" is colloquial and particular, not abstract and equalizing the way "post" was. It is virtually untranslatable. Let each language find its own version of being "*off*" and being modern at the same time.

To a non-native English speaker, "*off*" sounds like child's talk, somewhere between game and language: if you didn't know what "*off*" meant, you could almost guess it. Sometimes "there is more mouth than meaning there" (so Nabokov characterized the kiss of one of his refugee-lovers). In Nano Moretti's film *Caro Diario*, the American beauty played by Jennifer Beals tries to find a synonym for this elusive preposition, and fails charmingly. If American immigrants talk among themselves in their native language, the pidgin mother tongue that through years of exile becomes a hyphenated American, "*off*" is often one word they use in English: "Sabes, el tipo es un poco 'off'"; "nu ona nemnogo 'off'." I hear in this the traces of foreign accents—of ouch, ouff, bo, oi, ay. In short, *off* is odd.

Yet being *off* is not to be *out* or *anti*. You're never completely *off* the hook. Being *off* is a form of virtuosity. You have to exercise a special attentiveness, the vigilance of sense, the virtuality of imagination and engagement in worldly practice, which is not to be confused with the virtual interfacing in which the main physical relationship is between you and the tender buttons of your Powerbook.

A history of words composed with “off” suggests a parallel modern history.³³ “Off-color” referred first to gems, and more specifically, to the industrial exploitation of the distant corners of the world and a democratization of jewelry—at a high price. Off-color gems were the cheaper ones. By analogy, if the high modernist museum was a gem of a white cube, the off-modern museum has to be off-white. It is a different space, more off-beat, with dimensions of spontaneity and excess that don’t fit the narrative of display. “Off” introduces a moment of chance; it is both distancing and defamiliarizing, but also casts a short shadow next to the outlines of things. The off-modern space is where off-putting things are at home.

Off plays optical tricks with nearness and distance, belonging and straying off. Off doesn’t enter into a clear binary opposition with anything, except in expressions like “lights on” and “lights off,” meaning “out.” But in our case, being off is very different from being out; it doesn’t open into a dark space but into the multifarious world of luminous shadows and glimpses of the sun—neither blinding total illumination nor charismatic darkness, but a chiaroscuro, a shadow play. Off is not transcendental or transgressive, but mysterious and improbable.

The off-modern isn’t ashamed of old-fashioned practices of thinking. Off-modern thinking combines logos and pathos, memory and imagination, expanding the regimes of the sensible, wherever *techne*, muse, and gut guide us. Off-modern affects include different forms of reflective longing, balancing acts of tact and touch and of embarrassment—an outmoded form of self-consciousness, a paradoxical awareness of loss of control that deals with mishaps and challenges boundaries of the body and space, of self and the world.

At the same time, *off* is closer to the trans-sensical dimension of language as well as the realm of poetic puns and wordplay. We are warned that wordplay is bad for internet searches; it requires constant disambiguation. Wordplay disorients the cookies installed in your hardware that collect information about you and send it to advertisers for niche marketing. So, off-moderns, beware, everything off the market price will be advertised to you. But you have the option to pursue the arts of human ambivalence, take a break off-grid, and drift between the lines.

Part Two

Practices

(For the full sets of images, see www.svetlanaboym.com)

Since the 1960s, artists have dreamed of becoming their own curators and have borrowed from the theorists, while the belated off-modern theorists in turn dream of coming back to their artistic lives. Disappointed with their own disciplinary specialization, they migrate into each other's territory. Neither backwards nor forwards, but sideways. An amateur, as Barthes understood it, is the one who constantly unlearns and loves, not possessively, but tenderly and desperately. Grateful for every transient epiphany, an amateur isn't greedy.



Figure 23.1 Svetlana Boym, "A Girl in the Black Sea," *Unforeseen Homecoming*, 2007, photographic print, 11 × 8 inches.

Unforeseen Homecoming

When I emigrated from the USSR, we weren't allowed to carry family albums. Photographs with more than three people in the picture were considered a "suspicious grouping." Each picture we took with us thus became unique and unrepeatable. I began to re-photograph those pictures caught between two cultures, one of sparseness and the other of excess, one of archival obsession and the other of obsolescence. I still don't have a proper family album, but I constantly reframe photographs and play with foreign words that don't translate into my mother tongue.

Our past is unforeseen but not untouchable. Each moving image in this project records the act of touching a picture of homecoming. I push the forgotten "multiburst" button on my still camera and the sixteen syncopated seconds never allow me to freeze the perfect moment. Occasionally my tired fingers cast a blood-tinged shadow from behind the photograph. The touch dwells on the glare and cracks of the image, laying bare photographic errors, passing shadows, and future ghosts.

The act of recording homecoming was never a simple one for me. I come from a family where in every generation, starting at least with my great-grandparents, the family homes (or any kind of modest living accommodations) were lost, destroyed, and expropriated. Sometimes they were remembered with affection and bitterness, but mostly willfully forgotten. Moreover, this happened several times during each family member's lifetime, and nobody was ever able to go back or recover anything except a few sepia photographs with torn edges. Perhaps this isn't unusual for the lower middle-class Eastern European Jews who inhabited the outskirts of empires, but the story of multiple losses that happened before and after the Holocaust, and occurred with every regime change, is rarely told with all its uncomfortable twists and turns that defy some



Figure 23.2 Svetlana Boym, “The Inner Courtyard, Leningrad 1989 (Touched in 2007),” *Unforeseen Post*, 2007, still from a sixteen-second video.

contemporary plots of history. It belongs to the off-modern annals of parallel histories that aren't fully documented in any photo album.

Having grown up in a “communal apartment,” I inherited some of my grandparents' and neighbors' stories. While I had a deep attachment to the beautiful city of my birth, Leningrad–St. Petersburg, famously called “the foreigner in its own land,” I ended up emigrating and coming back only after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Upon my return in 1989, I found my old house in a state of sad disrepair, pervading not only the neo-baroque façade in the Russian art nouveau style of the early twentieth century, but even the interior yard and the back staircase that led to our communal apartment. I stood numb in front of the familiar ruins, but only when I pulled out my camera to take a picture did I discover the word “death” (смерть) written on the rusty pipe. The graffiti was laconic and excessive at once. Later I found out that a film was being made in my half-demolished yard about the absurdist poet Daniil Kharms, whose books were illustrated by Vladimir Tatlin. I still don't know whether the graffiti was part of the set or the work of an anonymous author.

This is the ceiling of our room in the communal apartment in the same building in Leningrad. During my childhood I used to stare at this relic from another era. Even when the house was ruined, this ceiling fragment survived, immune to all revolutions. A few bare wires hung down from the gaping hole where there once was a lamp.

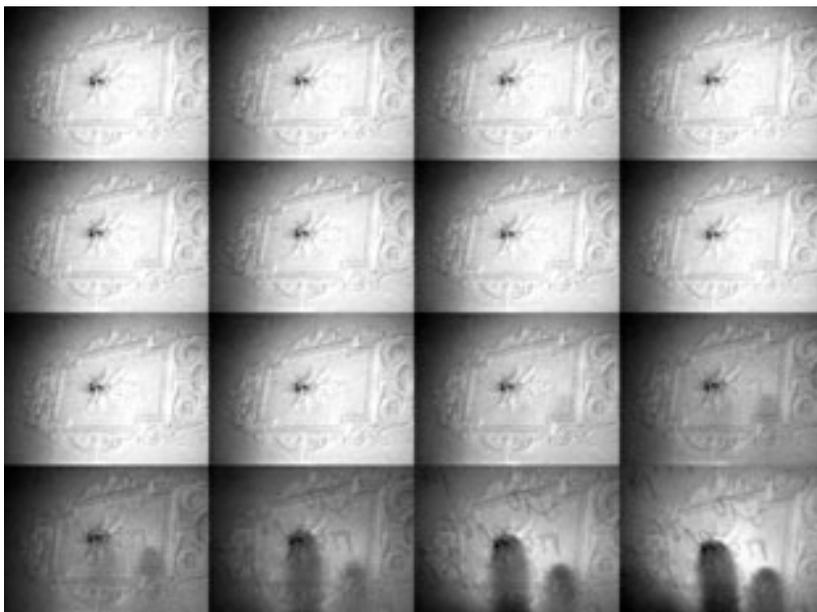


Figure 23.3 Svetlana Boym, “The Ceiling, Leningrad 1989 (Touched in 2007),” *Unforeseen Post*, 2007, frame-by-frame composite of a sixteen-second video.



Figure 24.1 Svetlana Boym, “Moscow 1935,” *Phantasmagorias of History Part 1: The History of “What If,”* date unknown, frame by frame images of a sixteen-second video.

Phantasmagorias of History

Phantasmagoria, literally “public gatherings of ghosts,” invites us to explore the side alleys of history. The word “phantasmagoria” was invented for the theater of optical illusions produced chiefly by means of magic lanterns or similar devices to restage and confront the uncanniness of recent history. One of the pioneers of phantasmagoria, Etienne-Gaspar Robertson, opened his spectacle in the Capuchine cloister in Paris in 1799, projecting the specters of Marat, Danton, Robespierre, and Louis XVI to French spectators haunted by the Revolution and Terror.

“Phantasmagorias of History” records the physical act of touching and looking back at photographs. We remember how to retouch images and historical events, but not how to touch—physically, emotionally, intellectually. Usually they show large groups of people, mass protests and popular revolts that occurred at various historical crossroads when the course of events could have turned otherwise, as in 1938 or 1968, in 1989 or in 1991 or 2001.

Sixteen-second-long syncopated movements attempt to capture the “butterfly effect” in history, that mysterious shudder of the wings that resist determinism. They become haunted loops of conjectural history that preserve the scars of the photographic surface, its glare, shadows, and folds, as if refracting the potentialities and errors of the medium without a single revelatory zoom. My “touching” intervention can’t salvage history but only “brush it against the grain,” commemorating lost opportunities and conjuring up the ghosts of the future that could have been.

In most cases I chose images of unorchestrated mass protests, political revolt, and social movements, rather than the official demonstrations and photogenically restaged heroic revolutions that supposedly captured the spirit of history. My phantasmagorias commemorate deviant spirits, not “manifest destinies,” conjuring up sympathetic ghosts, not the Big Brother of the Hegelian *Geist*.



Figure 25.1 Svetlana Boym, “Erased Communists,” *Phantasmagorias of History Part 2: Avant-Garde of Erasure/Turning the Page of History*, date unknown, still from a sixteen-second video.

Turning the Page on the Avant-Garde

Together with the photographs of the protests, I run the images of erased and doctored historical photographs. After all, the inventor of the photomontage, Gustav Klutss, who put his avant-garde technique in the service of Leninist and then Stalin's revolution, was himself erased from history after being shot in 1937, accused of being a British spy. These images of historic erasures remind us uncannily of the avant-garde paintings from Giorgio di Chirico to Kazimir Malevich, only here behind the black square we see the other kind of *pentimenti*: that of an erased face, first retouched and then erased from history and sometimes, executed.

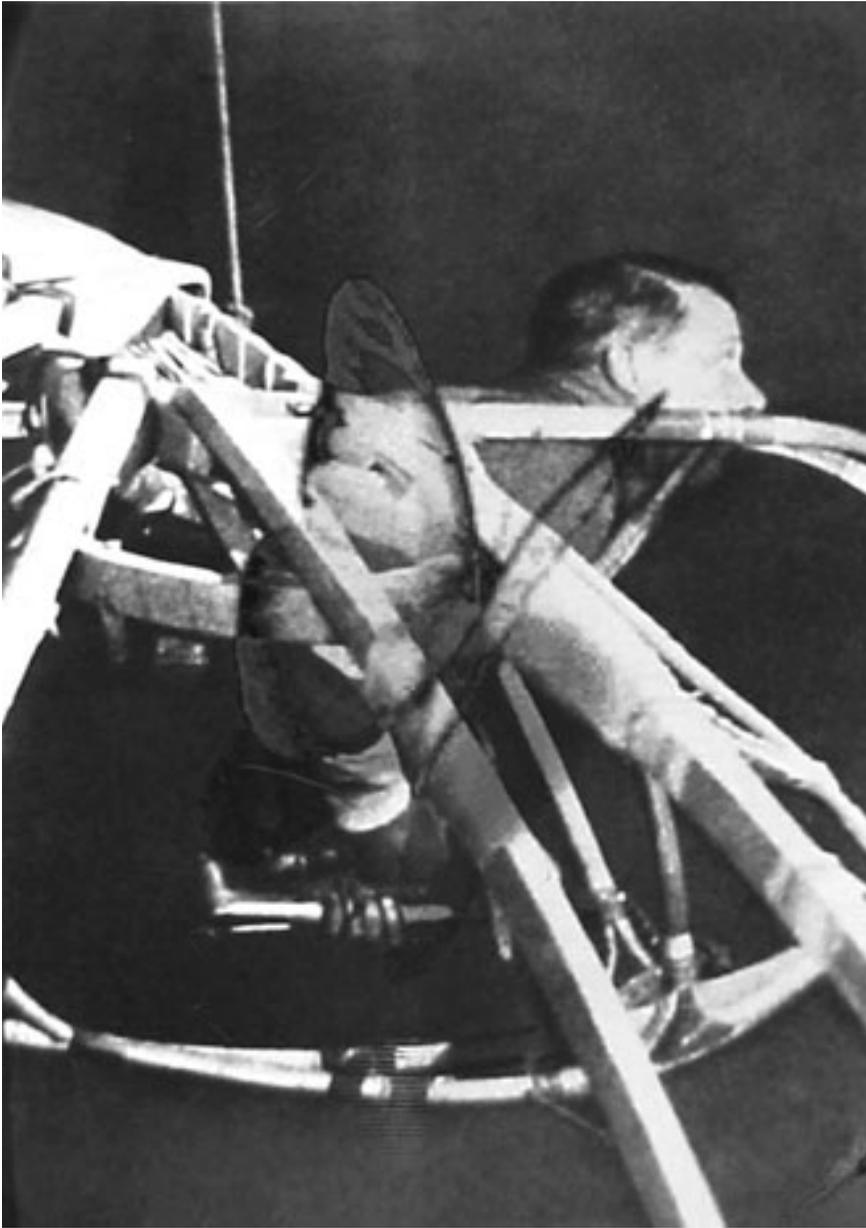


Figure 26.1 Svetlana Boym, “Letatlin with Butterfly,” *Hybrid Utopias*, 2002–2007, photographic print, 17 × 22 inches.

Hybrid Utopias

Vladimir Tatlin's project Letatlin survived the torturous history of the Russian avant-garde and Soviet rocket science; it remained an eccentric artistic vehicle, a graceful monument to a dream, not a journey into another world. Most likely Letatlin couldn't fly. Not in a literal sense, at least. And yet Letatlin, as well as the Tatlin Tower, remained as a phantom limb of the non-conformist art of the twentieth century, haunting artistic projects from Eastern Europe to Latin America.³⁴ Letatlin and the enchanted history of technology open up into another tradition of modernity that are a little "off" the main plot of history.

Like everything else, the images of Tatlin's studio, where he was making models of Letatlin, can be found in the public domain on the web, since no pro-cosmic estate has yet claimed them, and so are Nabokov's butterflies. Once as I was taking those dream images from the public domain I accidentally printed Nabokov's butterfly on top of Letatlin's wings, completely out of scale (Color Plate 2). This was the beginning of my own hybrid utopias.

Nabokov wrote that "the difference between comic and cosmic is in one sibilant." I am nostalgic for that one sibilant, as I realize that I can only tolerate impure hybrid utopias whose past and future are in arts and not in life.

In our Soviet high school, we used to study projects of hybrid socialist biology, particularly the work of Ivan Michurin, who endlessly cross-fertilized pear and apple, grape and sweet cherry. As far as I know, I never tasted these hybrids, but I loved the process of their creation. So I realize that I accidentally cross-fertilized two different utopias, Tatlin's and Nabokov's. These were two dreams of defying the force of gravity, of flying without falling, mimicry of immortality.



Figure 27.1 Svetlana Boym, "Portable Home," 2008, photographic print, 17 × 22 inches.

Global Transits and Portable Homes

Vilém Flusser, an exemplary twentieth-century philosopher of photography, wrote that a photographer isn't a "Homo Faber" but a "Homo Ludens" and a trickster. In his words, the photographer's freedom lies in "playing against the camera." This might be "the only form of revolution left to us" (Flusser, 80).

Revolutionary or not, my global errands go together with technological errors that capture a manual labor of memory and a personal touch that is imprinted on the images like a disruptive signature. For me, not only the act of photographing but also that of making individual prints has to be a mini-performance of intervention and imperfection. I interrupt my printer, all its prerecorded lamentations notwithstanding, and pull the photographs prematurely, leaving the lines of passages and blotches of transgressive colors. This "human error" makes each print unrepeatable and uniquely imperfect. A disruptive touch defies the understanding of photography as an art of mechanical or digital reproduction. Each work is a fragment.

Modern architecture lying in partial ruins on the outskirts of Europe is part of another, less spectacular International Style. These buildings, often indistinguishable from one another even in my own photographs, compose an outmoded mass ornament of global culture. That is only at the first glance, of course. If we look closer we see that no window, balcony or white wall is like any other. People in these anonymous dwelling places develop the most nuanced language of minor variations; they expose singular and unrepeatable outtakes of their ordinary lives: a lace curtain half-raised, a dusty lampshade in retro 1960s colors, a potted flower that has known better days, a piece of risqué underwear hung on a string here and there. The inhabitants of these buildings dream of elsewhere, homesick and sick of home. Satellite dishes are spread out over the ruined balconies in Sarajevo like desert flowers.

While traveling through former war zones in the former Yugoslavia, I didn't want to do disaster tourism but rather to reflect on the art of everyday survival. I capture the act of looking back at the snapshot from Sarajevo, taken right after the war, re-photographing it against all instructions, occasionally dropping a piece of trash or a flower on the old picture, leaving in all the glare and blemishes that a professional photographer would try to remove. The cities in transit include abandoned or foreclosed homes and scaffolds with the dream homes of the future. Among them is a construction site in Manhattan, behind the Cathedral of St John the Divine, the home of an immigrant peacock, and the windows of a real estate office in Cambridge Massachusetts, with pictures of sold and foreclosed homes during the financial crisis of 2008–2009. The photographs house the transients and offer “portable homes” that we can carry with us when we travel light.



Figure 27.2 Svetlana Boym, "Leaving New York," 2009, photographic print, 17 × 22 inches.



Figure 28.1 Tirana, Albania. Image courtesy of LatitudeStock/Capture Ltd.

Postindustrial Art Nouveau: Tirana Arabesque 2010

Albania's capital of Tirana is a city of belated modernity that in the twenty-first century has witnessed unprecedented artistic experiments in the public sphere with Edi Rama's Tirana Façade project.

The municipality of Tirana invited me to take part in the project and redesign one of the façades on Tirana's main street, Building 44. Exploring Tirana's histories out-of-sync, I imagined a special kind of post-industrial art nouveau, an art of wire arabesques that brings together art and technology, invisible collective infrastructures and patterns of shared memories.

Unlike other buildings used in the Tirana façade project, ones that typically have uniform façades of late socialist block-architecture, Building 44 struck me as a building with a unique personality, due to its unusual curved balconies that suggest echoes of pre-dictatorship architecture. I asked for an original photograph of the building, but no image of it seemed to exist, and the name of the architect was unknown. The building dated back to the late 1970s, but it seemed to have deviated very slightly from the norm of anonymous socialist public housing, revealing a trace of architectural eccentricity and innovation. Through the 1990s the residents continued with less artistic modes of individuation, expanding and modifying the balconies, conquering public air for a little more private space and hiding it from view. The more I looked at the building the more it struck me as a strange version of a late-socialist "Liberty" building that incorporated many minimal eccentricities and unconventional histories. I decided to work *with* the architecture of the building, not against it; this meant neither restoring it to its original form nor its complete transformation, but rather a celebration of its errors and deviations as an example of eccentric and implausible architecture of the out-of-sync postindustrial *art nouveau*.

The characteristic architectural function of *art nouveau*, known also as a *Jugendstil* or *liberty style*, was to connect the interior and exterior of a building through a signature artistic design that liberates architectural forms and puts new building technologies to artistic use. Victor Horta's staircases decorated with intricate squiggles with off-red shadows are an imitable example of *Liberty* design. Rather than imitating historical *art nouveau*, I chose to reimagine it in a new context. This would be a kind of postindustrial *art nouveau*, an alternative international modern style that might not have flourished in Tirana in the past, but could be reinvented in a Tirana of the future.

Art nouveau was the last architectural style to confront the mystery of the architectural façade. The façade, a building's face and mask, is at once public and very personal. Façades form an interior design of our dreams. There is always a quality of a cinematic prop to façades, a bit of a feel of a Potemkin village, a projection with darkened windows made for the illusionistic fantasies of the urban stranger.

A façade bears the patina of time, the wrinkles of age as well as the signs of contemporary makeup. It is haunted by the ghosts of the past and projections for the future. An architect sees the façade on a model, without reflections, shadows, wires, projections, posters, graffiti, or the scars of time. For me, a façade is a scarred and retouched material surface, the site of multiple practices of urban self-fashioning that go beyond architectural modeling.

Socialist architecture varied between the uniform collective façades of new living quarters and the highly symbolic façades of public buildings, often decorated with slogans and posters. Looking at the buildings of Tirana and other postcommunist cities, we see illicitly protruding balconies decorated with colorful underwear, semi-legal TV dishes and dangling wires—the intestinal infrastructure of our supposedly “wireless” world that connects us, often in an unforeseen manner.

In fact, the urban wires are a truly anonymous product of workers' art, without precise typology and not appropriated by any propaganda; they create strange utilitarian ornaments with curves and loops that no artist could have quite envisioned. There is something *exaptational* about those wire loops, they curve and weigh down with a bit of excess.

Based on my study of wire patterns in different cities and international art nouveau design, I have developed a special Tirana arabesque, and the façade

will be transformed through wire art. Like iron ornaments of the historic Art Nouveau, my wire arabesque brings together art and technology, evoking Victor Horta and contemporary graffiti artists at once. My Tirana façade is a dream work-in-progress, an intricate chain of arabesques that transform private connections of the present into public compositions of the future.



Figure 29.1 Svetlana Boym, “Multitasking with Clouds,” 2008–2009, photographic print, 15 1/2 × 16 1/2 inches.

Multitasking with Clouds

My neighbor on the train needs neither snail-watching through the window nor snail-talking with a stranger. She is happily interfacing in private. In a world of endless pop-up windows, horizons and limitations will be abolished. All you need is better tech and death itself will become a thing of the past. And, to paraphrase Faulkner, the past will never be dead again, it won't even be the past. Furtively I look out at the landscape of industrial decay—ruins of former factory towns, framed by endless pipes and wires. From a certain uncomfortable angle, the digital screen turns into an old-fashioned reflective surface shamelessly invaded by passing clouds and sunset panoramas. The computer is only a material thing, after all, however light it is. I am perched on the edge of my seat, trying to commemorate the flickering shadows on my neighbor's computer screen without disturbing her cinematic pleasures. I feel like a private detective, spying on transience itself.

At some point in the DVD a murder happens and the dying man screams for help in the middle of the clouds and trees. Is there a corpse there or just another ill-shaped cloud? Multiburst doesn't allow for blow-ups and zooms. It resembles the "primitive cinema" of the early twentieth century. I can't rewind it either, for the clouds and shadows would never conspire in the same way. As I capture the low-tech corpse on my neighbor's reflective digital screen, I recognize with anxiety that my playing with the camera doesn't result in chancy innovation but in appropriation. Why am I aiming at this vanishing corpse with such desperation? By chance my erratic photo work turns into a digital homage to Antonioni's *Blow-Up*. My version isn't slick but well intentioned. The existential puzzle is still there and the resolution is low, just like in the good old days.

Blow-Up, inspired by Julio Cortázar's short story "Las Babas del Diablo," offers an existential zoom in on the paradoxes of the real and the pitfalls of the

analog that no contemporary special effect was able to match. I watched the Antonioni films in Leningrad, and their auratic cinematic alienation had a profound effect on my life, even on my decision to emigrate from the former Soviet Union. At the age of eighteen my understanding of the political was a mixture of rebellion against the coercion and claustrophobia of Soviet life at the time that destroyed what remained of ideals of justice and the foreign existential dream of liberation. I could blame Antonioni for seducing me with auratic cinematic alienation. As a teenager I loved the freedom that I saw in his films, the freedom of long takes, of individual anxiety and critical reflection, wandering and wondering, a luxury of alienation. It was explained to us as a “Marxist critique of the bourgeois society,” but it seemed to be also a form of individual creativity, a way of playing against the apparatus. There was a breeze in the heroine’s hair and a long duration of non-obligatory time that we can only dream about.

The twilight time is short, the DVD is almost over, and so is the time of panorama watching. My “Chicken Sierra Special” purchased in the café car is getting cold. The “Sierra” part of it, a sun-dried tomato smashed into the Wonder Bread, has an aftertaste of another time.

“Dad, is the moon moving?” asks a little boy behind me. “No, it’s very far away,” the father explains. “It’s we who are moving . . .” I smile and turn around. “What’s your name?” I ask the boy. “I forgot,” he answers.

The windows are dark now, turning into imperfect mirrors in which the passengers can see themselves framed by dangling ticket stubs. Some are still multitasking, others just staring into space.

For better or for worse, panoramas are dying a slow death, yielding to interfaces and cell phone screens. Once they reigned supreme, framing the rivalry of art, technology, and nature. The word “panorama,” from the Greek *pan* (“all”) *horama* (“view”), all-encompassing vision, was coined by the Scottish painter Robert Barker in 1792. He built the first panorama house in the world especially for his grand wide-angle paintings of the city made on large cylindrical surfaces. The panorama became an all-encompassing fashion, making its inventor rich and famous. Since then all kinds of “oramas” have proliferated—from cosmoramas to lifeoramas in the nineteenth century to the full-immersion “Cinerama” shown in Universal Studios tours, a forerunner of modern IMAX film-projection technology.

The nineteenth century was the age of panoramas. Daguerre began as a panorama artist and invented photography only after a fire had destroyed his panorama house. Art and technology competed in the public imagination of the new space of modernity. Photography was the next step in the game of illusions. Soon afterward, the train journey became a part of “panoromania” and framed many real-life panoramas. It was never merely about arriving at a destination but also about window-travel. Many works of nineteenth-century literature are framed by the train journey. Its unhurried rhythm inspired strangers to unburden themselves, to think about the meaning of life. We remember how one famous passenger confessed to his accidental neighbor that he might have killed his wife over a Beethoven sonata. And another unfortunate heroine found her end under the wheels of a train, as if punished by the writer himself. Panoramas became victims of their own success, and in a peculiar reversal of fortune, from meaning a landscape painting they began to refer to the landscape itself. Now when we speak of a “panorama,” we mean nature (often at its most scenic), not the now-obsolete panorama art. Panoramas occupied the space of play between nature and art, and besides the dream of the grand illusion and all-encompassing perspective, they also revealed a horizon of finitude, the limit of human vision. The painter of panoramas strived to create a life-like illusion, always aware of its impossibility. Painting “en plein air” was like trying to square a circle and dwelling on its elusive curves.

From painted panoramas to photographic exposures, from real to fictional train journeys, the road led to the discovery of cinema, which was imagined in a novella by Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, *The Future Eve*, some fifteen years prior to the technological invention. Cinema would borrow the language of panorama (“panning” and “panoramic shots”), and movie houses shared architectural features with old panorama houses and train stations. The early twentieth century became the age of cinema, which continued its own train travel from the first film by the brothers Lumière, *The Arrival of the Train*, to Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*. The latter film's hero challenged “bourgeois realism” and jumped onto the train tracks, this time not to kill himself but to expand human vision with an under-the-wheels panorama. In a more conventional fashion, many a romance was happily consummated with a train driving into a tunnel and the cheerful words “The End” written over it.

Yet much of the early cinema was non-narrative. The brothers Lumière's "archaic" proto-documentary *The Arrival of the Train* featured non-centered frames with actions taking place chaotically and spontaneously in different parts of the image. This kind of cinema was about narrativity itself and its euphoric potentialities. It allowed the spectator a narrative freedom to play with unpredictable adventures and roads not taken. It depended neither on formulaic plots that would dominate cinema with the introduction of the Hollywood code in the 1930s nor on the carefully calculated interactivity of the new gadgetology.

The industrial landscape was the contemporary of cinema's golden years. Factories would give jobs to immigrants, and trains would transport them. Rails, not roots, were what mattered. Rails shouldn't turn into roots. Otherwise they bind you to the soil and never let you go. Cinema celebrated industrial construction but also revolutionary destruction, often simultaneously. Thus, in the films of Sergei Eisenstein, especially in *October*, the old monuments would become ruins only to be transformed into new monuments that used some of the same reconstruction and retouching techniques as the old ones.

Later twentieth-century visual art stopped trusting the enlarged Renaissance perspective of the panoramas, turning to a more self-reflective and ironic conceptual perspective. It explored virtuality in its original sense, as imagined by Henri Bergson, a virtuality of human consciousness and creative imagination that evades technological predictability. Yet much conceptual art was still haunted by the horizon of finitude, a certain clouded existential panorama; whether it acknowledged it explicitly or evaded the question is another matter.

In the early twenty-first century, Netscape took over the landscape. Just as the word "mail" turned into the retronym "snail mail," the word "window" is becoming virtual. Microsoft Windows offers faster and more exciting panoramas than the "snail train windows" of the malfunctioning and underfunded Amtrak service.



Figure 30.1 Svetlana Boym, “Airport 1,” *Airport Ruins*, still from a sixteen-second video.

Airport Ruins

I arrive at the departure gate, just another jetlagged transit passenger who has failed to travel light. A young businessman with a perfect haircut sits alone, hiding behind the morning paper. His solitude is so plausible that I don't notice at first that he is a piece of art. It is early morning in the Munich airport, but I am caught in the twilight zone of another continent. Thank God for the espresso bar "Pisa," decorated with the familiar ruin of a leaning tower. By inertia, I look for the windows, but there isn't much to see, a series of superimposed frames, a palimpsest of panoramas. Outside is the no-man's-land of shabby tech, ruined scaffoldings, rolling staircases to nowhere, shuttle buses and old aircraft with flowers painted on their wings. Remember where you're going but forget how you are getting there.

And please don't stare off into space.

Ensnared in the ruin's comforting shadow, I observe the chance encounters at the departure gates. A man passes by a woman waiting; he slows down, her disheveled hair trembles in the breeze of the air conditioning. Or are these mere reflections? Have they met before? Is this their last chance? The airplane staircase magically appears at the top of the leaning Tower of Pisa, making it look like a reconstructed Tower of Babel. You wish you could freeze that perfect image and just go up.

But alas, my camera takes pictures in multiburst, recording sixteen seconds of slow disenchantment. The objects in the mirror are further than they appear. It's boarding time, and that Pisan espresso has left nothing but emptiness and heartburn in my stomach. The in-flight magazine informs me that the tower of Pisa has been made more "stable," but it will soon undergo a new face-lift. Of course, they would never try to set it straight, but they'll make it lean a little more, in a safer picturesque manner, casting short shadows upon

the landscape of sleepy *loci amoeni*, *agriturismo*, industrial ruins, and Saturnian hot springs.

Airport architecture is all about light and function, visibility and convenience. But the truth is that your journey is neither transparent nor revealing. Old train stations looked like cathedrals of progress with skeletal steel apses. Airports resemble shopping malls or casinos with no obvious exit: you travel from sign to sign, some of it duty-free. In the disorienting space of the airport, with its unreadable panoramas and competing signs, I find comfort in the familiar image of the leaning tower of Pisa, the best-preserved ruin in the world. Its origins and angles of inclination are still under dispute. There is a legend that its architect wanted it to lean from the very beginning, making it into the first “artificial ruin.” The official “Leaning Tower of Pisa” website claims that the “genetic code” of the Tower is its connection to the “soil” rather than its picturesque quality. It was Mussolini who thought of making it perfectly vertical, pouring cement into its soil only to provoke unexpected results and further sinking of the tower. On the other hand, the tower was saved at the end of the Second World War when Allied forces entered Pisa, while many other towers were destroyed for fear of snipers’ fire. The shape of the famous leaning tower made it distinctive and memorable, as if resisting both correction and destruction.



Figures 31.1 and 31.2 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015, photographic print, 17 × 22 inches.

Hydrant Immigrants

I spent five years photographing hydrants, especially in New York City. For most people a hydrant is either a nuisance or a life-saver, but for me it's a strange unintentional memorial by the side of the road, or even an anthropomorphic deity that needs a photographic kiss to come to life. It dawned on me that my hydrants were invisible storytellers, just like the immigrants I'd been interviewing around the same time. Two parallel tracks fortuitously intersected.

Hydrant Immigrants are urban tricksters playing hide-and-seek with urban memories. The "straight" photographs of hydrants are accompanied by snippets of immigrant tales, real and imaginary. In some stories there is a sentence or two that come from a testimony, a short story, an account of disappearance, or a letter home. The project refers to the tradition of found objects and urban data collection—from "God" by Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven to Berlin water towers, but it also sidetracks and embarrasses these traditions with deviant and affectionate immigrant storytelling.

[See Color Plates 4–16 for a suite of hydrant immigrants.]



Figure 32.1 Svetlana Boym, “Not Working,” 2005, photographic print, 10 × 7 1/2 inches.

Not Working

The word “school” comes from the Greek *skholê*, which means both “lecture” and “leisure.” So there was a time when “spare time,” play, and leisure weren’t on the other side of the cultural divide from working and schooling.

I have to contribute something to a discussion of “cultural labor,” about which I know very little. I reflect on the off-modern and off the scene. The text begins to spill out, I contain it, expanding the outtakes, bolding the definitions. But my mind wanders and gets distracted. I notice short shadows of a Californian afternoon that remind me of Benjamin’s unfinished fragment “Short shadows.” There he writes that toward noon, shadows are “no more than the sharp black edges at the feet of things, preparing to retreat silently, unnoticed, into their burrow, into their secret” (272). They make us aware of thresholds, contours, and afterimages. I no longer shape my thoughts into lines, but look at the lines through my half-full glass of non-sparkling water, capturing fleeing sunbeams. I observe the instance when the parallel lines of the text just barely refract into a non-Euclidian space. My text is no longer spilling anywhere, rather the glass is spilling water on the keyboard, risking technological disaster.

I photograph my computer screen with my digital camera, enhance the image, crop it, and then “revert to the original,” losing all the labor-intensive changes in the process. The water lights up like fire. My lecture still isn’t ready, but the photo is, a testimony to the detour from lecture to leisure.

“Are you still working on it?” my American friend asks me.

“No,” I answer. “I am not working.”

It is tempting to write a nostalgic narrative of loss: *homo ludens* becomes *homo faber* and later a mere *animal laborans*. But one should not be seduced by stories of the Fall. What if all three beasts, the player, the maker, and the laborer,

cohabit in our bodies and minds? Maybe our cultural labor as teachers and writers isn't merely the laborious production of published goods. We cling to the utopian hope that cultural labor exceeds itself by being also a form of action, communication, co-creation, contribution to some collective open-ended work-in-progress. The technology of cultural labor is not a mere prosthesis of progress but a framework to be explored and deviated from.



Figure 33.1 Svetlana Boym, "Connectivities," *Black Mirrors*, 2009, photographic print, 15 1/2 × 16 1/2 inches.

Black Mirrors

What if we use digital devices to multitask with clouds transforming their pixelated interfaces into reflective surfaces and black mirrors?

The black mirror—an ancient gadget used by artists, magicians, and scientists from Mexico to India—offers an insight into another history of “techné” that connected art, science, and magic, producing an enchanted technology of wonder. When a digital surface becomes a “black mirror,” it reflects upon clashing forms of modern and premodern experience that coexist in contemporary culture. New “black mirrors” engage with pictorial and photographic genres of the past to document a confrontation of modern industrial ruins and virtual utopias.

The black mirror was an object of cross-cultural fascination, trade, conquest, and sometimes misappropriation. The Aztecs used black mirrors made of obsidian or volcanic glass in divination and healing practices. If a child was suffering from “soul loss,” for example, the healer would look at the reflection of the child’s image in a mirror and examine his shadows. After the discovery of the “new world,” Europeans appropriated the obsidian mirror for anatomic theaters and occult practices, dissecting bodies and bringing ghosts back to life. Since the Renaissance, European painters and architects—including Leonardo da Vinci and Claude Lorraine—have used their own black mirrors to focus on composition and perspective in the landscape and to take a respite from color. Sometimes the artists have stared into the black mirror to take a break—to catch a breath, so to say—in order to purify the gaze from the excess of worldly information. The black mirror allowed them to suspend and renew vision.

In the nineteenth century, black mirrors were rescued from oblivion and found their place in the new popular culture of the picturesque. English

travelers carried miniature black-mirror-like opera glasses, framing and fetishizing fragments of landscape. Absorbed by the possibility of capturing the beauties of the world in the palm of their hand, voyeurs of the picturesque left the world behind. American doctor and spiritualist Pascal Beverly Randolph went beyond the picturesque. Believing in the mystical vitality of the black mirror, he supposedly used opium and his own and his wife's (and mistress's) "sexual fluids"—to use chaste Victorian language—to polish its surface.

At the turn of the twentieth century, modern artists from Manet to Matisse resorted to the black mirror, not to reflect an image but to reflect upon sensation itself, on the ups and downs of euphoria and melancholia, or the syncopations of modern creativity. So, although the black mirror dims colors, it also sharpens perspective, not framing realistic illusions but estranging perception itself. The black mirror offers a different kind of mimesis and an uncanny and anti-narcissistic form of self-reflection, in which we spy on our own phantoms in the dim internal *film noir*.

I took a train journey through the American industrial landscape, multitasking with clouds on my digital screens. I used the digital surface as a "black mirror" to reflect nature and contemporary anxieties on the ground and in the air. The surface of my broken Powerbook looked like a Milky Way spotted with forgotten stars. Telephone wires reflected on my Blackberry ran parallel to the train tracks below me (Color Plate 3).

This project is *techno-errotic*—more erratic than erotic, engaged in errand and detour in order to question the new techno-evangelism. Surrounded by garrulous screens, we barely get a quiet moment for contemplation. The dim realm of personal chiaroscuro has given way to the pixelated brightness of a homepage, bombarded by hits and unembarrassed by total exposure. This new form of overexposed visuality hasn't been properly documented. When captured on camera, it appears ambivalent, confusing, and barely readable.

I want to catch the digital gadgets unawares, confront them with each other with the alchemy of cross-purpose uses, to counterpoint different forms of modern and premodern experience, technological, existential and artistic.

Once upon a time, trains ran on time. These days they rarely do, but now we have a great opportunity to text about it. My train runs through ruins and construction sites of industrial modernity, factories, cemeteries of deceased

cars and dismembered bicycles, service buildings that serve no purpose anymore with the palimpsest of graffiti on their walls. This landscape is the crisis of the picturesque.

With the Blackberry off, I get a respite from colorful virtual life. Distracted from “friending” or doing work, I stay in a state of contemplative slumber. I know that nostalgia isn’t an answer to the speeded-up present, that time is irreversible and shadows will never conspire in the same way again. No longer a seductive digital fruit, my Blackberry reveals its second life as a melancholic black mirror that puts into sharp focus the *decaying non-virtual world* that is passing us by.

Notes

- 1 See Viktor Shklovsky, *The Knight's Move* and "Art as Technique." For a detailed discussion, see Svetlana Boym, "Poetics and Politics of Estrangement."
- 2 I distinguish between modernization and modernity, but not in order to vilify the former and rehabilitate the latter. To discuss the concept of "world modernities," it is important to distinguish between *modernization*, which usually refers to industrialization and technological progress as state policy and social practice, and *modernity*—the word coined by Charles Baudelaire in the 1850s—which is a critical reflection on the new forms of perception and experience, often resulting in a critique of modernization and its accompanying embrace of a single narrative of progress, without turning antimodern or postmodern or postcritical. This modernity is contradictory and ambivalent; it can combine fascination with the present with longing for another time, a critical mixture of nostalgia and utopia. Most importantly, reflecting on modernity makes us critical subjects rather than mere objects of modernization, and encompasses the dimension of freedom as well as a recognition of its boundaries.

The literature on modernity and modernisms is vast. The "unfinished project of modernity" is often associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas and Mikhail Bakhtin, and is linked to the discussion of the discursive public sphere in the work of the former and the unfinalizability of the cultural dialogue in the latter. See Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project." "Uneven modernization" is part of the late Marxist discussion of the modern project in connection to the social transformations of the present. For the best discussion of "alternative modernities," as well as for a sympathetic critique of the Marxist model, see *Alternative Modernities*, edited by Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar. For other discussions of divergent and decentered modernities, see Julio Ramos, *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, and Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics*. In the post-Soviet context, see Harsha Ram's "Futurist Geographies: Uneven Modernities and the Struggle for Aesthetic Autonomy: Paris, Italy, Russia, 1909–1914."

For a bold poetic rethinking of modern poetry and art, see the work of Marjorie Perloff, for example, *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics*, and Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The*

Contemporaneity of Modernism. For the crucial discussion of new avant-garde and a critique of the postmodern project, see Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* and *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Anti-Modernism, Postmodernism* (with Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh), and his recent book, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (2013).

In my rethinking I am particularly indebted to the work of Andreas Huyssen and Reinhardt Koselleck that focuses on a different understanding of historic temporality itself and on new modernities and the culture of amnesia. See Reinhardt Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, and Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in the Culture of Amnesia* and *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. I drew personal inspiration from Vilém Flusser's unconventional critique in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* of technology that combines critique and creative freedom. My approach overlaps but never entirely coincides with all of the above.

- 3 To some extent, the theory of the altermodern still follows post-Marxist and post-postmodern logic, while the off-modern offsets this way of posthistorical thinking with the swerve and the knight's move that opens into alternative genealogies and conjectural histories. Bourriaud opposed the "modernism of the twentieth century which spoke the abstract language of the colonial west." The off-moderns don't subscribe to such a definition of modernism in the singular.
- 4 Shklovsky observed that artists often borrow and reuse the features from their uncles and aunts and not only the giant grandparents. Innovation often follows the oblique moves of mimicry and ruse, and reuse of the features that were considered culturally irrelevant, residual, inartistic, or outmoded, placing them into an alternative configuration and thus altering the very horizons of interpretation.
- 5 Jacques Lacan, "Anamorphosis." As an example of double vision, he cites a transformation of the tattoo on a limp phallus that becomes erect, making the logic of the phallus a hermeneutic clue to the anamorphosis. While acknowledging Lacan's great contribution to visual culture, the off-moderns aren't obliged to suffer from this particular phallus envy.
- 6 See Michael S. Roth et al., *Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed*.
- 7 Georg Simmel: "This is as it were a counterpart of that fruitful moment for which those riches which the ruin has in retrospect are still in prospect" ("The Ruin," 262).
- 8 Simmel, 262. Ruinscapes reveal the ambivalence of the aesthetic enjoyment that seeks unity and transient perfection but only if it is rooted in something "deeper

than mere aesthetic unity—in existential metamorphosis, in the process of becoming.”

- 9 Friedrich Schlegel, quoted in Roth et al., *Irresistible Decay*, 72.
- 10 Hermitage-Masterplan 2014 is very much a work in progress, and my description of it corresponds to conversations and drafts that date back to 2008–2010. I rely on the discussion during our workshop with Koolhaas’s team in London, July 2009. For further elaboration of “modernization through preservation,” see Rem Koolhaas, *Cronocaos*, Venice Architectural Biennial 2010. I am grateful to Rem Koolhaas for an inspiring discussion of the issues of modernization through preservation, and to his team, especially to Ekaterina Golovatyuk, for providing me with further insights and graciously helping me with the images for the project.
- 11 At the same time, embarrassment might introduce us to different, more intricate ways of comprehending. Embarrassment is a crucial modern cultural affect that plays an important role in cross-cultural communication, but it doesn’t have a precise iconography, or, to use Aby Warburg’s term, “pathos formula.” It is not a fossilized cultural gesture but a formal and epistemological hesitation. It belongs to the realm of the “iconology of the interval,” to the sensory mediation between depth and surface, language and the body.
- 12 Jennifer Roberts, *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History*. Roberts offers an illuminating and informative discussion of Smithson in the context of the American preservation movement.
- 13 Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, 66. See also Svetlana Boym, “Modernity out of Sync: The Tactful Art of Anri Sala.” Exploration of sense knowledge is crucial for Jacques Rancière’s conception of aesthetics, in particular in *The Politics of Aesthetics* and in his essay on Sala, “La politique du crabe.”
- 14 See Svetlana Boym, “Scenography of Friendship.”
- 15 I further discuss the conception of worldliness and freedom in Hannah Arendt in *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea*.
- 16 Donald Kuspit offers an eloquently ironic story of avant-garde history: “Each movement is by necessity short-lived—inherently short-lived, making its limited contribution then dying into academicism and mannerism, and quickly trampled by the movement that develops in its wake—that tries to outdo it in nihilistic modernity, indeed, nihilistic intensity. Thus the avant-garde perpetual motion machine seems to exist to mirror and confirm the momentum of the modern world, which becomes greater and greater—more and more pointlessly hectic.” Donald Kuspit, *A Critical History of 20th-Century Art*.
- 17 Roland Barthes’ poetic commemoration of the uselessness of the Eiffel Tower (off-modern *avant-la lettre*, we might add) could easily apply to its Soviet rival as

well. Barthes wrote that while Eiffel himself saw his tower “in the form of a serious object, rational, useful, men return it to him in the form of a great baroque dream which quite naturally touches on the borders of the irrational” (“The Eiffel Tower,” 6). Much of visionary architecture, in Barthes’ view, embodies a profound double movement; it is always “a dream and a function, an expression of a utopia and instrument of a convenience.” Barthes’ Eiffel Tower was an “empty” memorial that contained nothing, but from the top of it you could see the world. It became an optical device for a vision of modernity. Tatlin’s Tower played a similar role as an observatory for revolutionary panoramas that included ruins and construction sites alike.

- 18 The statue was erected by the sculptor Paolo Trubetskoi in 1909 on Znamensky Square near the Nicholas Station, now Vosstaniia Square near the Moscow Railway Station.
- 19 This ludic architecture can be compared to the baroque figure of anamorphosis. I am grateful to Tatiana Smoliarova for drawing my attention to the concept of anamorphosis.
- 20 From the very beginning, Shklovsky’s *ostranenie* is defined differently than alienation, the latter usually translated by the Russian term *otchuzhdenie*.
- 21 In his essays on the phenomenology of art, Hegel also speaks about freedom and alienation as well as art’s particular role in mediating between different realms of existence. In a discussion of Dutch paintings, he calls art a “mockery” of reality, a form of irony. These ideas are close to those of the Formalists, yet Shklovsky by no means embraces the larger frame of the Hegelian system. In his later work, Shklovsky engages directly with Hegelian theories of literature. Speaking of Don Quixote, for example, Shklovsky observes that Hegel was not interested in Don Quixote but in “Don Quixotism,” not paying attention to the particular strangeness of art: “In the words of Hegel there is no movement. Hegel had an impression that he sees from the hindsight of eternity everything, including the imperial police” (*On the Theory of Prose*, 370). The Brechtian V-effect can be read as a creative reinterpretation of Hegel.
- 22 In “Art as Technique,” Shklovsky examines Tolstoy’s descriptions of theater as examples of estrangement; in his later work he speaks of the importance of the trope of “parabasis” that was frequently employed in German Romantic theater to lay bare and play with theatrical illusions. Shklovsky recited some of his early theoretical essays in the cabaret “Stray Dog,” which offered a livelier context for literary discussions than that of contemporary academia. Shklovsky’s conception of estrangement is close to Denis Diderot’s “paradox of the actor.”

- 23 See Viktor Shklovsky, *Gamburgskii schet. Stat'i—vospominaniia—esse* (*The Hamburg Account*), 118–119.
- 24 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Sometimes these a-modern versions of the past appear uncannily neo-Medieval, and their critique of the Enlightenment conception of human agency seems reductive and shared by some on the far Left and far Right.
- 25 The latter term was coined by José Ortega y Gasset, who argued that in contrast to Renaissance art and the nineteenth-century novel, man is no longer at the center of modern art; the new art does not “imitate reality,” but operates through inversion, bringing to life a reality of its own and realizing poetic metaphors. Ortega y Gasset wrote: “the weapon of poetry turns against the natural things and wounds or murders them” (*The Dehumanization of Art*, 35). Shklovsky too once suggested that blood in poetry isn’t blood but only a sound pattern.
- 26 In “Art as Technique,” Shklovsky argues that art exists in order to combat the “habitualization” that “devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (12).
- 27 This translation has been slightly modified; the original is: “Bytie opredeliaet soznanie, no sovest’ ostaetsia neustroennoi.” Viktor Shklovsky, *Third Factory*. The slogan “material being conditions consciousness” has been attributed in Soviet sources to Feuerbach, Hegel, Marx, and Lenin. Importantly, in Shklovsky’s context, this slogan opened the 1924 declaration of a radical Constructivist group that declared that the writer had to serve the demands of the social and industrial revolution (LTsK [Literature section of Constructivists]), “Tekhnicheskii Kodeks,” quoted in T.M. Goriaeva, *Politicheskaiia Tsenzura v SSSR* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2002), 123.
- 28 “There is an old term, *ostranenie*, that was often written with one “n” even though the word comes from *strannyi*. *Ostranenie* entered life in such a spelling in 1917. When discussed orally it is often confused with *otstranenie*, which means “distancing of the world.” See Viktor Shklovsky 1983, “Eshche raz o nachalax i kotsax veshchei” [Once more about the beginnings and endings of works], in *Izbrannoe v dvux tomax*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1983), 188.
- 29 William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), 49–50. Of course, the chase isn’t wanton, it is a part of what Schiller and others would call “aesthetic education.” For Schiller play is a way of pursuing freedom by means of freedom. In other words, only in serious play can the practice of public and personal freedom become both an end and a means to an end.
- 30 The Atlas of gestures and arrested movements looks like a hybrid world cinema shown simultaneously or as a hypertext of the virtual realities of cultural

imagination that requires no computer. See Aby M. Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, and Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg et l'image en mouvement* (in English, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*), and Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Image survivante, L'histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*. On the serpent dance and freedom, see Svetlana Boym, *Another Freedom*.

- 31 Goran Djorjevic, who is consistently associated with the project, describes himself as a former artist and an MIT-trained physicist who left Belgrade in the early 1990s.
- 32 Marina Grzinic, the art historian and curator of the Ljubljana exhibit that showed the Salon de Fleurus, commented that the state of an object in this context is in itself contested: "Copying does not falsify or forge the original, but questions the current, canonized foundations of modern art."
- 33 *Off*: By circa 1200 as an emphatic form of O.E. *of* (see *of*), employed in the adverbial use of that word. The prepositional meaning "away from" and the adjectival sense of "farther" were not firmly fixed in this variant until they left the original *of* with the transf. and weakened senses of the word. The meaning "not working" is from 1861; verb sense of "to kill" was first attested in 1930. *Off the cuff* (1938) is from the notion of speaking from notes written in haste on one's shirt cuffs. *Off the rack* is from 1963; *off the record* is from 1933; *off the wall*, "crazy," is from 1968, probably from the notion of a lunatic "bouncing off the walls" or else in reference to carom shots in squash, handball, etc.

Off-base: "unawares," 1936, Amererican English, figurative extension from baseball in the sense of "not in the right position" (1907), from the notion of a base runner being picked off while taking a lead; *off-beat*: "unusual," 1938, from *off* + *beat* (n.). From earlier sense in reference to music rhythm (1927). *Off-Broadway*: 1953, "experimental theater productions in New York City." Even more experimental *off-off-Broadway* is attested from 1967. *Off-color*: 1860, from *off* + *color*; originally used of gems; figurative extension to "of questionable taste, risqué" is American English, 1860s.

Off-hand: 1694, "at once, straightway," from *off* + *hand*. Probably originally in reference to shooting without a rest or support. Hence, of speech or action, "unpremeditated" (1719). *Off-key*: 1929, from *off* + musical sense of *key*. Figurative sense is from 1943. *Off-limits*: the OED says was first attested in 1952, in a US military (Korean War) sense, but almost certainly from the Second World War (cf. Bill Mauldin cartoons), if not the First World War. *Off-line*: 1926, of railroads; 1950, of computers. *Off-load*: "unload," 1850, from *off* + *load* (v.). Originally South African, on model of Dutch *afladen*.

Off-white: "white with a tinge of gray or yellow," 1927, from *off* + *white*.

Off-peak: 1920, originally in reference to electrical systems; *off-putting*: 1578, “procrastinating,” from *off* + put. The meaning “creating an unfavorable impression” is first recorded in 1894. *Off-season*: 1848, “a period when business is down,” from *off* + season.

34 See Svetlana Boym, *Architecture of the Off-Modern*.

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Plate 1 Svetlana Boym, "Leaving Sarajevo," 2002–2004. From *Cities in Transit* (*Printing Errors*).



Plate 2 Svetlana Boym, "Letatlin with Butterfly," *Hybrid Utopias*, 2002–2007.
Photographic print, 17 × 22 in.



Plate 3 Svetlana Boym, “Connectivities,” *Black Mirrors*, 2009. Photographic print, 15 1/2 × 16 1/2.

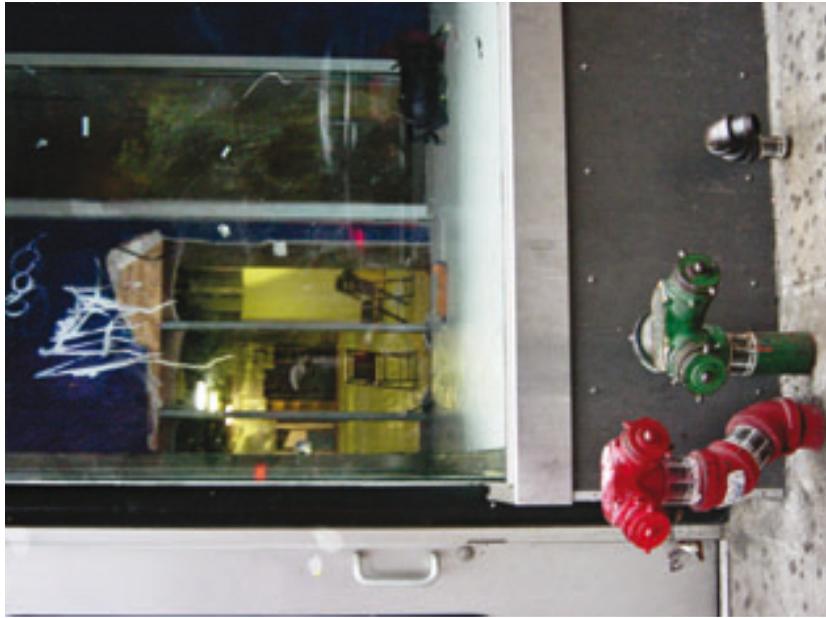


Plate 4 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015. Photographic prints, 17 × 22 in.



Plate 5 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015. Photographic prints, 17 × 22 in.



Plate 6 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015. Photographic prints, 17 × 22 in.

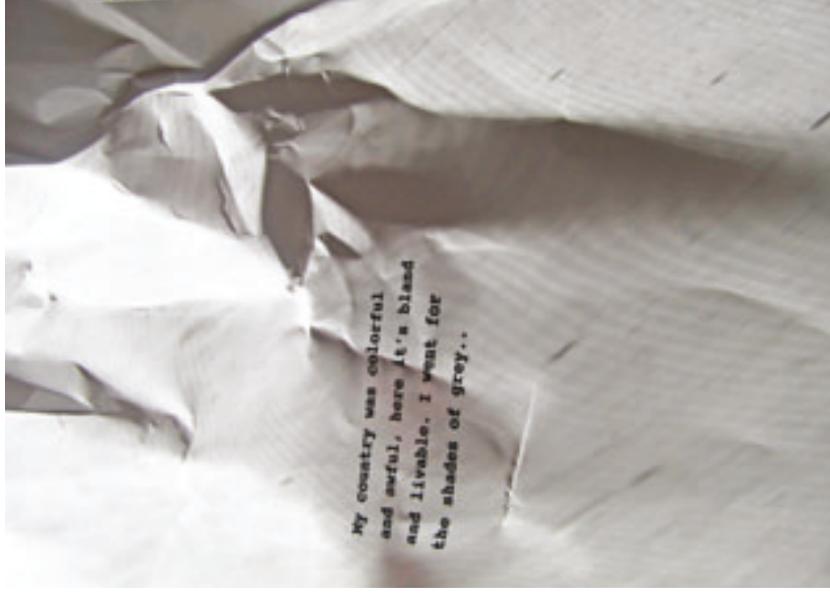
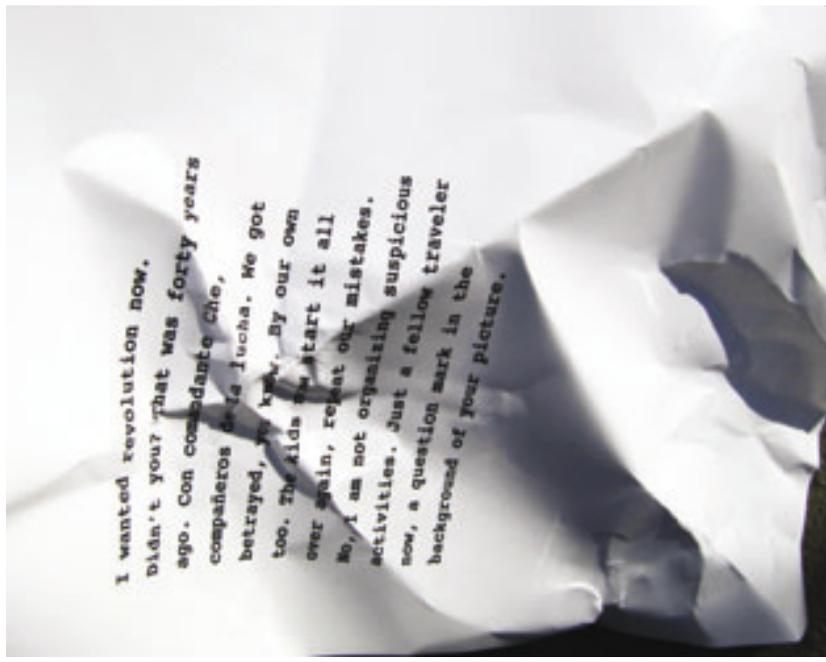


Plate 7 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015. Photographic prints, 17 × 22 in.

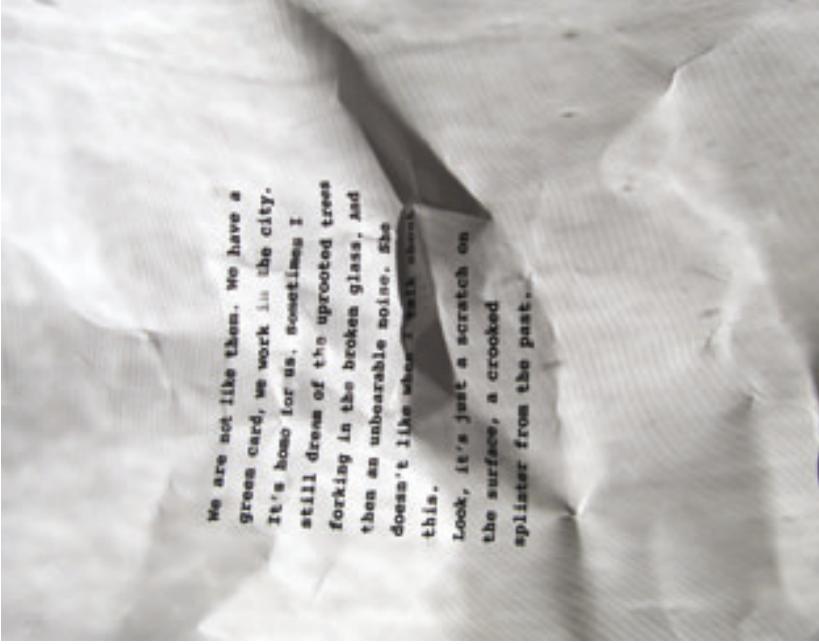


I wanted revolution now.
Didn't you? That was forty years
ago. Con comandante Che,
compañeros de la lucha. We got
betrayed, you know. By our own
too. The kids ~~we~~ start it all
over again, repeat our mistakes.
No, I am not organizing suspicious
activities. Just a fellow traveler
now, a question mark in the
background of your picture.

Plate 8 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015. Photographic prints, 17 × 22 in.



Plate 9 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015. Photographic prints, 17 × 22 in.



We are not like them. We have a
Green card, we work in the city.
It's home for us. Sometimes I
still dream of the uprooted trees
forking in the broken glass, and
then an unbearable noise. She
doesn't like when I talk about
this.
Look, it's just a scratch on
the surface, a crooked
splinter from the past.

Plate 10 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015. Photographic prints, 17 × 22 in.

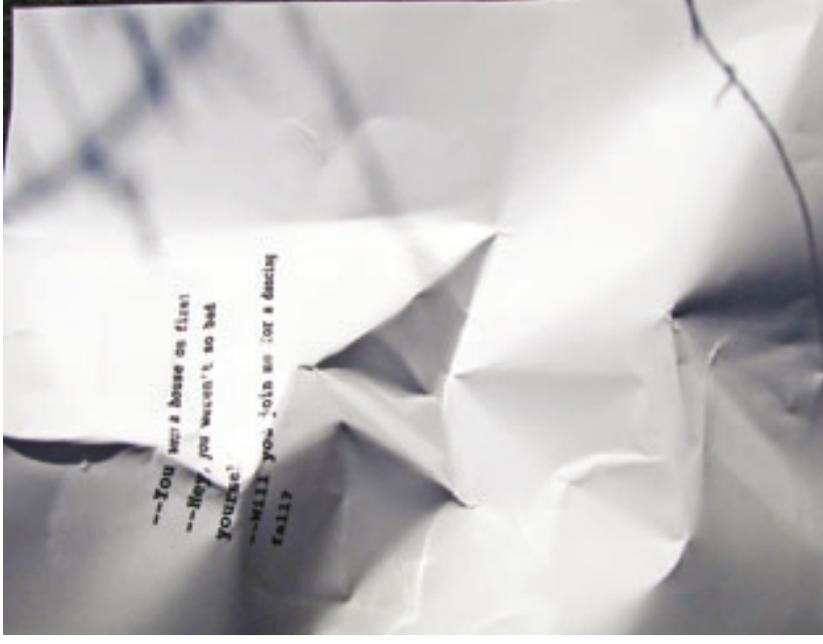


Plate 11 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015. Photographic prints, 17 × 22 in.

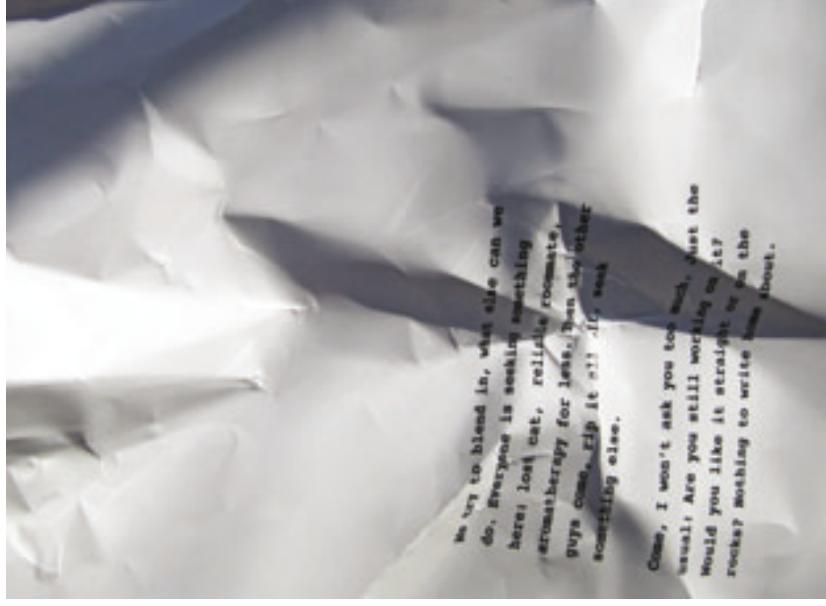


Plate 12 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015. Photographic prints, 17 × 22 in.



Plate 13 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015. Photographic prints, 17 × 22 in.

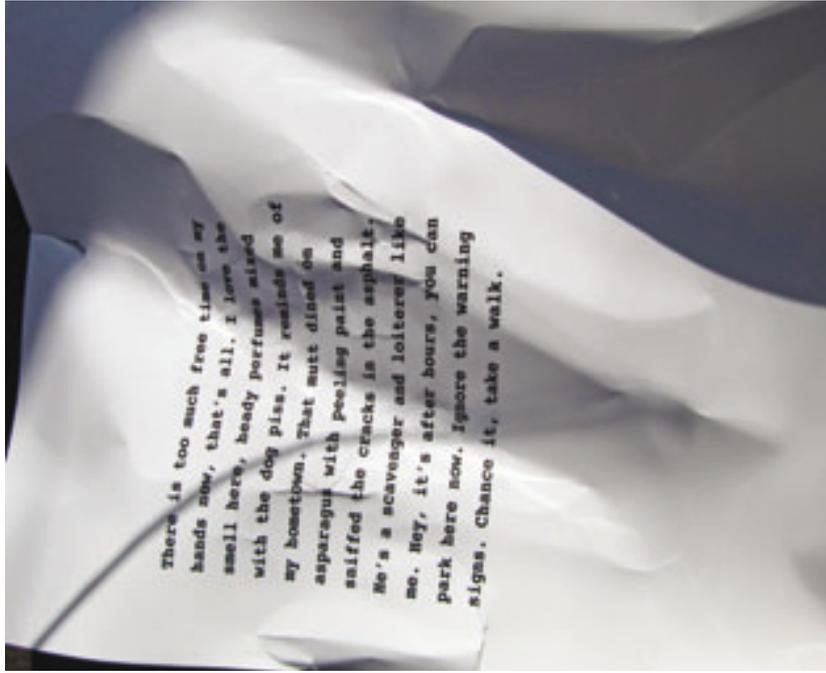


Plate 14 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015. Photographic prints, 17 × 22 in.

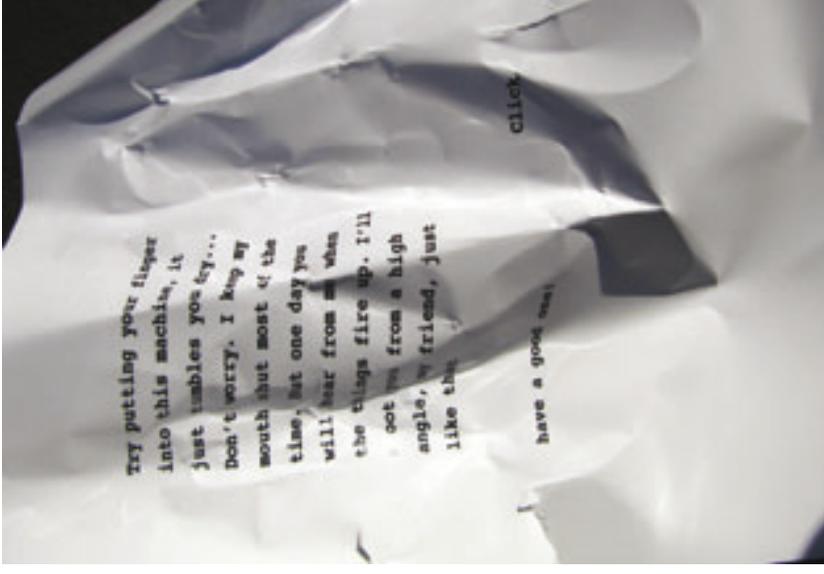


Plate 15 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015. Photographic prints, 17 × 22 in.

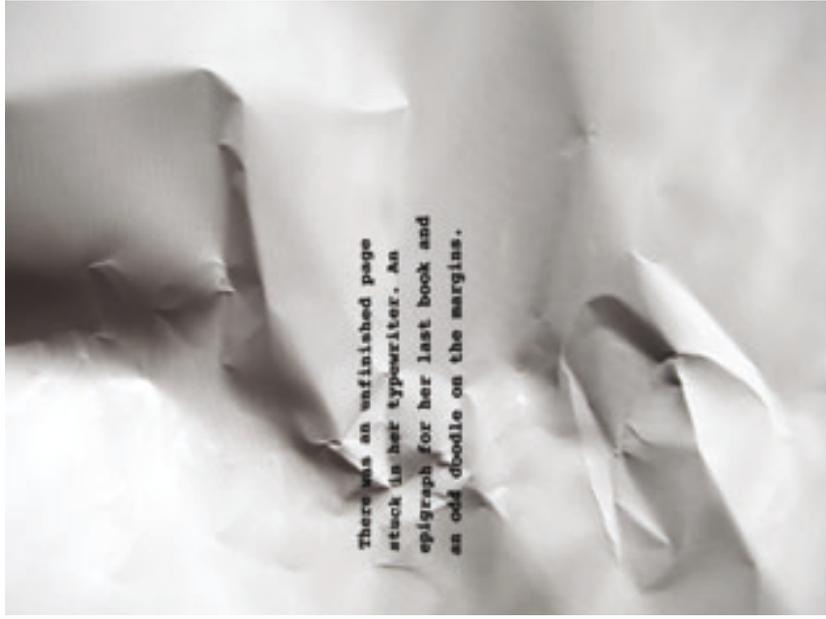


Plate 16 Svetlana Boym, *Hydrant Immigrants*, 2007–2015. Photographic prints, 17 × 22 in.