



# Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art

## ***Still Present!***

As diverse and varied as the worlds that comprise our current human reality are, they subsist amid the waste and cacophony that traverse global capitalism's frantic and destructive race toward production. A seemingly endless profusion of sprawling, monumental exhibitions mirrors the material excesses of this global overproduction. So why add yet another exhibition to this? This is the question I have been thinking about for years and that must be asked once again with the help of the artists, archives, films, theorists, and activists invited to the spaces of collective speech and reflection offered by the 12th Berlin Biennale.

Since the onset of modernity, our planet has endured successive and ruinous changes that have accelerated alarmingly since the start of the third millennium and are the diachronic consequence of a series of oversights due to our blindness. This myopia is product of the myth of Western modernity, whose engine of so-called progress is fueled by the certainty and violence of a deceptive belief in its own superiority. This delusion is wielded over societies that have not embraced a scientific worldview, over the natural environment that is destroyed, over the diverse cultures that are hegemonized, over our very health—an overexploited economic model, as the pandemic has revealed—and finally, over time itself, which along with science embodies the Promethean challenge of modernity. This illusion of superiority has a boomerang effect, its innate narcissism inevitably leading to self-destruction.

## Worlds of Wounds

The place to which we have arrived today is not by chance: it is the result of historical formations constructed over centuries. In their egoism, modern Western societies have taken their own liberal character for granted, falsely assuming that the balance between free trade and universal suffrage guarantees a self-regulating system of universal democratic values. The dystopian society we have inherited from this utopian promise produces chaos but denies responsibility for it. In fact, the present world is the way it is because it carries all of the wounds accumulated throughout the history of Western modernity. Unrepaired, they continue to haunt our societies.

This world of wounds is based on the extraordinary crimes committed by modernity—from slavery to colonialism, with racism an ideological lever to establish the certainty of its

supremacy over subjugated peoples, the West founded modern capitalism upon the brutalization of others. But while racist crimes and genocides have been normalized to justify the extraction of wealth from the Global South, the West has acted in just as genocidal a manner by constructing hatred against segments of its own populations, like that inflicted upon European Jewry throughout history, resulting in the singular crime of the Holocaust. The modern capitalist machine expounds hatred of the other—foreigners, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ people, Roma and other nomadic communities, people experiencing homelessness or mental illness, disabled people—as dogma, designating difference as a state of inferiority inherent to otherness. Obsessed with its own myth of homogenous perfection, modernity contains within itself the very seeds of fascism. What is the reason behind a failure to repair the collective trauma that haunts our societies like the phantom limb of an amputated body? To ask this question, I would argue, initiates a process of reparation—both material and immaterial. It is by understanding why these wounds have never been repaired that we may comprehend how their repair is crucial to a more just society.

The wounds that have never been repaired have become invisible, though they have not completely disappeared: their symptoms visibly manifest themselves. But the opacifying power of the colonial narrative seeks to erase these wounds like an event that never took place: a dismissal, a *non-lieu* (non-place). This place of erasure established by coloniality constitutes its discourse, a product of modern thought, “the rogue child of the Enlightenment,”(1) to quote the Algerian psychoanalyst Karima Lazali. She cites a very telling comment made by a French settler in Albert Camus’s *The First Man* (1960) as he departs from Algeria after the war: “Since what we made here is a crime, it has to be wiped out.”(2) Invisibility is discourse’s preferred weapon of control: always in denial of the crime, the enunciator claims victory while disavowing all responsibility.

Imperialism’s regimes of abstraction arrive to fascism via colonialism, articulating a hegemonic discourse of Western heroism that is superior to all others, subordinated and reduced to various categories—race, ethnicity, religion, gender, language, and so on—in order to be objectified and controlled through narrative and history. According to the decolonial scholar Rolando Vázquez, the abstract force of the locus of coloniality emits the enunciation of a colonial modern discourse that constructs the visible inferiority of the other without ever naming itself, hegemonizing the discursive space it occupies through what I would call radical expansion—which is another form of universalism. Categories of otherness are established while refusing to acknowledge the normative category of whiteness from which this binary is formulated. The paradox of radical expansion is that the hypervisibility of others tends to reduce them to a single and universal concept of humanity, enunciated by and from the invisible, privileged locus of the modern colonial WHITE West. As Vázquez has written, “there is no claim to universality without erasure.”(3)

Among the many merits of the decolonial revolution we are witnessing today in the West is that it makes the *white* fear of losing privilege excruciatingly visible. Ideologues of the far right who pander to this paranoia with imagined threats like “the great replacement,” or “anti-white racism” fear the boomerang effect of the racist colonial hegemonic erasure elaborated by Western *whiteness* and settler colonization. One wonders whether the rise of Islamophobia and anti-immigrant hatred that has fostered US right-wing populism simply manifests the West’s phobia of having inflicted upon itself what it has inflicted onto others. The historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has noted the fear of immigrants by American white supremacists, who themselves are descendants of immigrants and live in a territory stolen from its original inhabitants.(4)

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## Archive as Knowledge and Experience

The list of the crimes of colonialism is so long that many of them remain invisible. Although repairing them seems to be a never-ending task, we must move beyond this systematic discouragement. In urgent need of repair of colonial trauma and its regime of invisibilization is the material cultural heritage that has fallen victim to slavery and colonialism—its artworks and everyday objects present in Western museums in almost immeasurable quantities. The Senegalese musician, writer, and economist Felwine Sarr has suggested that the debate on the restitution of non-Western material and immaterial culture cannot be allowed to stagnate but must evolve toward a reinvention of a new space-time, where access to the archive as knowledge and experience approximates the function of its objects in their original contexts. To care for this archive means to reflect upon the very restitution of this material cultural heritage.<sup>(5)</sup> As Sarr has stated in my film, *The Object's Interlacing* (2020), the very place of these objects' return must be rethought in order to refute the regime of colonial abstraction that generates museographic modernity's neutralizing structures—the vitrine its quintessential tool. It is disappointing to see the long-awaited statues of Kings Glegle, Behanzin, and Guezo of the Dahomey kingdom depart from the vitrines of the Musée du Quai Branly (France) only to land in other vitrines at the Palais de la Marina, Cotonou (Benin). The restitution process provides a momentous opportunity in present time for reinvention, because like repair it is unpredictable.

Even if the material and intangible wounds inflicted by colonialism seem irreparable, we cannot continue to deny them or ignore them with silence. Our silence is the weapon employed by imperialism's regime of invisibilization. We must identify these wounds, listen to them, talk about them, and take care of them—by reinventing ourselves. There are many ways to approach this difficult task, but I believe that only art, in which I include all creative fields, can successfully oppose imperialism's seeds of fascism and its state apparatuses, precisely because art is unpredictable. Because it is uncontrollable, art sustains itself against political and religious obscurantism, irrespective of geographical or temporal localization.

## Reappropriating the Present

In his 2016 book *Automatic Society*, the philosopher and media theorist Bernard Stiegler explains how the proletarianization that Karl Marx wrongly associated with class constitutes the disappearance of knowledge—first know-how, then savoir-vivre, as observed by Walter Benjamin and Paul Valéry—through the disappearance of social space generated by the nascent culture industry, beginning with radio in the 1920s.<sup>(6)</sup> The Hollywood film industry that followed was far more pernicious for promulgating modern Western capitalism as the heroic victory in the fight against fascism, obscuring what the Martinican poet and founder of the Négritude movement Aimé Césaire argued in his 1956 anticolonialist speech “Culture and Colonization”—that fascism is the homecoming of colonialism.<sup>(7)</sup>

We must beware, then, of the consequences of the capitalist logic of modernity/ coloniality and its capacity to depoliticize the social subject. Today, human society has become automated to such an extent that the collective individuation articulated by Stiegler and the philosopher Gilbert Simondon is reduced to a pulsional and narcissistic individualization dependent upon its own technological alienation. Is it possible to achieve emancipation from the latent fascist governances that derive from regimes of invisibility, and from their technological avatar within algorithmic governance? Perhaps—and as

paradoxical as this seems—we may do so not by looking at the past or the future but by reappropriating the present.

The social worlds we inhabit today are articulated through cross-linked networked environments that interact in ways that are not immediately visible. The more a social network user pays attention to hate speech expressed by a small minority, the more the algorithm will connect them with others who hold these views. Even more problematic is that most of the people who have transited to these radical spaces were not even overtly political to begin with. A friend of mine once told me that after watching a YouTube video about the 9/11 attacks, he was shown dozens of videos of Islamic fundamentalists, which led him to conclude that the greatest disseminator of radical Islamism was none other than YouTube itself. Ignorance is an important part of what plays out in the regime of invisibility and abstraction orchestrated by coloniality, modernity, imperialism, and fascism: it is their common denominator. Hence the importance of considering the power of the governance that administers this regime of invisibility—of making it legible in order to understand why it is so dangerous.

More than ever before, algorithmic governance has taken over our present moment; it has become a field of unprecedented economic struggle over behavioral data extraction, which is such a powerful economic model that we feel powerless to free our present from its clutches. A very daily, paradoxical example of this is our carelessness toward the past or future when we post images or texts on social media; computational governance makes us believe that we control our present while it extracts our behavioral data in order to predict our future behaviors. Whether we share information frantically or more methodically, we tend to forget about it almost immediately, whereas algorithmic governance never forgets. On the contrary, in what Stiegler has termed “digital tertiary retention,”(8) algorithmic governance duplicates us by exteriorizing our memory. He argues that this dispossession of memory is the source of the last but no less catastrophic proletarianization of knowledge as the disappearance of our collective production of meanings—we are less and less required to think. We project ourselves daily onto the future or past, while believing that we constantly act in the present; but this present is actually a proxy present enacted by the algorithmic governance of 24/7 capitalism (9) that is inherent to imperialism. To resist this, it is crucial to reappropriate our present. Upon what kind of present does algorithmic governance base its economic model? What is this present that political discourse exploits to control and wield power over us? It is the conscious present of what I call “the field of emotion.”

### The Field of Emotion

Aristotle described the cathartic experience of the theater as repairing the wounds of its audience. Throughout history, from Greek to contemporary times, the field of emotion has been appropriated by charismatic speakers in real or virtual, public or private space and, more recently, by the unbridled capitalism that threatens democracy. In the visibility that governs big data’s immense economy, attention, which is both dependent on and inherent to consciousness and the present, has become capitalism’s primary focus. Attention is the present of consciousness, coveted by algorithms that collect behavioral traces in order to predict our future behaviors. Data mining algorithms must occupy our present as connected subjects to predict—and colonize—our future behaviors. This is why we constantly project ourselves onto the future or the past, but never onto the present; paradoxically, by being forced to impulsively interact with a present colonized 24/7 by computational governance. and capitalism, the present no longer belongs to us. Algorithmic governance associated with 24/7 capitalism is as devious in its ambivalence

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as the regime of invisibility of coloniality and universalism. While entrapping us in an unconscious and impulsive present that exploits our behaviors, algorithmic governance makes us privilege our projection onto the future and past, condemning us, like Sisyphus, to return incessantly to the present, which we take for granted as our own.

How do we reclaim our present? By reclaiming our attention. “Any painter, any artist, musician, sets a trap for your attention. That is the nature of art,”(10) the media theorist Marshall McLuhan has stated. I would add that artists also seek to capture the present. The communication scientist Daniel Bounoux has argued that art by definition generates attention, thus the work of art is a machine that slows down time: “If humanity has only ever invented machines to speed up, what could be the machines to slow down? Works of art, perhaps, to access another temporality and not die of the present.”(11) Standing before a work of art, the spectator is plunged into another temporality, radically different from that of their environment, inaccessible to the insatiable appetite of algorithmic governance. Art offers a present that is protracted and, above all, free. The present separates as much as it connects past and future, and the artwork allows the conscience to perceive its stealth, where emotion is present.

The capacity to play with time—with the perception of time, more precisely— is integral to the other fundamental human activity that feeds all human thought: dreaming. According to Stiegler, all human conceptual thought derives from dreams. To go from the individual dream to its collective realization is to open the possibility of an individuation—of a meaning that can be shared between individuals and groups of individuals. In the automated society we inhabit, algorithmic governance bypasses the production of meaning in order to extract data for economic (and political) ends. Art opposes algorithmic governance by taking care of our dreams and cultivating our power to deautomatize them. Because of its unpredictable character—what it is and what it produces—art is an improbable machine that cannot be subjected to the calculation of probabilities. Data can be analyzed to generate statistics on the economy of art or the networks affiliated to it but it can never foresee what the art of tomorrow will look like.

“The poet and the artist, exteriorizing their dreams and reveries, make us dream and hallucinate a world in a state of shock,” writes Stiegler.(12) The notion of shock to which Stiegler refers goes all the way back in history to when humans first discovered the power of visual reproduction on the walls of dark caves, through the moving forms of the fire’s shadows projected onto them—a proto-visual language. The dreams of artists and poets always constitute new circuits of transindividuation. The experience of the Surrealists or the concept of the Dreaming held by Indigenous people of Australia are perfect illustrations of the human capacity to deautomatize dreams. Human beings have done so since the beginning of time. This is what we do every time we dream— while sleeping or in a wakeful reverie. Stiegler cites Félix Guattari, who theorized this experience by describing how when he drives on a familiar road, he is confident enough to allow himself to daydream; however, at certain crucial moments when his mind must focus on an imminent danger, he applies the brake, his unconscious merging with the machine in a machinic unconscious, deautomatizing his dream when necessary.(13)

#### Out of the Shadows

As the archeologist Marc Azéma has observed in relation to Paleolithic cave drawings, “Humans have always ‘dreamed.’ They share this faculty with many animals. But their brain is a machine for producing far more advanced images ... capable of being projected outside of their ‘internal cinema.’”(14) If there is a crucial moment that links cave paintings to the cinema, it is the invention of the camera obscura followed by the lanterna magica.

Caves, like movie theaters, are spaces of darkness, penetrated only at certain times of the day or year by a ray of sunlight that filtered through the vegetation outside, casting shadows onto the walls—of tree branches or moving leaves—that likely inspired those who first observed them. In Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, a fascination with the shadows projected in a cave in lieu of the real objects they represent outside is a form of entrapment. To escape this imprisonment is to walk toward the light but not without experiencing the shock of temporary blindness. Plato’s allegory reveals a certain ambivalence toward light, which can be used as a tool to control visibility and thus freedom.

For Saint Augustin, who was deeply influenced by Platonism, truth is the light that human beings shine on things to know them, but as soon as they have taken them out of the shadow, they put them back again for fear of confronting their truth. All governance obscures the truth: the regimes of invisibility of coloniality and of the dystopian society they normalize leave us only art and philosophy—as living reflections rather than blind satisfaction—that allow us to evolve our capacity to produce collective intelligence, critical of the automation of our power of interpretation. In the dream exists an anticolonialist force, as Frantz Fanon has argued: “The first thing that the native learns is to stay in their place and not to exceed their limits. This is why the dreams of the native are muscular dreams, dreams of action, aggressive dreams. I dream that I jump, that I swim, that I run, that I climb. I dream that I burst into laughter, that I cross the river in one stride, that I am chased by packs of cars that never catch up with me.”(15) Similarly, the Congolese/ Gabonese sociologist Joseph Tonda has written: “The first President of Gabon, Léon M’ba, living image of the colonial dream, imperialist or neocolonial, transformed into an Afrodystopian reality, is the product of the dream work of this machinic unconscious of imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism. He is the living image of a dream that did not belong to him but to this unconsciousness of domination, of subjection, of exploitation and dehumanization of the colonized and neocolonized. We are the pictures of a dream that does not belong to us...”(16) We must know and understand this status of images-dreams of the unconscious machine of imperialism that we are, in order to deautomatize them and reappropriate our sovereignty based on a hermeneutic of our imagination.

### Agency of Art

Since the very first humans coped with tragic life events such as the loss of a loved one by elaborating artistic rituals like burials, we have continuously invented new forms to make sense of our world. To exist is not only to resist but to invent; it is precisely what is at stake in Plato’s cave. Thus, allegory is today more relevant than ever if we consider the words of politicians and sophists who manipulate their audiences or the dissemination of fake news via traditional and social media, where repetition produces an addiction to digital capitalism’s protentions,(17) bypassing the human protentions that comprise our dreams. In order to deautomatize our dreams, we must continuously leave the cave, walk toward the light, and invent the present. Today’s cave is the dystopian imperialist society where everything constitutes an endless revisionism of real politics in process. We take this for granted because we live with the illusion of the subordinated inherence of democracy to capitalism without any alternative, discouraging us from standing against its self-destructive agency. Entranced by the algorithmic governance of surveillance capitalism, as Shoshana Zuboff explains in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*,(18) our impulses in the present are controlled as we passively witness the self-destruction of an obsolete system, the megamachine where all environments—natural, cultural, psychological, political—are exhausted by capitalism’s collapse.(19) All except the agency of art. The process of creative inventive agency is as powerful as the agency of capitalism, but whereas capitalism destroys in order to transform its crime into an alleged

rejuvenation—a quasi cause of its rebirth—art deconstructs so that it may repair and evolve, generating new forms to interpret the present.

Inherent to emotion, consciousness is movement in the present: as emotional, interpretive beings, we are totally unpredictable in the present, and this allows us to escape the technologies of capitalist behavioral manipulation and imperialist governance that colludes with it. So more than ever, we must remain present!

Kader Attia

- (1) Karima Lazali, *Colonial Trauma*, trans. Matthew B. Smith (Cambridge, 2021), 33.
- (2) Albert Camus, *The First Man*, trans. David Hapgood (London, 1996), 141.
- (3) Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary* (Prinsenbeek, 2020), 8.
- (4) Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Not “A Nation of Immigrants”: Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and A History of Erasure and Exclusion* (Boston, 2021).
- (5) See for example: Felwine Sarr, Bénédicte Savoy, et. al., *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (Paris, 2018).
- (6) Bernard Stiegler, *Automatic Society*, vol. 1, *The Future of Work*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge, 2016).
- (7) Aimé Césaire, “Culture and Colonization,” *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (2010), 127–144.
- (8) See Bernard Stiegler “Digital Knowledge, Obsessive Computing, Short-Termism and Need for a Negentropic Web,” in *Digital Humanities and Digital Media: Conversations on Politics, Culture, Aesthetics and Literacy*, ed. Roberto Simanowski (London, 2016), 290–304.
- (9) For a seminal discussion of the nonstop processes of twenty-first-century capitalism, see Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York, 2014).
- (10) Marshall McLuhan during a live audience Q&A session hosted by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on June 27, 1977, online at: [vialogue.wordpress.com/2013/04/02/the-medium-is-themessage-transcription/](http://vialogue.wordpress.com/2013/04/02/the-medium-is-themessage-transcription/) (last accessed May 4, 2022).
- (11) Daniel Bounoux, *La communication contre l'information* (Paris, 1995), 35. All French citations are translated by the author.
- (12) Stiegler, *Automatic Society*, 75.
- (13) *Ibid.*, 122.
- (14) Marc Azéma, *La Préhistoire du cinéma: Origines paléolithiques de la narration graphique et du cinématographe* (Paris, 2011).
- (15) Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, with a preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, trans. Constance Farrington (New York, 1963), 52.
- (16) Joseph Tonda, *Afrodystopie: La vie dans la rêve d'Autrui* (Paris, 2021), 15.
- (17) In Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology of temporality, protention refers to an anticipation of the next moment—the moment that has yet to be perceived. See *The New Husserl: A Critical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton (Bloomington, 2003).
- (18) Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York, 2018).
- (19) Fabian Scheidler, *The End of the Megamachine: A Brief History of a Failing Civilization* (Winchester, 2020).