

The Collective as a Political Model

Fredric Jameson: We decided to try to found a group. It was founded on the principle, enunciated by some comrade of Stanley's, that we both felt was very interesting and that I still feel is very interesting: namely, that politics today isn't organized around parties, it's organized around journals. So we thought, OK, if we're trying to build up a Marxist intellectual movement in this country, we would have to have a journal.

Anders Stephanson: Fred's strategic position was always that journals would somehow take the role of the avant-garde parties in the U.S. So journals are the new parties, or journals are the new kind of avant-garde revolutionary groups or radical groups. And they very much believed this. Coming out of the European background, I was not equally convinced.

Stanley Aronowitz: My argument at that time was that we don't have a political party worthy of the name, so journals have to be the surrogate political party. The journal was established as an intellectual journal, not to stimulate activism. Or, if you want to talk about activism, the activism we wanted to stimulate was people starting to meet together to do political-intellectual work together, not political work in the practical sense but political work in the intellectual sense.

John Brenkman: The aspect of the journal that I most identified with was not so much that it was going to be connected to social movements, but instead a sense that the sixties were over, dramatically over, and that in the lingo of the time we were now involved in the "long march" through the institutions. The idea would be to use your research and intellectual work to preserve the critical spirit of the sixties and to think in a more systematic way about movements in society. It was necessary to consolidate at some other level the gains that had been made, or the new prob-

lems that had been brought to light. This was now a work that we could do through the journal.

Fredric Jameson: It had to be collective, and it went along with other kinds of writing projects. We had a great project at UC-San Diego, I remember. It was myself and some students, but we were all equals and we all wrote papers. And it was critical; they criticized me as much as anybody else. But I remember what we had to do to enforce it: we had to say we're not going to talk about your paper unless you read everybody else's. That was finally the ideal image of this sort of collective work. But not just collective in a sense of work like that, but also interests from all kinds of directions coming together. The idea was that the journal would be the clearinghouse—that it would be the place where we learned collective theory and practice, because our idea was that these things were political issues. Work on all of these things was meant to achieve political advance.

Andrew Ross: There was a lot of work that went into *Social Text* that some folks, including myself, in retrospect might have preferred to put into activism. But at the time the production of the journal was seen as something activist, something integral to the left. And especially as part of the post–New Left movement away from sectarian alliance. Everything in *Social Text* was political but there was no real line.

Sohnya Sayres: Collectives are sort of passé now. People don't think in those terms; they don't want to worry through these processes. Collectives take a lot of time; they're very difficult to manage. I think we were there to keep a certain kind of creative energy alive.

Randy Martin: The draw of the collective was that it offered some promise of a cauldron where political theory could matter for something. It seemed like a practical embodiment of radical democracy: we were coming up with political interventions that had a kind of theoretical cast, that were urgent, that were of the moment.

Aesthetics

Susette Min

All art is political, the problem is that most of it is reactionary, . . . passively affirmative of the relations of power in which it is produced. . . . I would define political art as art that consciously sets out to intervene in (and not just reflect on) relations of power. . . . And there's one more condition: This intervention must be the organizing principle of the work in all its aspects, not only in its "form" and its "content" but also its mode of production and circulation.
—Andrea Fraser, quoted in Gregg Bordowitz, "Tactics Inside and Out," *Artforum* 9 (2004)

To break free from the cycle of commodification has been one of many underlying motivations for the resurgent interest in collectives such as the Situationists and in the aesthetics of the everyday. And yet art's power as cultural resistance and convivial exchange has been viewed with skepticism and increasing cynicism by those who are most invested in art's potential—perhaps a feeling or sensibility shared by the editorial board of *Social Text* in recent years, as evidenced by the virtual absence of essays that directly engage with art and aesthetics.

For some, the questions of aesthetics are flatly obsolete and have long been so: think back to Arthur C. Danto's 1964 essay "The Artworld," in which he, according to Belinda Bowring, "heralded the end of art's inextricable relationship with aesthetics," or Dave Hickey's good riddance to aesthetics as that "old patriarchal do-dah about transcendental formal values and humane realism."¹ Aesthetics as a politics-free autonomous space is surely a dead, or at least moribund, notion; but consider, too, that aesthetics beginning with Plato and Aristotle (tragedy is civic politics) has always been political, explicitly formulated in close relation to politics, and in some cases more a matter of politics than anything else.

To dismiss aesthetics is fruitless; aesthetics continues to make judgments on what the establishment sees or defines as both art and meaningful experience. Today, political art tends to be judged by both its timeliness and its timelessness—a limited framework that ignores historical differences, formations of multiple modernities, and current conditions that have radically transformed the production, circulation, and distribution of artistic production. In the late 1980s and 1990s, there was a brief period of resurgent interest in the term, an open invitation to reevaluate and rework the frameworks of aesthetics, in light of productions of knowledge on its historical exclusions based on outdated criteria. The gains of these efforts have been revisited in a spate of recent exhibitions that focus their attention on feminism, multiculturalism, and identity politics—only to conclude that we have a long way to go.

Despite appearances, *Social Text* has always been open to issues of art and aesthetics as they intersect with its aims to explore “art’s capacity to stall or spur our social transformations in a given historical situation,” and to present work that is “open to experimentation with form but still theoretically engaged” (Brent Hayes Edwards and Randy Martin, “Rallying *Social Text*,” *ST* 20, 2002). The following essay samples contemporary art practices in order to introduce productive ways *Social Text* can and should engage art and aesthetics. The global expansion and transformation of the art world since 1979 and the market’s nimble dexterity at coopting and stultifying the criticality of oppositional art have both created a wider understanding of our definition of art and what it can be, and at the same time led to a profound ambivalence. This ambivalence toward politically or socially engaged art or toward questions about the political role of aesthetics has become prevalent beyond the pages of *Social Text* as well. For example, in the 2008 issue of *October*—one of the leading journals on contemporary art—guest editors Benjamin Buchloh and Rachel Churner asked a diverse array of art historians, curators, and artists a series of questions about socially engaged art, leading off with “In what ways have artists, academics, and cultural institutions responded to the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq?”² The questions seemed to anticipate a defeatist response, underlining the indifference or impotence of the professionalized artist and the futility of political activism in art. Interestingly, the responses from those making their debuts in the pages of *October* exposed these assumptions, questioned the editors’ belated and sudden interest in socially engaged art, and/or complicated the set of questions by discussing how artists and non-artists (or those outside the art world’s radar) perceived the Iraq War not as an isolated, exceptional incident, but as part of a continuum of U.S. militarization, global capitalism, and American exceptionalism.

A contemporary artist whose work occupies this reopened channel



Figure 1. Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future, London* (detail), 2008. Multiple-slide-projection installation. Courtesy of the artist

between political activism and art is Sharon Hayes. Her slide-projected images of herself, standing alone at charged sites of protest or controversy in Manhattan, London, and Warsaw, holding large handwritten signs, such as *WHEN IS THIS GOING TO END*, from her series *In the Near Future* (2005–8) (fig. 1), on one hand, exemplify or question the use-value of certain modes of political activism in the streets: her images become more stark when juxtaposed with memories of artists mobilizing en masse against the Vietnam War, U.S. activity in Central America, and the inaction of the U.S. government regarding the AIDS crisis. On the other hand, Hayes’s low-tech art practice, which includes borrowing protest poster language from the 1980s, but especially the 1960s, and tweaking and situating it in contemporary social and political contexts, can, as art historian James Meyer suggests, “induce [us] to imagine less romanticized forms of opposition . . . these practices instead construct a periodized sixties without illusion, a sixties we can use.”³

Since the 1960s, corporations and governments, alongside wealthy individual buyers, have enabled intercultural flows, investing money in art and increasing its value to the point of concretizing money’s superiority to art. As anticipated in the pages of *Social Text* in the early 1990s by Laura Kipnis (*ST* 15, 1986), Abigail Solomon-Godeau (*ST* 21, 1989), Hal Foster (*ST* 21, highlighting how much of contemporary art constitutes the “infrastructural reality of late capitalism”), and Rosalyn Deutsche (*ST* 33, 1992), the art world’s incestuous relationship with the market and

the long-reaching shadow cast by global capital over the art world have led to a number of phenomena: art criticism's obsolescence, the corporatization of the museum, the devaluation of art's emotional and spiritual value, and art's interdependence with the market. In other words, *Social Text's* lack of direct engagement with contemporary art due to its relationship with the market is understandable. At the same time, the market is not all-encompassing, as select artists have worked outside the status quo in order to address similar or overlapping concerns to those raised in recent issues of *Social Text*, such as the corporatization of the university, the erosion of academic freedom, and the establishment of neo-liberal multiculturalism.

More important, art's potential remains unsettling—at times, a concrete threat. Both random and systematic attempts by the state to contain art's production and presentation raise questions, especially since 9/11, regarding the kinds of artistic practices and products that are prohibited or proscribed in this (post) modern age. For example, in an exchange with a fellow airline passenger, artist Allan deSouza was confronted with the following warning: “As an American citizen, I want you to stop taking them.” Taking what? Photographs of deserted areas of airports and airport runways or, from the point of view of his passenger-mate, images for reconnaissance (fig. 2). After 9/11, regulatory policies put forth by New York City's MTA and other municipal organizations to ban photography, film, and video recording on subways and buses without authorization, and requiring permits to photograph and film in public spaces not only delimited freedom of expression, but also highlighted the battle for power being played out through competing images.

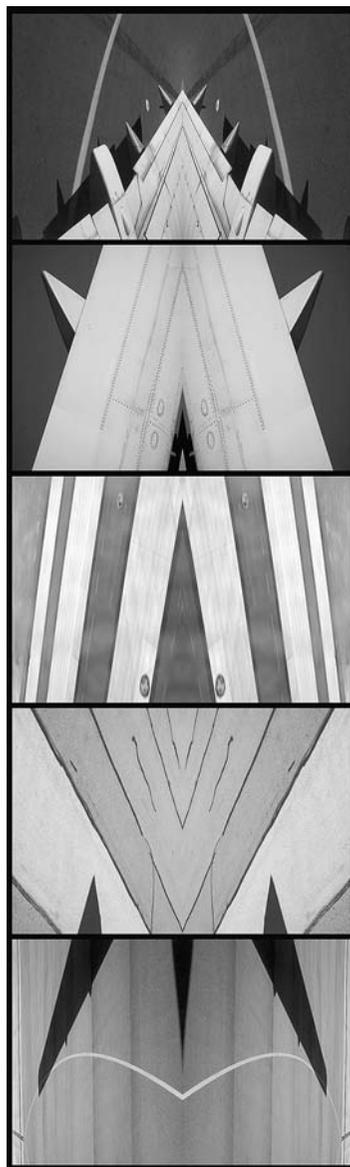


Figure 2. Allan deSouza, *Divine 1881*, 2007. 16" × 24", C-print (original in color). Courtesy of the artist and Talwar Gallery, New York



Figure 3. Walid Raad, *BEY82_Onlookers* (from the series “Untitled [1982–2007]”), 1982–2007. 44" × 67", archival color inkjet print. © Walid Raad. Courtesy of the Paula Cooper Gallery

In the Otolith Group’s film essay *Otolith I*, the fictional character named Usha, in exile after the 2003 demonstration against the Iraq War, laments: “Earth is out of bounds for us now; it remains a planet accessible only through media.” Usha and her new species of fellow mutants urgently take on the task of sifting mediated images from an “aging history from the tense present in order to identify the critical points of the twentieth century.” Usha declares: “For us there is no memory without image and no image without memory. Image is the matter of memory.” Likewise, the Atlas Group’s PowerPoint presentation constructing the contemporary history of Lebanon through an archive of real and fabricated photographs, counterfactual documents, and testimonials is one of many intriguing, unresolved, contradictory contemporary art projects that document an overlooked and disavowed history while acknowledging how memory exceeds representation (see fig. 3).

At the same time, the politics of memory and the perceived truth value of images or iconography led to misunderstandings, clashes between the citizens of New York City and its art institutions. In 2005 The Drawing Center was one of four organizations selected to be part of the new cultural center at the new World Trade Center site. A group of family members of victims of the September 11 tragedy, as well as others, including then New York governor George Pataki, criticized the well-respected twenty-eight-year-old arts organization for its exhibitions that challenged Bush administration policies. Artworks such as Amy Wilson’s *A Glimpse of What Life in a Free Country*

Can Be Like (2004) and Zoë Charlton's *Homeland Security* (2004) led to Pat-aki's impossible demand that organizations like The Drawing Center *absolutely* guarantee "total respect for the sanctity of the [World Trade Center] site." Yet the 2003 retrospective of Mark Lombardi's work at The Drawing Center, curated by Robert Hobbs, was hardly mentioned by the media or the parties involved in the controversy about whether to pull The Drawing Center from the planned new World Trade Center. Lombardi's mesmerizing, intricately drawn diagrams linking the Bush family to Osama bin Laden, *George W. Bush, Harken Energy, and Jackson Stephens ca. 1979–90* (5th version) (fig. 4), ironically underscored how The Drawing Center—never really seen as a radically progressive political space—actually embodied the concept of freedom more than the then-proposed International Freedom Center.

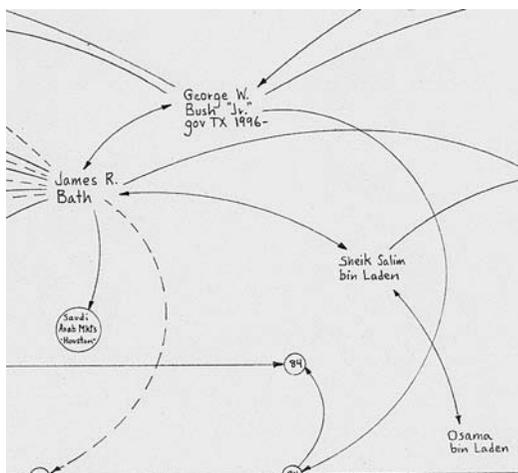


Figure 4. Mark Lombardi, *George W. Bush, Harken Energy, and Jackson Stephens ca. 1979–90* (5th version), 1999. 16.5" × 41". Private collection, courtesy of Pierogi, Inc.

Parallel to Lombardi's researching prowess—taking advantage of the Freedom of Information Act and mining a growing global archive of media images, incorporating data that hover between the evidentiary and the counterfactual—the scholarly performances by Trevor Paglen (fig. 5), Walid Raad, and others in both academic and art institutional settings reveal how the cultural realm remains a crucial alternative avenue for the dissemination of information in our current state of exception.⁴ In addition to their art practice, through daily blogs, listservs, and networks, artists such as Raad, Sagar, and Naeem Mohaimen, and curators such as Rasha Salti, offered alternative perspectives and by turns eloquent and agitated eyewitness observations of the effects of violence and everyday events happening on the ground. For example, in the summer of 2006 Salti presented daily "siege notes" on her blog and Raad published observations in *Artforum*, both on the Israeli bombings in Beirut. Since 2001 Sagar's listserv, *Multitudes*, has disseminated consistently informative reports from all over the globe and diverse perspectives on events ranging from the 9/11 attacks to, more recently, the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks.

In exhibitions ranging from the Museum of Modern Art's depo-

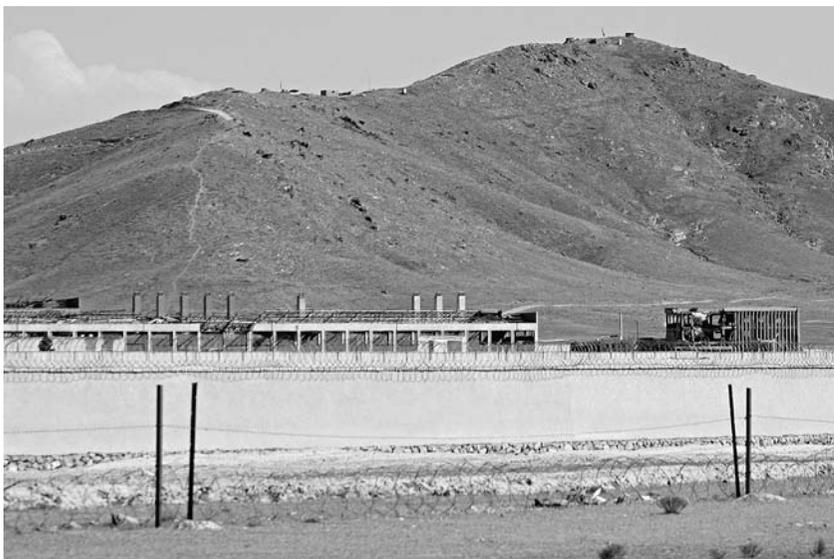


Figure 5. Trevor Paglen, *The Salt Pit*. Northeast of Kabul, Afghanistan, 2006.
Courtesy of Altman Siegel Gallery

liticized Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking, an exhibition on contemporary art by Islamic artists, to Brian Wallis's *Inconvenient Evidence: Iraqi Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib* at the International Center of Photography, the figure of the terrorist replaced, or at times merged with, the previous generation's fear of and fascination with queer bodies as in the case of the NEA 4/Robert Mapplethorpe controversies in the 1980s.⁵ Wallis's spare presentation of the photos in a museum space, where one could see simultaneously and discretely the dehumanization of the detainees, raised questions of the status of the photos as "quasi-aesthetic artifacts," in the words of *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman. Amid current discussions of classifying or declassifying such photos, Wallis's endeavor also highlights the ethical dimensions of aesthetic practices and the necessity for aesthetics itself to remain a category of interrogation.

Rather than see art as a materially finite object or event, I'd like to end with how art is also a critical and incomplete encounter. What remains to be explored further is the role of the relational within aesthetic experience. In contrast to focusing on how an autonomous object emanates the very elements that lead to the transcendent experience of a viewing subject, how might we, for example, expand on George Yudice's or Grant Kester's work on artists who engage dialogically with a community, who foster an experience that leads to the radiation, touch, conversion of an aesthetic's

distributive value—an attentive looking—into the caring for the other? Taking up Deutsche’s call to “enlarge the space of politics,” *Social Text* has a unique opportunity on the page and on the Web not only to document and track such transformative activities, but to explore critically, from different perspectives, ways to engage with art practices that will open up possibilities of art taking place both within and external to the marketplace. Artists, curators, and collectives, with the discursive support of *Social Text*, have the potential—by forging alliances across fields and disciplines, flexing their formidable organizational and networking skills, recombining different talents and expertise to organize large-scale exhibitions, long-term projects, and sustained weekly forums—to create an unforeseen, vigilant, multidirectional, multicellular, counterhegemonic force field. Such collaborations would play against and resist the media’s persistence and the market’s prowess, in order to glean, expose, and make both transparent and marketable these remarkable efforts.

Notes

1. Belinda Bowring, “Art after the End of Art,” *Frieze* 98 (2006): 44; Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty, Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 15.

2. “In What Ways Have Artists, Academics, and Cultural Institutions Responded to the U.S.-Led Invasion and Occupation of Iraq?” ed. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Rachel Churner, special issue, *October*, no. 123 (2008): 9–10.

3. James Meyer, “The Return of the Sixties in Contemporary Art and Criticism,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 331.

4. Among Trevor Paglen’s many art projects is his comprehensive investigation of the U.S. rendition program by tracking unmarked CIA planes to black sites, secret prisons such as the Salt Pit, an old brick factory just northeast of Kabul. See his Web site, www.paglen.com/pages/projects/CIA/black_sites.html (accessed 1 June 2009).

5. In the 1980s, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was besieged by neoconservatives because of the NEA’s granting of money and support to “obscene” artwork by artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. But in particular, it was the virulent and widespread responses to the NEA 4—artists Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, John Fleck, and Tim Miller, whose performances, with the exception of Finley’s, involved queer sexuality—as indecent and filthy that made apparent the government’s repressed fear of homosexuality.

Affect

Ann Pellegrini and Jasbir Puar

As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings—which it may be better and more accurate, to call “intensities”—are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria.
—Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”

In his 1984 article “Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Fredric Jameson famously declared postmodern culture to be proliferating a “waning of affect” characterized by “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness.”¹ The integrity of the unitary modern subject was now dissolving into schizophrenic fragmentation, its depth displaced by multiple forms of discombobulating surface articulations. This waning of affect, laments Jameson, does not deflate or eradicate expressive forms, but rather shifts their register from the realm of substantive feelings to fleeting “intensities.” Jameson’s concerns represent the culmination of an argument he began outlining in the pages of *Social Text*. If, in the inaugural issue of *Social Text*—in an essay titled “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” (*ST* 1, 1979)—Jameson can yet hold out for cultural forms whose manipulation and containment of conflicting social anxieties do not close down “their Utopian and transcendent potential,” by the time he alights on “*On Diva*” (*ST* 6, 1982), he is ready to diagnose “the disappearance of ‘affect’ in the older sense, the sudden and unexpected absence of ‘anxiety.’” Bye-bye chatty unconscious with all its anxious

outpourings of repressed desires. Behold “the silence of affect” and a “new gratification in surfaces.”

These are claims he returns to and refines in an interview with Anders Stephanson, which originally appeared in *ST* 17 (1987) and was reprinted in *ST* 21 (1989), a special issue/book titled *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism*. There Jameson spells out more clearly the transformation he has in mind: from “hermeneutic emotion” (anxiety was his paradigmatic example) to “what the French have started to call *intensities* of highs and lows.” These intensities, he says, “really don’t imply anything about the world; you can feel them on whatever occasion. They are no longer *cognitive*” (*ST* 17, emphasis in original).

Ironically, some thirty years after Jameson’s first exploration of these questions, it is *postmodernism* that has ceased to be sounded as a term of, and for, critical analysis. Nor have Jameson’s fears about the waning of affect been realized, at least not in the terms in which he predicted affect’s demise. Indeed, it may be that this misdiagnosis has itself helped to generate or, more accurately, regenerate critical interest in the cultural politics and claims of affect. We could thus say, reading against the grain of Jameson’s linked essays, that he was in fact extraordinarily prescient about the growing centrality of theories of affect to conceptualizations of subjecthood, being, corporeality, *and* politics.

On one hand, whether or not Jameson was correct about the waning of affect may depend on what definition of affect is being mobilized. According to Jameson’s analysis, the demise of affect was due to the death of the depth psychological subject; their twinned obituaries were themselves linked to the end of left politics. In the wake of these linked deaths arose surface relations to commodity culture, a flattening of politics and feeling. On the other hand, in his desire to distinguish the modern subject’s integrity of feeling from the ephemeral surface intensities of the postmodern subject who is not one, Jameson himself could not have more symptomatically staged the terms of debate of the recent emergence of affect studies. What some have hailed as a recent “affective turn” in fact draws across older formations of sentiment studies; theories of emotion; “structures of feeling” (to invoke Raymond Williams’s oft-cited formulation); the work of Gottfried Leibniz, Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, among others; and science and technology studies. Thus, what appears to be a “new” critical, conceptual lens that has gained significant intellectual and scholarly cachet in the last decade is in fact indebted to multiple, and often contradictory, genealogical threads.

These contradictions have produced rich and fruitful debates over what affect “is” and/or “does,” as well as exposed intellectual tensions about the relation and difference between affect and terms such as *emo-*

tion, feeling, and sensation with which it is sometimes used interchangeably (Jameson himself uses *affect* and *feeling* interchangeably). In the rough schematic, hardly exhaustive, that follows, we are less interested in delimiting the boundaries of what affect is or is not and more compelled by the generative and productive multiplicity of its deployment as an analytic and political frame. Affect may anchor claims about the materiality of bodies and physiological processes that are not contained or representable by language or cognition alone. Philosophical inquires into bioscience, for example, propose affect as both a “precognitive” attribute (not in terms of a telos, but in terms of a quality) of the body as well as emotion’s trace effect. This conception of affect poses a distinction between sensation and the perception of the sensation. Affect, from this perspective, is precisely what allows the body to be an open system, always in concert with its virtuality, the potential of becoming. As Jameson’s own references to the death of “the older psychological subject, with its anxieties and its Unconscious” (*ST* 6, 1982), suggests, psychoanalysis, too, has had much to say on the matter—and topography—of affect. Recent and forthcoming work at the intersection “between” psychoanalysis and affect attempts not so much a return to the modernist subject of depth as a reopening of the relations between ontology and epistemology, and between psychoanalysis and phenomenology.² Finally, much productive critical work has been invested in how concepts like affect, emotion, and feelings aid in comprehending subject-formation and political oppositionality for an age when neoliberal capital has reduced possibilities for collective political praxis.

The provocation of all of these critical approaches is to ask how affect—and emotions, feelings, and sensation (call it what you will?)—might be mobilized toward different political ends. While we are not particularly interested to settle these terms, as such attempts may be seen as semantic quibbles or demands for genealogical purity and loyalty, it is interesting that some theories of affect foreground affective (and affected subjects) while others see the promise of politics working through precisely the surface intensities of bodies that Jameson so quickly dismisses. While Jameson registers his complaint about the waning of affect predominantly in relation to aesthetic production—architecture and painting—he does so out of concern and worry over precisely this question of left political resistance. More recently, two major special issues of *Social Text* have continued these lines of inquiry regarding affect and politics—Patricia Clough’s “Technoscience” (*ST* 80, 2004) and “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” coedited by David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz (*ST* 84–85, 2005). Both these collections foreground work that understands affect as simultaneously vital to the conditions of possibility for identity politics yet indicative of their limitations. Jameson worried that the death of the modernist subject meant the end of

politics—and let us be clear, a certain kind of politics. However, recent work in affect studies—across manifold interdisciplinary and genealogical influences—points not only to different ways of conceiving bodies and subjects of politics but also, and perhaps more crucially, takes on the imperative of (re)imagining the terrain of politics “itself.”

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1984): 53–92.

2. See the essays collected in “Between Psychoanalysis and Affect: A Public Feelings Project,” ed. José Esteban Muñoz, special issue, *Women and Performance* 19 (2009).

AIDS

Ed Cohen and Julie Livingston

The AIDS epidemic doesn't always make sense. In fact, it often challenges the very ways we come to make sense. The usual lenses—academic or otherwise—fail to bring its immense devastation into any clear focus. Yet, despite the radical epistemological and emotional blur, we nevertheless discern that a chasm has opened before us and that multitudes have fallen, are falling, into the abyss. We have lost too much: friends, family, communities, networks, vast constellations of vital human potential and heartfelt connection are gone. We grieve them.

Over the last twenty-five years, AIDS has evolved from a highly mysterious and terrifyingly efficient killer into a scientifically identified and popularly recognized threat to life. In the passage from cipher to acronym to nominal agent to narrative form, it has gathered being—and life—within itself, both imaginatively and materially. Through its newly attained ontological force and its repeated allegorical invocation, it constitutes both thing and event. AIDS effaces life, not just as an incarnation of virulence but as a way of telling a story. Within its embrace, the particularities of experience disappear. Black boxes are built and maintained. An industry forms. Secrets are kept, violent decisions enacted, communities created and devastated, all under the sign of AIDS. In one generation, AIDS has become an incredibly, almost wildly, popular way to die, an apocalypse. Talk about a critical event! So how can we learn from it? Or can we?

Social Text shares its life span with the AIDS epidemic. In reflecting on these odd age-mates, we also contemplate an intellectual and moral moment: one in which new ideas and technologies arise, even as distributive gaps widen, and in which critical community constitutes a matter (or the matter) of life and death, even as geopolitical borders are violently shored

up and policed. As Joao Biehl asked in *ST 80* (2004): “How are disease, misery, and marginality governed through the AIDS response?” In order to consider such questions we need to recognize that, as an epidemic and as a pandemic, AIDS also troubles our beliefs about separation and hierarchy. It reveals our ability to touch one another, even across tremendous distances and socioeconomic differences. Contagion, after all, literally means “together touching.”

As both affective and material connection, AIDS thematizes an experience of being connected in the world. It locates entire histories of power, origins, circulation, distribution, appropriation in collective expressions of mortal terror as well as in the atomized experiences of diarrhea, sores, and funerals. But eventually, over time, it aggregates and circulates in predictable patterns among those whose resources are most limited. Inequality does not name a natural imbalance; it bespeaks systematic and relentless devaluations. And, as with all instances of (d)evaluation, the hierarchies it inscribes result from *decisions*, a word whose etymology reminds us of the violent rending they enact. Suffering and immiseration depend on context, and AIDS tracks the gradients of their distributions.

Yet AIDS is far more than death and misery. People live with AIDS and in the shadow of AIDS. And they live in determined ways. Though we say that people have AIDS, AIDS actually happens between people. Or more to the point, AIDS lives in the world and so do we. Whatever it “is,” it shapes how human beings live together and how we come to know (or think we know) one another. By providing a horizon of expectations, by underscoring our deep and at times desperate need for one another, and by constituting the political as a vital investment in human ecologies, AIDS lives in us, it informs us, and it acts through us in ways we cannot ever know. So much, perhaps too much, is done in its name. This happens, in part, because of the existential crisis this event provokes. AIDS troubles worldviews. For some, it disturbs teleologies of science and modernity. For others, it forecloses the promises proffered by postcolonial remappings of global economies. Into these anxiety-provoking gaps, where previously imagined futures perish, AIDS calls forth different, heretofore unthinkable alliances and attunements that (we hope) might make living with AIDS possible—for individuals, families, communities, nations, regions, species, and the biosphere as a whole.

Epidemics simultaneously evince collective vulnerabilities and the vulnerabilities of collectives. After all, epidemics only become *epidemics* (a word that leans on the same root as *democracy*) when they precipitate biological effects that transgress the threshold of the political. Otherwise it’s just illness. Thus, epidemics inevitably reveal, albeit in painful and often life-threatening ways, how living together exposes us to one another

and to the broader life world. For Michel Foucault, biopolitics attempts to encompass the risks inherent in “population,” that is, the risks of living together with others of our species and of other species (both those other others on whom we live and those who live in us). Yet this biopolitical parsing of universe into individuals and populations does not sufficiently appreciate the paradox that underwrites it. The threats that address us when we live together coexist with the impossibility of living alone. We are—and must be—both hurt and sustained by others. This inexorability suffuses the tension between the etymological opposites *immunity* and *community*, which mark the paradoxical social nature that AIDS manifests (see Ed Cohen, “Immune Communities, Common Immunities,” *ST* 94, 2008).

AIDS literally names this paradox. Though we might no longer recognize it, the acronym A(quired) I(mmune) D(eficiency) S(yndrome) also orthographically and audibly doubles the word “aids” in the sense of assists, helps, supports, succors. As a result of this weird irony, when we speak of aids for AIDS, we evoke our paradoxical situation as dangerous and necessary to each other. Unfortunately, since we usually ignore one crux or the other, our approaches to AIDS tend to fall onto one side or the other of the individual/population divide. Thus, immunology and epidemiology draw up the authorized maps of the terrain. Based on this official employment, governments and corporate laboratories have conjured up a new world-historical agent, HIV/AIDS, whose status as public enemy number one legitimates outpourings of money, resources, knowledge, concern, and care. Yet what exactly does this diacritically inflected provocateur incarnate? How do we read the relation between the entities it slashes together? HIV/AIDS forms and performs a narrative, a plot. It emplots people—and peoples—within a story of cause and effect, as James Dawes argued in “Narrating Disease: AIDS, Consent, and the Ethics of Representation” in *ST* 43 (1995). When we say someone “has” HIV/AIDS, when we say someone dies of HIV/AIDS, we inscribe their lives within this temporal and causal frame. We now think we know something crucial about them, about how they live(d) and how they die(d)—though, in fact, no one dies “of” HIV/AIDS. It’s as if the black box of HIV/AIDS becomes a black hole whose intense gravitational force sheers off any vital singularity and condenses it into a superdense viral mass. No doubt, the technologies that produce this black box—bioscientific, pharmaceutical, governmental, nongovernmental—all have different investment strategies and interests. Knowledge, profit, public health, philanthropy, and genuine and profound compassion all commingle promiscuously within AIDS plots. However, the values that HIV/AIDS secret(e)s mostly remain obscure in such stories. If science and politics coalesce around interests—from the

Latin *interesse*, meaning to be between, to differ, make a difference, to concern, be of importance—then what makes HIV/AIDS so interesting are the myriad ways it makes “between-ness” make a difference. And if we are concerned, if it is important to us, then we might want to disinter some of the values that we bury along with those whom we consign to HIV/AIDS.

(Theorizing the) Americas

Ana María Dopico

America is saving herself from all her dangers. Over some republics the octopus sleeps still, but by the law of equilibrium other republics are running into the sea to recover the lost centuries with mad and sublime swiftness.

—José Martí, “Our America,” 20 January 1891

Theorizing the Americas is a long tradition in the United States and not always a felicitous practice.¹ When José Martí’s 1891 essay “Our America” was published in Mexico City in 1891, the United States had been publicly debating the annexation of Cuba for a half century. The Americas, having cast off one empire, had suffered nearly a century of imperialist theorizing, beginning with the articulation of the Monroe Doctrine and culminating with the seizure of half of Mexico’s territory following the Mexican-American War. But during the neoimperial campaigns of the Spanish-American War, a reinvigorated opposition to empire had reached a new crisis, and a resistant critique denouncing U.S. imperialism was being voiced not only by revolutionaries like Martí, but by U.S. citizens in the Anti-Imperialist League, the first national peace movement mobilized in response to a foreign war. In the league’s platform, they wrote:

We hold that the policy known as imperialism is hostile to liberty and tends toward militarism, an evil from which it has been our glory to be free. We regret that it has become necessary in the land of Washington and Lincoln to reaffirm that all men, of whatever race or color, are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We maintain that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. We insist that the subjugation of any people is “criminal aggression” and open disloyalty to the distinctive principles of our Government.

The league included luminaries, celebrities, ex-presidents, national poets, and philosophers, many of whom saw U.S. imperialism in the Americas and the Pacific as a distorted and distorting expression of U.S. republicanism and U.S. power—one that would leave a permanent disfiguring mark on the national psyche and the global reputation of the United States. But this engaged response to U.S. incursion into the Americas was not without thorns. Even as the league denounced U.S. atrocities in the Philippines and the occupation of Cuba and Puerto Rico, some of its members framed the anti-imperial argument by affirming that “tropical peoples” were incapable of governing themselves and thus useless subjects for an experiment with U.S. republican models of governance. From that prophetic collective naming by Martí, the American republics have been framed by the power of U.S. hegemony and by the threat of U.S. imperialism. The denunciations of imperialism at the beginning of the twentieth century marked a new phase in U.S. theorization about the Americas. It also established a new model for solidarities and engagements between intellectuals, statesmen, civic and religious institutions, cultural critics, and writers and artists. Oppositional thinkers in the United States were alarmed by the grotesque image of the state that imperialism revealed. This theorizing of a hemispheric plural entity, “the Americas,” was thus primarily a mirror for U.S. national identity and hardly an integrated geopolitical critique. It was something else entirely to think the Americas, and to understand the Americas, from a hemispheric perspective beyond the United States. In Latin America and the Caribbean, appeals to cultural and political solidarity across the hemisphere were crafted by negotiating the competing imperialisms of Europe and the United States. However troubled, however compromised, and precisely because it is troubled and compromised, theorizing about the Americas through *Social Text* inevitably carries that historical legacy of the Anti-Imperialist League and its successors in the U.S. Left across the twentieth century. For *Social Text*’s theorizing of the Americas in the United States, anti-imperial thinking is a foundational tool.

The intellectual and political brief of *Social Text* changed the history and critical practices of U.S. anti-imperialism, yoking it to Marxism’s critique of capitalism as a world system dependent on empire, militarism, colonial economies, and uneven global development. Born in the late cold war and at a moment of intense social crisis in the Americas, *Social Text* gathered in its pages the writing of committed intellectuals from Latin America and of politically engaged U.S. Latin Americanists who were conscious that they were witnessing a prolonged social emergency and facing the violent extermination of socialist and left oppositions across Latin America.

When *Social Text* published Hernán Vidal’s “The Politics of the

Body: The Chilean Junta and the Anti-Fascist Struggle” in the summer of 1979 (*ST* 2), America was far from safe from all those dangers that Martí invoked in his eternal present tense of 1891. As *Social Text* published its first issues and its first essays on Latin America, the Americas were living the disastrous consequences of a hemispheric cold war in the forms of dictatorships, military rule, and brutal state violence; confronting popular and institutionalized revolutions; and suffering American interventions in open or secret civil wars that would kill millions and devastate civil society through the end of the century. The essays in *Social Text*’s first hundred issues offer an instructive map of engagements with Latin America from the American academic Left.

As the American academic Left crossed the threshold into the long Reagan years and engaged in new ideological struggles, Latin America would play a prominent role in political and ideological debates, in engaged scholarship, and in movements of solidarity and resistance that challenged U.S. hegemony in the hemisphere. The Americas had long functioned as a familiar historical backyard for capitalist exploitation, “democratic” propaganda, racist condescension, and strategic uneven development. But with the cold war, the colorful subalterns of the Good Neighbor policy were transformed into unreliable ideological subjects. From Jacobo Arbenz’s election and ouster in 1954 Guatemala, to the Cuban Revolution, to the invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965, and onward into the hard lines of the Global South’s cold wars, the Americas suffered a new and devastating attention from the United States as Washington’s imperialist paradigms morphed into the strategic experiments of a globalized cold war. The workshop of empire in the Americas became a new social and military laboratory where the United States could redeem its cold-war credentials after its humiliation in Vietnam. Across the thirty years of *Social Text*’s existence, for both the Left and the Right, the Americas became the prime example of new political orders, new dystopic states, new revolutionary potential, and new subjects and methods of resistance in the late cold war. If Left intellectuals wished to engage the U.S. state as a monopoly of violence or as a franchise of multinational capital, if they wished to challenge cold-war ideology, or a popular complicity with sustained U.S. neoimperial violence in the third world, Latin America was example one. If they wanted to talk about monoculture economies or import substitution, Latin America was example one—a singular referent, a proliferating political archive. For those seeking resources of hope, Latin America was also example one—for institutionalized socialism victorious over U.S. hegemony (Cuba), for socialist agrarian revolts (Nicaragua, El Salvador), for anti-imperial guerrilla movements (Colombia, Bolivia), for Maoist revolutionary victories (Peru), for indigenous movements and collectives (Guatemala). Networks of alliance and support flourished in the United

States. Solidarity movements and organizations forged through churches, universities, and secular institutions mobilized U.S. citizens around the practical urgencies of refugees, protests, lobbying, and nonviolent resistance. Throughout the 1980s, millions of U.S. citizens were engaged in theorizing the Americas at grassroots levels. Organizations emerged, like the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) or the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES). Sharing a common brief of solidarity, witnessing, sanctuary, and anti-imperial critiques of U.S. violence, these organizations and their members were targeted as subversive entities and agents by the U.S. government.

Thus for *Social Text*, theorizing the Americas across the eighties meant renewed anti-imperial critiques, scholarship in solidarity with socialist agendas and besieged resistance movements, essays that chronicled social disasters and creative resistance to authoritarian violence. Writers offered descriptive histories of embattled Latin American republics like El Salvador, literary and cultural criticism that exploded the ideological logic of conservative canons, new readings of gender and queer subjects in the repressive gray years of the Cuban Revolution. Looking back on that archive of work, one recognizes the names and the interventions of authors who transformed Latin American studies, who articulated major critiques of liberal capitalism and the state, who analyzed not merely the immediate consequences, but the long histories and dangerous alliances connecting U.S. capital and military power to systemic political violence in Latin America. The archive of essays placed cultural marketplaces, communities of reception, and academic politics under interrogation and sought to reveal Latin America through critical methods that engaged and challenged Euro-American theory. Hence the politics of the body, the Marxist critiques of advanced capitalism, the transformative optics of feminist and queer analysis.

Throughout the eighties *Social Text* offered a space of engagement with the present of the hemisphere and the long aesthetic resonance of its political battles. In *ST* 4 (1981), we find Jean Franco's magisterial "The Utopia of a Tired Man: Jorge Luis Borges," where the reader encounters an impious debunking of the literary market's avidity for Borges and its sanctification of the author as the sole Latin American genius, one whose exceptionality proves the rule of a barbarous cultural scarcity. Franco offered a devastating analysis of the critical love affair with Borges, reading it as a political symptom wherein mastery, enigma, rivalry, privacy, and know-how offer a closed literary pleasure machine—one among many available in advanced capitalism. She traces the eradication of community, dependency, or loyalty in Borges, arguing that this symptom of a violent separation makes possible a freeing transition from the social to the private.

Franco demystifies the high-culture Borgesian enchantments and their appeal. She writes:

Little wonder that Borges has become the guru of University circles, since his stories flatter the reader's smartness while diverting skills into the harmless zone of a game of solitaire . . . they school the reader into that free-floating adaptability which becomes the very requisite of modernization under advanced capitalism. Thus it seems that the Latin American writer must not only make a sacrifice in order to be invited to the banquet of civilization . . . but must persuade himself and others that no sacrifice has been made.

In the same issue, Julianne Burton's reflection on Cuban cinema puts gender, sexuality, and feminism at center stage (see "Seeing, Being, Being Seen: *Portrait of Teresa*; or, Contradictions of Sexual Politics in Contemporary Cuba"), offering one of the first and most incisive feminist readings of Cuban cinema's engagement with sexuality and gender equality. The mirror that such writers offered the American Left was not always comfortable, and the intensity of their solidarities and their critiques of American power left them exposed as thinkers considered "too ideological" for conventional disciplinary journals in the United States.

The journal attracted other signal interventions that mapped the Latin American crisis and also the ongoing ideological battles across the eighties. In *ST* 5 (1982), a reader could find an extraordinary historical and political briefing on El Salvador by John Beverley, complete with empirical and demographic data, national history, contemporary political analysis, and regional contexts. In reading Beverley, the reader wishes for entire volumes capable of contextualizing Latin American nations for the American academic Left. Poignantly, Beverley's piece is followed by a short collection of eleven poems by the Salvadoran revolutionary leader Roque Dalton (1938–75), who was assassinated by political rivals. Beverley introduces Dalton to the reader:

Dalton represents a new type of Latin American writer: no longer the genial "fellow traveler" of the revolution like Pablo Neruda, but rather the rank and file revolutionary activist for whom the intricate cabbala of clandestine struggle—passwords, safe houses, escape routes, forged documents, sectarian squabbles—is as familiar as Parisian surrealism. . . . That today there exists a Democratic Revolutionary Front, that there is a unified guerrilla army, that together they represent a whole people's struggle against imperialism—these are the legacies of Roque Dalton's voice and example.

The scholarly work of authors like Hernán Vidal, Jean Franco, and John Beverley was framed and supplemented by activism in solidarity movements and university politics in the long cold wars of the Americas. These

writers took unfashionable stands during times when doing politics in the academy had immediate and subtle costs, since the United States was not only a space of free speech but also a site of surveillance.

In 1983 *Social Text* continued its focus on Central America with Michael Fleet's "The Church and Revolutionary Struggle in Central America" (ST 7), as well as with James Petras's "Marxism and World Historical Transformations" (ST 8), which uses Latin America as a case study in thinking the transition to socialism. The Petras essay marks the sociological stakes for theorizing the Americas in *Social Text*, analyzing collectivities through political economy. Looking through a Latin American lens at capital, class, labor, and revolutionary movements, it reveals the transition to socialism in the third world as denoting the failed normative models and theoretical impasses at the heart of the crisis of Marxism.

In 1984, *Social Text* published *The 60's without Apology* (ST 9/10), and, in "South of Your Border," Jean Franco returns to theorize revolution and the sixties for Latin America. It becomes clear in reading the *Social Text* archive that Franco's political voice found a special home and resonance within the journal, a place where both the specificity and the significance of Latin America could be asserted among the American Left, and she is unsparing in making clear what is at stake in intellectual judgments about the Americas. "There were two Latin American 60s," she writes. "The first started in Cuba in 1959; for ten years Cuba became the pacemaker of both revolutionary literature and politics on the continent." But, she cautions: "All the while, however, another revolution was going on—the silent revolution of multinational corporations and their allies—the conservative and the military." Franco argues that 1968 was the crisis point for both revolutions, a crisis point whose consequences can still be measured in political terms, in literary terms, and in the new consolidations and alignments of loyalty and antagonism. Thinking the sixties after the Sandinista Revolution, Franco weighed the cost of the confrontational politics that isolated Cuba and isolates Nicaragua. Interestingly, Franco's closing denunciation of capital outrings her measured solidarity with a Cuban Revolution by then mired in the policing practices and banal bureaucracies of repression. Franco ends the short piece with a startling reminder: "We have to remember that in Latin America capitalism has never brought into being any freedom other than the freedom of the very rich based on the genocide of the poor."

For *Social Text*, theorizing the Americas through the immediate context of the cold war closes, it seems to me, in 1986. With ST 15, Roberto Fernández Retamar and Fredric Jameson share the discursive stage, theorizing, respectively, the relation between "Our America and the West," and the role of "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." Here Fernández Retamar takes up the mantle of

Martí to think through the terms of occidental privilege. An erudite poet, critic, and cultural statesman of the Cuban Revolution, author of “Caliban: Notes toward a Discussion of Culture in Our America,” and president of the Casa de las Américas, Retamar launches an impressive survey of Latin America’s struggle with occidental legacies and epistemologies and the inherent and painful contradictions between Western Enlightenment values and Latin American exploitation in colonialism and neocolonialism. For Retamar, Martí’s injunctions to throw out the “archons of Greece” in favor of autochthonous values, practices, and archives still resonate. The opposition between the vision in “Our America” of a virtuous, just, and anti-imperial hemispheric culture and the imperial universalisms of Western culture persist as an antagonism that only socialism can engage. Martí’s project of cultural and political liberation, Retamar writes, like those of a free Haiti or an Anglo-Antillean culture, “could not be fully developed nor implemented in Our America until Marxism-Leninism took root in the twenties.”

Retamar’s masterful review of Latin American revolutionary and socialist thought offers the reader an overdetermined functional model for theorizing the Americas, one whose historical teleology and discursive trajectory culminate in the Cuban Revolution: “With the Cuban Revolution, Our America has taken its first steps in this new universe where ‘West’ and ‘East’ will turn out to be the most ancient cardinal points in the planetary (and now interplanetary) adventure of the total human subject.” In a moment of ideological crisis for the revolution, Retamar’s defensive cold war poetics claims Cuba as the exception where oppositional thought and liberatory epistemologies reigned long before their adoption into Western intellectual practices. Set against the notorious essay by Jameson (a U.S. intellectual star in nominal solidarity with socialist movements) in the same volume, with its famous affirmation that “third world texts . . . necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society*,” Retamar’s analysis argues for specificity, cultural genealogy, sophistication, autonomy, and difference. But it insists on a teleological determinism, a developmentalist logic, that echoes Jameson’s essay. The reader of Latin America, confronted with Jameson’s masterful comparatism, his third-world cognitive structures, his now-notorious and much-maligned reductionism, grows conscious of the uneven discursive power commanded by these two giants, remembers the extraordinary power of a U.S. interpreter, and briefly despairs. In our retrospective reading, however, we are swiftly heartened by the responses to Jameson articulated by Aijaz Ahmad (*ST* 17, 1987) and Santiago Colás (*ST* 18, 1987).

Social Text’s attention to the long Latin American cold wars found

new expressions through the culture wars of the George H. W. Bush years. In the late eighties and early nineties, scholars articulated new paradigms in thinking the Americas that engaged multiculturalism, border studies, and queer subjectivities. The early nineties were accompanied by a new attention to the human subject in the Americas—in particular, the Latin American not merely as a citizen of the Americas but as the Latino or Hispanic U.S. citizen—and a new archive of work engaged these syncretic and recombinant identities, their distinct cultural, linguistic, and political syntaxes, and their long history within U.S. hegemony. In 1990, Juan Flores and George Yudice published their seminal “Living Borders/Buscando America: Languages of Latino Self-Formation” (*ST* 24). With the end of the cold war, the crumbling of authoritarianisms, and new transitions to democracy, *Social Text* covered social subjects and social movements that had been marginalized or overshadowed in the long Latin American cold wars, and scholars revealed a long history for women and indigenous, multiracial, and queer subjects in the Americas and began theorizing U.S. subjects with Latino identities.

With the beginning of the nineties, *Social Text* mapped new intellectual projects and marked a watershed for theorizations of Latin America within the U.S. academy—theorizations that would connect the political projects of feminism, queer studies, and gender studies to Latin American history and Latin American contexts. In *ST* 31/32 (1990), Sylvia Molloy founded a field, in part, with her essay on Oscar Wilde and Latin American queer subjectivity. Her work and that of scholars like Daniel Balderston, José Quiroga, José Esteban Muñoz, and Ricardo Ortíz produce a radical critique of the relationship between gender, sexuality, cultural discourse, and the state, producing new theories of nationalism and masculinity, new historical mappings of queer poetics. The double issue underlines the conjugations between Latin American culture and postcolonial theory, between old anti-imperial agendas and new critiques of international capital and a burgeoning globalization. George Yudice’s “We Are Not the World” turned from cultural cold wars to the subjects and discourses of globalization, questioning the logic and markets of neoliberalism and tracing the challenges that Latin American thinkers and Latin American situations posed to U.S. paradigms.

Writers thinking the Americas in *Social Text* since the nineties have proceeded on the firmer theoretical and contextual ground claimed by these thinkers, returning to these earlier political struggles to mark distance or recognize enduring paradigms. This essay will not do justice to an impressive corpus of writing in more recent years by writers engaging the force of neoliberalism, unbridled capitalism, and economic crisis in the Latin American turn of the century. But it is clear in reviewing the more recent interventions that, although thinking Latin America no longer involves

the social emergency that framed *Social Text*'s cold-war beginnings, the theoretical and pedagogical engagements, the archival and critical practices, and the political solidarities should be just as urgent. The categories and thematics have shifted and the North American academy now looks to Latin America to understand new imperialisms, new global urgencies in radical unevenness, explosive slum urbanization, mass migrations, hyper-violent narcostates, and ecological dispossession. But the Americas are also revealing reinvigorated claims to democratic socialism and participatory populisms, and new indigenous and subaltern movements that continue to challenge U.S. hegemony. With the United States engaged in a more distant hegemonic and military struggle, Latin America now offers a social map that has outstripped imperial and cold-war logics—revealing new and sometimes alarming geopolitical realities that the United States has long ignored and can only falteringly address. Beyond economic instrumentality, understanding a globalized hemisphere, and theorizing the social, political, cultural, and ecological spaces and subjects of these Americas is an indispensable task. It requires that scholars find old and new models for scholarship and political critique. Thirty years of *Social Text*'s engagement with Latin America offers a heartening archive.

Note

1. America, América, Latin America, Latinoamérica, Nuestra América, Las Américas: to think the Americas, or to theorize them, necessarily involves reflecting on a name. This essay is not about “Latin America,” although that is what it essentially focuses on. “The Americas” is that which lies outside what a U.S. citizen would call America. This essay uses the plural noun, a plural feminine in Spanish. To do so breaks up the singularity, the identity, of the single noun. The definite article escorting the plural connotes to any Spanish speaker a Spanish origin for the name. The subject is not “America,” in the singular or the singular collective, not “Nuestra América,” or “Our America,” from José Martí’s fantasy of syncretic identity and collective redemption in 1891. Rather, it is “the Americas” as in Las Américas, as in Casa de las Américas, that publishing house and Latin American cultural archive founded with the Cuban Revolution. Dedicated to publishing, to giving prizes to and to serving the engaged writers and Left literary communities of Latin America, its directors and its ideological chiefs have measured the revolutionary and socialist legitimacy and the aesthetic promise of literary texts for half a century. Its choices, exciting and deplorable, mark the uneasy relationship between state power and cultural freedom, between engaged writing and decadent thought. Perhaps the connotations might be allowed to rest there, with the cold-war struggles, the cultural solidarities, the discursive and political critiques of the hard eighties as the founding thought of the Americas in *Social Text*.

several foreign nations as well. Scott Long's "Wonders as well as Michael Stolbach's narrative "Art" (including illustrations) were also enthralling to the readership. This issue has stimulated an interest among writers who work with similar topics, a very busy publishing schedule for 1990 also includes "Numbers 2" (Fall/Winter 1989) (with fiction by Lynne Timmons, Danuta Walters and M. Kaspar) and "Numbers 2" (Spring 1990) "Sphere." These issues have also been highly

Number of artists benefitting = 15

B. Organizational Financial Information

1. Include your organization's financial statements (expenses and income tax returns for the fiscal year in which the project(s) was completed).
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Art

Tavia Nyong'o

Was the photograph Shepard Fairey used as a basis for his “Hope” image of Barack Obama a social text? The Associated Press (AP) thought not. Mannie Garcia, the freelance AP photographer who snapped the 2006 referent for Fairey’s iconic 2008 print, did not originally recognize his handiwork when the poster first began its viral spread throughout political and popular culture. But when someone identified his own work to him, Garcia told National Public Radio (NPR) that he was “disappointed that someone was able to go onto the Internet and take something that doesn’t belong to them and use it.”¹ Fairey, who as late as January 2009 was unaware of Garcia’s identity, preemptively sued the AP, citing “fair use.” Meanwhile, Garcia held his own doubts about the AP’s claim that they and not he owned his handiwork. As the legal machinery swung into action, the National Portrait Gallery quietly invited Garcia to hang a signed print of his original photo next to the Fairey print they had earlier acquired. Artistic rebel, meet working stiff.

The Madison *Social Text* collective, writing in the journal’s first issue, analyzed the appropriation of the mass media as a political strategy and posited a contradiction between “nostalgic, ideological content” and its “contemporary, historically conditioned form of ideological dissemination” (*ST* 1, 1979). While they were discussing right-wing media strategies, their insight into the contradictory nature of appropriation seems applicable to the cyberutopianism that sees in the Obama victory—buoyed by initiatives like Fairey’s grassroots poster campaign—a confirmation that its time has come.

Shepard Fairey, a left-libertarian purveyor of revolutionary kitsch, is only the latest in a lineage of American appropriation artists. That appropriation must itself be considered a nostalgic artistic strategy by now

merely underlines the importance of insisting upon the contradiction that the “free culture” of the remix moves a bit too hastily to paper over. The image of Fairey as a street or graffiti artist making remixes merely reflects a slack reliance upon hip-hop patois as cultural jargon for all things youthful and creative (see “Hip-Hop” in this issue). From his “Obey Giant” stickers, to a recent cover design for George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Fairey’s fascinations with how the authoritarian personality can be manipulated by visual media suggest that he makes a quite slippery agent of progressive renewal. The legal defense of his right to appropriate skips over the form and content of these nostalgic appropriations.

In a public forum about his work, the lawsuit, and the role of the remix in a “hybrid economy,” Fairey related an early career epiphany, when his first anonymous sticker campaign ignited intense and surprising media attention. The very presence of compelling public images that were not advertisements, he inferred, provoked public curiosity verging on anxiety. It was as if “free” images, illegal art expertly done in the visual language of advertising, opened up a temporary gap in the society of the spectacle. Hal Foster, reflecting in *Social Text* on appropriation art at the end of the 1980s, extolled its attempt “to break apart the mythical sign, to reinscribe it in a countermythical system and to recirculate it in the distribution form of the commodity-image.” But he worried: “When is appropriation a counterappropriation and not a replication? When does [it] recode, rather than rehearse, the dissolution of the sign by capital?” (*ST* 21, 1989). Reflecting upon the claims put forward on behalf of artists like Fairey by the legal scholar Lawrence Lessig, the author of *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, it seems that Foster’s questions remain pertinent and unresolved. It is one thing to dispose of the AP’s fatuous reduction of Fairey’s “Hope” image to a “copy” of their copyrighted property. But to relegate Garcia’s contribution to the alienated status that the AP’s profit-driven calculus assigns it would entirely miss the broader question of how strategies of appropriation work within the visual economy of capitalism today. For what is crucial is not the extent of Fairey’s transformation of Garcia’s previously anonymous original; it is the fact of that very anonymity.

To seriously explore the contested relationship between the respective creative labors of Shepard Fairey and Mannie Garcia requires unpacking that ubiquitous but undertheorized word, *appropriation*. In one of *Social Text*’s more extended attempts to do this, Meaghan Morris began by ruefully observing that appropriation often amounted to “a vague essentialist wave in the general direction of intertextuality” (*ST* 21). Expanding upon this insight, I would posit that underlying the discourse of appropriation lies a specific essentialism around the twin concepts of property and theft. Appropriation is simply a particular term for identifying relations of power

through the emotive language of stolen property, or what is “proper” or essential to one. Put this way, one can see why a straightforwardly antiessentialist critique of appropriation won’t do. Instead we see that an unqualified defense of property right stands no better a chance of sustaining a radical analysis of aesthetic practices of the remix than would an unlimited valorization of theft. For missing from both cases are precisely the questions of scale, force, and accumulation that we would need to answer before differentiating, for instance, the AP and Mannie Garcia as prospective claimants to the product of his labor.

Garcia was a bit too polite to describe Fairey’s actions as theft, but he clearly understood his photo, even if he couldn’t at first identify it, to be his property. As he told NPR, freelancers take hundreds, even thousands, of images a day. Describing the working day in which he took the original photo, Garcia portrayed himself as a skilled laborer, waiting patiently and composing carefully, accumulating diligently, and eventually selling only a select few. That he demurred from the tag *artist*, with its accruing cultural capital, should in no way detract from his self-perception as consciously creative. Indeed, given the determination of contemporary art to define itself around what is credentialed and exhibited “as art,” Garcia’s refusal to describe his work as art seems just a way of avoiding its redescription by an elite and aloof art world. Ironically, however, the “fair use” provision that distinguishes between works of artistic creativity and works that document fact would likely assign photojournalism to the latter category. So Garcia’s claim of ownership based upon the time, effort, and skill he put into the image, rather than upon his artistic intentions or even his ability to remember what he had created, serves as a kind of anti-antiessentialist critique of appropriation and postmodern remix culture. Only by an accident of scale (the astonishing success of Fairey’s poster) did Garcia move from anonymous to known creator. But his articulation of a labor theory of culture spoke less for himself than for that anonymous mass of intelligence that makes the Internet, from which privileged rebels like Fairey then dip.

One problem here is the left-libertarian consensus that the free culture of the remix is always good, because always subversive of the society of the spectacle. This is particularly worrisome in the case of Lessig’s populist attempt to define remixing as potentially the cultural dominant of our present, if only the misbegotten agents of corporate capital would stop hounding moms for uploading videos of their infants dancing to a Prince song (an actual example he used in the forum with Fairey). Here we might take Lessig’s catchphrase *hybrid economy* seriously. What this economy apparently consists of is an (undifferentiated) human aesthetic or creative capacity merging or blending with a (properly restrained) rule of law. But underlying this image of free culture lie disquieting ideological assumptions about the universality of free markets. Copyright is, in

essence, a legal monopoly. Competition, igniting a loose constellation of images, from “virally” recombinant and infectious images and videos, to marketplace competition, to evolution itself, then becomes the thing to be protected against the stultifying inflexibility of monopolistic capital. Lessig’s understanding of human creativity as fundamentally appropriative and recombinatory reflects, at a deep level, the ideologeme that, as Tom Moylan acidly put it in these pages in 1995, “Free competition, it seems, has not only produced wealth but indeed humanity itself” (ST44). Thinking through the effects of free culture from the vantage point of Garcia, rather than that of Fairey, produces a different take on the status of the “creative class” than that which sees only utopian solutions in the saturation of Internet communications throughout human work, leisure, and creative lives. (See my entry on “Social Text” in this issue.)

Remixers who treat the Internet as a sort of free-for-all, all in the name of some putative commons, can indeed more closely replicate what Marx called “primitive accumulation,” or the outright expropriation of those commons. The historical commons, after all, were not simply a state of nature, but a precapitalist state of culture, in which local relations of access, right, and responsibility managed resources collectively. As James Scott argues in *Seeing Like a State*, the classifying, ordering, standardizing, and forcibly rendering accessible of the commons by the modern state—whether capitalist or communist—was and remains extraordinarily deleterious to the lifeworlds of the commons. The Internet, although we speak of it and attempt to think of it as a single, reified thing, might better be approached as a relation or set of relations between technologies, economies, cultural forms, and forms of life. It is the site of, among other things, a class struggle.

Considering the aesthetic and political issues raised by the “Hope” controversy, one might want to add to them a series of different questions. What has been the story of photojournalism, and of photojournalists, as a form of life? How has that form of life been appropriated on the Internet? What new contracts, rights, options, and provisions were innovated in the ever-shifting calculus of control through which press agencies and media conglomerates profit from the risk-taking of their freelancers? How has the digitalization of photography not only transformed the techniques and skill requirements of photographers, but altered the “nature” of the claims a photographer, whose business it now plausibly is to take thousands of images at a time, to own her work as discrete images, rather than flows or patterns of image-taking? How might the anonymous contributors to the material support of the Internet as the physical space where an image now is stored, distributed, and viewed be factored into a radicalized understanding of photographic production? What claims of ownership, or contribution to the ecology of the commons, might they also possess?

One thing is certain, however. Arrogating to a creative commons the accumulated endowment of photojournalism, as a form of precarious labor, simply because it can be crawled by a Google search, is surely an incongruous and incomplete form of homage to the resisters to primitive accumulation gone by. Those resisters resisted in the name of some ideal, even some deity, whose propers they saw to be at risk. They even destroyed some property to stand up for those propers. Luddites of the world, unite!

Note

1. “Mannie Garcia: The Photo That Sparked ‘Hope,’” *Fresh Air*, NPR, 26 February 2009, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=101184444.

Body

Micki McGee

It is glory that these body-loss-obsessed men and women [in weight loss groups] seek, in making themselves “lost,” rapacious glory in a society constraining them in rituals around limitless loss. They externalize the return of the repressed in this society which, more than others, is rationalized around the ledger sheets and the accountants of gain, whose most serious intonations are about the “bottom line”—which has remade the “full plate” into the latest idiom for dealing with bad news.

—Sohnya Sayres, “Glory Mongering: Food and the Agon of Excess,”
ST 16 (1986)

While Barack Obama began his historic presidency with a “full plate” of economic and political challenges and an athletic build complete with a “six-pack” duly captured by the long lens of a paparazzo, the woman who had arguably paved the way for his election with her early endorsement began her year on a rather different note. Oprah Winfrey started 2009 by appearing in a series of television spots castigating herself for regaining the weight that she had once lost (and gained and lost and gained again over the course of her nearly three decades in the public eye). In this spectacle of self-rebuke that promoted the newest season of her *Live Your Best Life* series, Winfrey asserted that everything she has accomplished in every other arena was rendered meaningless unless she controls her weight. “All the money and all the fame and all the attention and the glamorous life and the success,” Winfrey said, “doesn’t mean anything if you can’t fit into your own clothes . . . if you can’t control your own being.”¹

Winfrey’s epic battle with herself, waged as a battle over her weight, has always guaranteed ratings hikes for the talk show host and now overshadows (and perhaps serves to camouflage) the immensity of her cultural

and political influence. Indeed, her televised confessional concerned itself in part with whether she would fit into the gown that she'd chosen for the inaugural festivities. *Would she fit? Would she fit in?* is the perennial self-doubt available to anyone who has ever felt themselves an outsider whether on account of size, or shape, or color, or the objects of their desire, or their manner of elocution, or their differences of ability, or belief, or disposition. In this moment of unprecedented historical achievement—with the inauguration of the first African American president—the woman who has been welcomed into the living rooms of millions of Americans and had helped to make way for the Obamas to claim their place in the people's house publicly expressed her concern about how she'd fit—not on account of her race, but now on account of her size.

The cultural fantasy that body size and shape are largely functions of individual willpower, rather than of genetic predispositions and socioeconomic environment, renders this ongoing saga of Oprah's battle with her weight a morality tale where her legitimacy and moral authority are both threatened (“not walking the walk”) and maintained (through confessional spectacles of self-reproach).² Epic battles of personal strength are waged not against oppression or inequity or social or economic injustice, but against one's appetites.

While Oprah's public battle with her weight shared the spotlight with Obama's historic inauguration and the global financial implosion, the mainstream press had already begun to comment on Michelle Obama's figure, suggesting that her elegant and athletic physique may help dispel the stereotypical image of the African American woman as the rotund Aunt-Jemima-mammy, lush and nurturant to everyone but (presumably, in a fitness-preoccupied culture) neglectful of herself.³ A November *Newsweek* magazine cover story titled “The Meaning of Michelle” noted that Michelle Obama's dedication to a fitness regimen might serve as a positive model for African American women: “A self-proclaimed fitness junkie who works out every morning, Michelle could actually encourage women of color to take better care of themselves.”⁴

Women who heretofore had not “put themselves on the top of their own to-do list” (in the language of Oprah's best-life advice) would somehow find a way to make personal fitness their top priority. Somehow they would find the time for the workouts amid the multiple jobs and extra shifts necessary in a subminimum-wage economy. Somehow they would eke out the money for the gym membership or the treadmill or the step-climber. Michelle Obama's personal appearance would, somehow, render such personal change possible (and desirable) for millions of African American women who work two or three low-wage jobs as they struggle to support their families, who have ready access primarily to nutritionally compromised food in low-income neighborhoods where fast-food restau-

rants proliferate, and who find themselves famished for sleep as they juggle their many responsibilities. The same *Newsweek* article that asserted that Michelle Obama would break through stereotypes for black women also noted her ability to tone down her personality: “Early on in the primaries, after she was labeled too forward and too loud, Michelle demonstrated *self-restraint and discipline* by dialing back” (emphasis added).⁵ By announcing herself as Mom-in-Chief—and downplaying what must have seemed to many to be a surfeit of talent, intelligence, beauty, and professional accomplishment—Michelle Obama proved that she, too, could fit in to the traditionally diminished expectations of women. By exercising such self-discipline, she helped ensure that her husband would be deemed fit to govern the nation.

At the end of an era of both unprecedented expansion and inequality, the Obamas appear fittingly and fit: as the antidote to an epoch of excess, as the embodiment of the virtues of self-control and self-discipline that had long been abandoned in an era of free-marketeering and unabashed extravagance. Barack Obama has been catapulted to the presidency on the wave of our dreams of racial equality, but also on the hope that he can limit our collective losses as the model of free-marketeering unravels. Michelle Obama shows herself not only fit, but willing to diminish herself in an effort to fit in. And Oprah Winfrey serves as our avatar of limitless loss with her claim that “nothing I’ve done is of any worth unless I can lose (weight).” In their respective capacities for limiting (and limitless) loss, all three of these groundbreaking African American cultural icons gain their highest ratings, quantified in the metrics of approval polls and television audience shares. These three *Os*, Oprah and the Obamas, call upon the nation to revel in a new era of belt-tightening and personal restraint. One might ask if fitness, long associated with fitness to govern—with the governance of the self as a prerequisite for the governance of others—has become the new white?⁶ Will corpulence be inaugurated as the new negritude in the wake of the historic advancement marked by Obama’s ascendancy to the highest office in the nation?

Readers of *Social Text* familiar with Sohnya Sayres’s prescient 1986 essay “Glory Mongering: Food and the Agon of Excess” (*ST* 16) would find the drama of Oprah’s self-flagellation and the Obamas’ fitness regimens—along with the public’s fascination with both—utterly unsurprising. As with the best of cultural studies, her insights remain remarkably relevant as a consequence of the deep structure of her analysis. Back in 1986, Sayres noted the aggravation expressed by many African Americans when faced with an emerging cultural demand that they conform to a new lean model of beauty: “I remember too from so many other kinds of fat discussion and weight control groups how piqued some black woman felt

about the shift to glamorous slenderness in the new black woman. They had had to be the rock and the earth and the daintiest dancers in chiffon and heels you could imagine. Big mammas and nymphs of the cornucopia.” (As a point of reference, the Somalian beauty Iman had broken the color barrier of *Vogue*’s pages in 1976, following swiftly on the heels of Leni Riefenstahl’s 1973 photographic chronicle *The Last of the Nuba*.) Indeed, Sayres contended that the 1980s mean vogue for slenderness had “niggerized” the self-described “food addicts” whom she chronicled: “All those less than physically ideal know in their gut how this current or that current style has niggerized them; what fear they then think they spy behind those white masks of the not-natural beauties.” Sayres directed her readers to Georges Bataille, quoting his essay on expenditure in *Visions of Excess*: “Fortune does not serve to shelter its owner from need. On the contrary, it functionally remains — as does its possessor — at the mercy of a need for limitless loss. . . . Connected to the losses that are realized in this way — in the case of the ‘lost woman’ as well as in the case of military expenditure — is the creation of unproductive values, and the one that makes people most rapacious, is glory.”⁷ Although one might quibble — perhaps even argue full-tilt — with Bataille’s formulation of a general economy in which a natural excess (“the accursed share”) always requires an ongoing expenditure of this excess in displays of luxury, spoilage, or carnage, his observation that economic surpluses are dispatched in wasteful displays, such as destructive wars, seems incontrovertible. Fortuna requires virtue and sacrifices both small and large: the mornings on the treadmill and the diminution of all one has ever achieved, the high ratings of *The Biggest Loser* gleaned from its contestants’ capacity for loss.

In its earliest days, in the days of the emerging field of cultural studies, *Social Text* concerned itself with an analysis of these everyday or quotidian concerns — with aspects of daily life and popular media read as social texts to be unpacked not only as symptoms of systematic social malaise but with an eye toward social and political remedies. Denigrated in the popular press as “Oprah studies”⁸ — yet ironically carried out in the pages of its newspapers and magazines⁹ — the cultural studies imperative of *Social Text* seems to be an almost lost project in our own ranks. The work of intervening in the multiple and seemingly trivial social texts that surround, envelop, and produce us has been gradually supplanted by a focus on grander narratives of globalization, empire, and urgent political economies. As *Social Text* looks back and ahead on the occasion of its thirtieth anniversary and one-hundredth issue, perhaps the radical nature of the everyday will return as an entree at our tables, however full we may find our respective plates.

Notes

1. *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 5 January 2009.
2. Micki McGee, "Resolute We Are," OUP Blog, 16 January 2006, blog.oup.com/2006/01/resolute_we_are/.
3. See Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1–5.
4. Allison Samuels, "What Michelle Can Teach Us," *Newsweek*, 10 November 2008, 42; online as "What Michelle Means to Us," www.newsweek.com/id/170383.
5. Samuels, "What Michelle Can Teach Us," 42.
6. See, for example, the use of the theory of Michel Foucault on self-mastery and fitness in Jennifer Smith McGuire, *Fit for Consumption: Sociology and the Business of Fitness* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 135–36; Toby Miller and Alex W. McHoul, *Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 65; and Jeffrey Louis Decker, *Made in America: Self-Styled Success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 127–30, 132.
7. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 128, as cited in Sohnya Sayres, "Glory Mongering: Food and the Agon of Excess," *Social Text* 16 (1986): 94.
8. Amy Benfer, "Broadsheet: Spanking Oprah," *Salon.com*, 27 January 2009, www.salon.com/mwt/broadsheet/feature/2009/01/27/oprah_depression/index.html.
9. For example, Maureen Callahan, "Bloated, Depressed: As Oprah Goes, So Goes the Nation," *New York Post*, 24 January 2009, www.nypost.com/seven/01242009/postopinion/opedcolumnists/the_oprah_syndrome_151684.htm?