Antifascist Art Theory: A Roundtable Discussion

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Introduction

The conversation that follows, among three art theorists whose work focuses on emancipatory politics on the left and who participated together in recent art events in Europe examining the resurgence of fascist politics, poses this question:[1] what might be the connection between the increasing normalisation of a political landscape strewn with fascist elements and the complex positioning of art between (or possibly, across) the *status quo* and its subversion? Here, 'art' is understood as the totality of practices that give us the 'art field' rather than just artworks, while the 'political landscape' is seen as being articulated, one way or another, through the hegemony of neoliberalism. The question as such implies that we inhabit a critical moment in the trajectory of the antagonisms inherited from the twentieth century. Our moment is defined by extraordinary ideological fusions and transpositions; technological ultra-mediation of subjects and cultural milieus premised on supremacy; the increasing appeal of exclusionary far-right authoritarianism and counter-emancipatory positions; multiple enactments of social hatred, discursively performed as well as violently actualised on anyone who qualifies as socially abject. The juncture where new articulations of a fascist mentality are forming puts the doxa that capitalist markets are best served by liberal democracy to the test while the left is, at large and also in art, found implicated in the reproduction of the capitalist horizon. The roundtable is intended as an effort to think against the advance of this cultural and political dynamic and propose, as a first step, possible vectors of critique for bringing together a self-consciously anti-fascist art theory. The discussion focuses on three main themes: a) art vis-à-vis power relations in capitalism, b) the role of technology in subject formation, c) sexuality and whiteness.

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[1] These events included meetings in the context of the long-term project of BAK, Utrecht, *Propositions for Non-Fascist Living* (2017 to date) and *The White West: The Resurgence of Fascism as a Cultural Force*, 9 May 2018, La Colonie, Paris.

Relationships: Fascism, Capitalism, Art, Power

Angela Dimitrakaki: There is no consensus within the left on whether it makes sense to speak of a resurgence of fascism, or whether bringing forth this term to explain certain tendencies and practices - especially in so-called liberal democracies - amounts to an exaggerated (mis)reading of our historical moment. Enzo Traverso, for instance, prefers to refer to contemporary tendencies associated with the Alt-Right as rooted in a 'fascist matrix'. Yet Fredric Jameson, interviewed shortly before the US Presidential Election of 2016, indicated an instability or uncertainty that should allow for reconsideration: 'People are now saying – this is a new fascism and my answer would be – not yet. If Trump comes to power, that would be a different thing.'[2] Trump did come to power. In the years since Jameson's statement there have been numerous attempts 'to reconsider', but still there is some hesitancy with regard to how to refer to the zeitgeist. My starting question then has to do with what art theory might have to offer towards the elucidation of what is going on. From the perspective of art theory, does it make sense or is it even imperative to speak about the re-emergence of a political subject that must be described as 'fascist'? Or does speaking in these terms entail a misguided thinking that draws us towards the past, preventing thus the development of a new language with which to address a troubling, divisive contemporary?

Marina Vishmidt: There are two questions here. The first would be a definitional one, the one about whether it is meaningful *in general* to speak about this period as one of an emergent fascism. The second is a strategic one, which aims to develop the consequences of how we answer the first question in light of the capacities and purpose of a discipline or an activity that we are calling 'art theory'. Given the potential scope of both these questions, my inclination would be to start by pulling

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[2] Olivier Doubre, 'Mutations of Fascism: An Interview with Enzo Traverso', *Verso Blog*, 28 February 2017, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3112-mutations-of-fascism-an-interview-with-enzo-traverso; Filip Baluvonic, 'Fredric Jameson: 'People are saying 'this is a new fascism' and my answer is – not yet!', *LEFTEAST,* 4 Nov 2016, http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/fredric-jameson-fascism-not-yet-there/, accessed 31 July 2018

out and mapping the further questions implicit in these two, and then take it from there. I might proceed somewhat genealogically.

First, we could reverse the question slightly and ask: what kinds of political responsibility pertain to a discipline or activity called art theory? Whether or not we are living in fascism, the question of the political responsibility of a practically alienated and institutionalised field whose protocol is neutrality would need to be determined in this discussion. *Mutatis mutandis*, that goes for all academic disciplines, as well as the art field as a whole inasmuch as it partakes of institutionalisation, professionalisation and alienation, which of course it does, double-bound as apolitical both by modernist legacies of disengaged knowledge (liberalism) and by the more contemporary pressures of the university as a node of capitalist accumulation (neoliberalism). There is also the question of political responsibility within the field, which though specific and contextual, embody and reproduce larger systemic tendencies. This would include practices of organising around working conditions and to counter the abusive results of the informal power hierarchies that prevail in both art and academia. There are also, as already implied by my use of the term transversal, questions of political responsibility that go beyond the working conditions in the field. These would be the political responsibilities of any human living in this society in terms of material solidarity and participation in struggles. Finally, there is political responsibility as attends on theoretical and creative practice – I would use those terms rather than 'critical practice', because critical practice in the field should already incorporate activism and organising – which is where we get to the content, and the platforms and contexts, for what we write or produce and how it is staged and with and for whom. This is where analysis cuts into, and against, infrastructure.

Here, we could raise, without addressing just yet, the central question of defining fascism as just an ideological or also a structural phenomenon, and much has already been written on how elements of neoliberalism as the variant of capitalist state and policy we have been living with for most of our lives already express (or, perhaps, 'encode') solid fascist virtues such as social Darwinism, the merging of the market and the state, and the decimation of collective agency.[3] But back to the 'pre-'

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[3] See Henry A. Giroux and Mark Karlin, 'The Nightmare of Neoliberal Fascism', *Truthout*, 10 June 2018, https://truthout.org/articles/henry-a-giroux-the-nightmare-of-neoliberal-fascism/, accessed 15

questions, the studied political neutrality that forms part of the professional apparatus of the disciplines has historically, as it does in the present, provided sustained aid and support rather than opposition to a shift to more vicious and totalitarian form of these existing tendencies, which is being contested as provisionally being called fascism. Inasmuch as art theory empirically transpires within this disciplinary matrix, it has a responsibility to countervail the reflexive conservatism of that position; or, its liberalism, if this signifier designates the concerted divorce of rhetorical politics from material ones. As for a more specific responsibility, this is something I'd like to start developing below.

Thus, given all this ground clearing, I would like to see if the question can be angled slightly differently while, I think, maintaining its focus. Thinking of what Alberto Toscano has written on fascism as principally a *cultural* rather than political phenomenon in the present moment, I wonder if art theory, or aesthetic theory more broadly, can give us some insight into the 'structures of feeling' that, whether ambiguous or partisan to the extreme right, can normalise or mystify (two ways of rendering fascism appealing) fascism as, at minimum, an inclination to consider some socio-historically ascribed groups more worthy of survival than others and the willingness to act on these beliefs, and at maximum, an organised state and police implementation of this position, with or without the historically mandated ideologies.[4] In the latter case we also need to extend the reach of the category 'fascism' in time as well as in space. We'd have to admit that extreme structural and arbitrary violence characteristic of white supremacy, especially as directed at the descendants of slaves in the Western hemisphere, has borne many of the characteristics of fascism, including social consensus (enthusiastic or passive cooperation with white supremacy), but has not often registered as such in political theory or historiography.

September 2018, and Giroux's book, *Terror of Neoliberalism: Authoritarianism and the Eclipse of Democracy*, Routledge, New York, 2017 [2004]; Éric Fassin, 'The Neo-fascist Moment of Neoliberalism', *Open Democracy*, 10 August 2018, https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/ric-fassin/neo-fascist-moment-of-neoliberalism, accessed 15 September 2018.

[4] See Alberto Toscano, 'Notes on Late Fascism', *Historical Materialism Blog*, 2 April 2017, accessed 10 September 2018; on 'structure of feeling', see Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1961.

And we would also need to consider fascist tendencies outside the West, such as in the current Indian regime.[5]

Angela: Marina, you point to at least two interwoven tasks of cultural and political theory more broadly, in advance of proceeding to what art theory might be able to contribute. Both tasks address history-writing: the first would be the effort to piece together a universal/global history of fascism; the second would be the effort to grasp how fascism relates to the trajectories of liberal societies, especially as 'liberal democracies' are often (mis)presented as an achievement of 'the West' and as an aspiration of 'the rest'. Since the mid-2000s, terms such as 'post-democracy' and, increasingly in the 2010s, the alarm against an incipient fascist turn have been associated with a mentality shift in such liberal democracies[6] – including either the witnessing of murderous acts by far right individuals such as Anders Breivik in a 'model democracy' such as Norway,[7] or the advance of political parties such as Front National in France, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany and Golden Dawn in Greece; not to mention the shock generated by the rise of far right forces in Central Europe (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic) after the 'transition' to capitalism, where the latter is *still* upheld as somehow conjoined with democracy. Liberals speak about 'extremes', 'populism' and 'totalitarianism' as subversions of capitalism's assumed commitment to democracy. Yet their commitment to capitalism comes first: liberal democracies today speak against 'totalitarianism' in a campaign to equate

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[5] Indicatively, see 'Arundhati Roy: 'We're up against a fascist regime in India', *Deutsche Welle*, 3 September 2018, https://www.dw.com/en/arundhati-roy-were-up-against-a-fascist-regime-in-india/a-45332070, accessed 17 September 2018.

[6] The theorists most associated with the term 'post-democracy' are Jacques Rancière, Colin Crouch, and Chantal Mouffe. For a brief history, including references to the work of Rancière, Crouch, and Mouffee, see Yannis Stavrakakis, 'PostDemocracy', *Atlas of Transformation*, 2011, http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/p/postdemocracy/postdemocracy-yannis-stavrakakis.html, accessed 1 September 2018. See also Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Polity, Cambridge, 2004.

[7] On July 22, 2011, Anders Behring Breivik (b 1979) shot 69 people attending the Workers' Youth League summer camp in the island of Utoya, Norway, and eight people in Oslo by detonating a van bomb. He also distributed his manifesto, against 'cultural Marxism', Islam, and feminism, *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*. In 2014, while imprisoned, he self-identified as a fascist.

fascism and communism, crucial for reproducing the 'no alternative' hegemony.[8] For me then, an anti-fascist art theory would need to start with exposing the ideological grounds of the liberals' discourse against totalitarianism. What does this discourse prevent us from grasping and doing? This, Marina, connects to my mind to your above critique of the art field overall as the ground occupied by liberalism.

Larne Abse Gogarty: I don't think we have to wait for Jameson or Traverso to clarify what might or might not be 'fascism'. I am unsure about the merits of becoming preoccupied with this kind of categorical thinking, as if once we alight upon actually existing fascism, and then designate it as such, the left might spring into action and become a force within the world. Along these lines, it seems important to avoid a macho heroics of anti-fascism which is more concerned with the emergence of (sometimes quite small) street fascist movements and the cultivation of fascistic culture online at the expense of considering their relation to state forces. Anti-migrant rhetoric is consistently bolstered by the existence of detention centers and the capacity of the state, and unions of states such as the EU, to render people as non-citizens. We know the political climate across much of Europe and the US, as well as nations including Australia, India, Turkey, Russia have become increasingly exclusionary in their nationalism, alongside the emergence of street movements.

I think it does make sense to speak of fascist political subjects as long as there are people who identify as such, which we know there are. But this hasn't suddenly re-emerged. At least in Europe, there's been a continuity of fascist movements, ebbs and flows of Casa Pound, Golden Dawn, the National Front, Britain First, etc. Or, in thinking about what Marina says vis-à-vis Toscano about fascism as a cultural phenomenon, we might also have to think about domesticated (literally, as in the home) forms of racism – for example, something like Zwarte Piet in the Netherlands, or the commonplace appearance of figurines/images of Jews counting money as a good luck charm in Poland – as an important facet in feeding the possibility for a public re-emergence of acceptably fascist positions. In terms of what has changed, my question is: does someone like Trump or a phenomenon like Brexit *contribute* to the

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[8] Indicatively, see the statement about the Pan-European Memorial for Victims of Totalitarianism in Brussels at https://memoryandconscience.eu/memorialbrussels/, accessed 17 September 2018.

formation of fascist subjects in a manner that is more widespread, dispersed, or effective?

In terms of art theory, for me this is again related (as Marina also suggests) to the task of how we toggle between the blatantly exclusionary world of 'art' and 'theory' that is long standing and endemic, and the emergence of a new legitimisation of far-right politics within a sphere that tends to imagine itself as liberal, i.e. the LD50 debacle which in some sense remains a one-off in terms of its extremity.[9] Morgan Quaintance's outlining of how the art world is structurally right wing is extremely instructive in this respect.[10] I don't mean to diminish the need for an anti-fascist cultural movement which might incorporate something called art theory in it, but this leads me to my first question: How do you conceive of the relation between racism and fascism, and anti-racist and anti-fascist positions? And relatedly, how do you conceive of the relationship between street-level fascist cultural/political movements and the capitalist state? Do we always need to think in terms of specifics with the second question (particular national contexts), or as Angela asks, can we piece together a universal/global history of fascism?

Marina: While I agree with the hesitation about getting too caught up in categorical thinking or taxonomies of 'our era' (an endlessly recursive task in any case, as we end up trawling through the character of the era, only to discover we are back to zero as soon as the 'our' comes forward to be unpacked), at the same time there is a need to map and draw the lines of distinction and contiguity between terms that point to historical movement of one kind or another.

Going back to the structurally 'fascist' character of aspects of neoliberalism, we can say okay, but that's just exacerbated capitalism up till the moment that those aspects are expressed ideologically, culturally and politically, or, to be clear,

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[9] LD50, a gallery in Hackney, London, was forced to shut down following protests that exposed it as the host of far-right, racist activities in 2017. For further details see the Shut Down LD50 blog at https://shutdownld50.tumblr.com/, accessed 11 February 2019, and Larne Abse Gogarty, 'The Art Right', *Art Monthly*, 405, April 2017, pp 6–10.

[10] Morgan Quaintance, 'The New Conservatism: The New Conservatism and the UK Artworld's Performance of Progression', *e-flux conversations*, October 2017, https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/the-new-conservatism-complicity-and-the-uk-art-worlds-performance-of-progression/7200, accessed 20 August 2018

*necro*politically. It is also structurally, and expressively racist, until such time as racism becomes overt public policy, and then we can say, oh, we're in fascism; but equally well we can say, oh, we're in twentieth-century United States, or twenty-first-century Israel, or so many places and times that are left out of universal history but can be read differently from the political standpoint of those in struggle against it, then and now. Fascism, then, comes to seem like simply the normalisation and intensification of the lethal tendencies of the existing mode of production and governance; capitalism without a filter, the grinning face of more and more people rendered surplus on a global scale. Nationalism, again, is part of this normalisation, a very important part, since it's about the valorisation of affects of purity, tradition and exclusion of harmful, dirty others who are poised to menace our 'way of life'. All of these are connected, and following a lot of historical analysis of fascism, it's about how threatened the current state and organs of power feel, whether they are threatened by a large working-class movement in the 1920s, or by the prospect of climate and war-induced migratory movements now, while working to prop up the current architecture of financial stability and extraction at home. So it feels to me that it's not so much about identifying a dominant or definitive crisis tendency as it is about mapping the relationships between them, in localised ways, but also in system-reproductive ways that exhibit consistency across sites. Here, I guess also the old question of the relation between structure and history in critical analysis comes up.

Following on from that, the structural 'right-wing'-ness of the art world, ie the material infrastructure of its liberalism, is a key premise when it comes to any evaluation of politics in that space. Art is simply in thrall to power as an institution, and it will always glorify it as an institution, regardless of the content of works and the intentions of practices. But I wonder if we could focus on these, lest we end up only confirming these 'first principles' in our discussion. The question of the political capacities of art theory, and maybe I am here broadening the question to art practices as well, seems germane to why all three of us choose to stay engaged with the field. Institutionally it obviously doesn't work that way, though of course we have to keep trying – but what is it we want from the field, as anti-fascists, anti-racists, communists, feminists, or other political subjects? Maybe it's going way too broad now, but I feel it might be a way back into the original questions, or at least one of them.

The Technology Question

Angela: So, anti-fascist art theory can help posit an anti-fascist 'we' of a clearly defined political contour – which, Marina, you more or less give above. Yet as this anti-fascist 'we' is necessarily contemporary, the features of this contemporary must be sought vis-à-vis both concrete reality (the fact that self-identified fascists *do* exist openly, as Larne points out) and the more elusive elements of the emerging juncture. What are the features of the contemporary through which fascism becomes formed, and not merely facilitated?

A salient such feature is technology, indeed the *particularity* of technologies favoured by contemporary capitalism. With this, I also want to return to Larne's question: do we need a global history of fascism, and is there scope for one? I answer yes to both parts of this question, because if at this point we need to grasp the links of possibly a transnational turn to authoritarianism as a pillar of fascism, this is because the core of capitalist globalisation is technological. The fascism that gave us the Holocaust was also technological, as it deployed technology to organise mass deaths of designated subjects. Technology-based biopolitics and necropolitics have been the order of modernity overall. But historical analysis, to which art theory is necessarily tied, requires us to differentiate, to attend to the specificities of technologies in use and their connection to the political reality and its imaginaries.

In 1996, Hal Foster in *The Return of the Real* already referred to a fascistic subject in connection with recent technologies that fuse the spectacle with military operations. [11] The relevant chapter is titled 'Whatever Happened to Postmodernism?', and I have always wondered since I read it, twenty years ago as a student, why the demise of postmodernism had to be connected with the re-appearance of a fascistic

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[11] See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1996, p 222: 'A thrill of techno-mastery (my mere human perception become a super machine vision, able to see what it destroys and to destroy what it sees), but also a thrill of an imaginary dispersal of my own body, of my own subjecthood. Of course, when the screens of the smart bombs went dark, my body did not explode. On the contrary, it was bolstered: in a classic fascistic trope, my body, my subjecthood, was affirmed in the destruction of other bodies. In this technosublime, then, there is a partial return of a fascistic subjecthood, which occurs at the level of the mass too, for such events are massively mediated, and they produce a psychic collectivity-a psychic nation, as it were, that is also defined against cultural otherness both within and without.'

subject about which nonetheless Foster wonders 'did it ever go away?' and 'does it rest within us all?'[12] Michel Foucault argued that in his Introduction to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*.[13] On the one hand, then, we have within (Western) art theory this lingering question of whether postmodernism functioned in a double and contradictory mode in relation to fascism: its military-spectacle techno-configuration implied the recall to a fascistic sensibility while its alleged commitment to undoing the centred 'humanist' subject opposed such sensibility.

Yet I wonder if we are already at a different moment with regard to how technology is co-implicated with neo-fascism in everyday life. I will mention, of course, Nick Land and the various social Darwinists whose ideas increasingly occupy the digital (and not only) public space.[14] The speed of communicating such positions, including the spread of neo-fascist evolutionism, are a given, but my question is whether the way that technology merges with social beings generates a tendency in the ideological reconstitution of subjects that may strengthen the cult of, and surrender to, the specific authoritarianism we understand as integral to fascism; and the social hatred that is also specific to it. Whether the form, rather than content, of artworks could provide evidence of this ideological reconstitution is a question – which is why a specifically anti-fascist art theory might be politically useful (in addition to examining institutional platforms and the art field's structure).

Larne: In terms of how technology shapes subjecthood, this seems to be both a reality and a fantasy. Reality in the sense that at the most banal level we reflexively check our phones all the time, and also perhaps in the sense of how something like eg sexual bullying is transformed and assisted by new technologies, with these then assisting in the continued maintenance of subjects formed by patriarchal, hetero-sexist relations. In terms of the fantasy dimension, I see this as more multi-faceted in its implications: I am thinking about liberal fantasies that situate the blame for our

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[12] Ibid, p 210

[13] See Michel Foucault, 'Preface' in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, trans, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1983 [1972].

[14] Olivia Goldhill, 'The Neo-fascist Philosophy that Underpins both the Alt-Right and Silicon Valley Technophiles', *Quartz*, 18 June 2017, https://qz.com/1007144/the-neo-fascist-philosophy-that-underpins-both-the-alt-right-and-silicon-valley-technophiles/, accessed 17 September 2018

current populist turn on unchecked technological 'innovation' (ie Brexit only happened because of Cambridge Analytica),[15] but we might also think more generally about accelerationist fantasies of automation, both left and right variants.

The field of art and theory seems to be a crucial terrain where the shifting ground between the fantasy and reality of technology's role in subject formation meet. I see a lot of artworks that believe in (whether sounding the alarm, or affirming) the myth of a subject shaped first and foremost by technology. The *promise* of this idea perhaps lies in the belief that the widespread availability of technologies might form the new means to weave a shared social fabric, in terms of the practicalities of life as well as in terms of the production of culture (with art forming part of this). An example of this would be something like Metahaven, or Holly Herndon's work.[16] Conversely, there is a version of this within the field of art and theory that seems to match more closely with the fascistic zeitgeist in that it takes technology as a means to *fantasise about entirely evacuating history and the social, in favour of an atomised, self-possessing subject*. I would see something like Katja Novitskova's *Neolithic Potential* (2016) series along these lines, in the de-temporalising quality of this work, which affirms an unchanging, naturalised idea of the human (and social hierarchies as something intrinsic to human nature).[17]

What knits the two tendencies together—the first tendency that fetishises technology as capable of providing a social fabric and the second as situating contemporary technology as correspondent with e.g. fire, in order to produce an atavistic, Promethean metaphor—is their shared stylistic base in something I call 'aspirational nihilism'. The 9th Berlin Biennale, in 2016, is perhaps the easiest target in diagnosing this style and also marks where it tends to slip across a variety of

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[15] See Patrick Greenfield, 'The Cambridge Analytica Files: The Story So Far', *The Guardian*, 26 March 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/26/the-cambridge-analytica-files-the-story-so-far, accessed 2 September 2018.

[16] Ruth Saxelby, '10 Radical Ideas that Inspired Holly Herndon's *Platform*', *The Fader*, 21 March 2015, https://www.thefader.com/2015/05/21/radical-ideas-that-inspired-holly-herndon-platform, accessed 2 September 2018

[17] This quality is embedded in the form of the work, but also in how Novitskova articulates its meaning. See her statement for the 2016 Berlin Biennale here: https://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/participants/novitskova/, accessed 2 September 2018.

political orientations.[18] I see a key quality of this aspirational nihilism in the production of a kind of armour that maybe shares its heritage with what Christine Poggi describes as central to the aesthetics of the Futurists—a fantasy of 'metallizing' the human body, mimicking the technology which transformed the world they found themselves in, in order to act as a kind of stimulus shield (which Poggi draws from Freud).[19] Nowadays, rather than such crude machismo, the social is more commonly deflected by the reproduction of property relations above all else. Ana Teixeira Pinto has argued that 'a great deal of the art being exhibited currently could be said to embody, albeit semi-consciously, ideological principles that truck with NRx's cyber-libertarian views', going so far as to map the vanguard of tech-fascism onto the style known as 'post-internet' art which shares a 'libidinal investment in the triad of novelty/technology/potency' with right-accelerationism. Yet, Teixeira Pinto also stresses that we 'mustn't collapse Silicon Valley, accelerationism, and post-internet art into one single bad object.'[20]

This presents one of the real challenges for art theory and art history at the moment. That is, to distinguish between works which fetishistically mobilise their digitality, and those that work with technology's myths in order to center the forms of sociality and existence that enable the frictionless fantasy of the former. To be more precise: as Kerstin Stakemeier describes, there are two types of mimicry at play in the present, which mark out two distinct aesthetic and artistic strategies. While some works submit to the fantasies of financialisation (and thus, the question of technology and its relation to the fascism-capitalism nexus), others attempt to mimic the clashing, differentiated forms of existence which underpin the fantasy of frictionless, boundless exchange, and instead to produce a *somatic* sense of the 'risk inherent to digitized capitalism.' [21] In the first category of mimicry—which corresponds with the aspirational nihilism I am speaking of—I would see the work of artists like Timur Si Qin, Simon Denny, Christopher Kulendran Thomas and the aforementioned

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[18] Berlin Biennial 9 (4 June – 18 September 2016), titled The Present in Drag, was curated by DIS.

[19] Christine Poggi, *Inventing Futurism: The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2008, p 33

[20] Ana Teixeira Pinto, 'Artwashing – on NRX and the Alt-Right', *Texte zur Kunst*, 4 July 2017, https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/artwashing-web-de/, accessed 29 August 2018

[21] Kerstin Stakemeier, 'Exchangeables: Aesthetics against Art', *Texte zur Kunst* 98, June 2015, pp 124–143, here p 134

Novitskova as exemplary, *alongside* the more politically sympathetic Herndon, Metahaven and the left accelerationists. In the second sense—of works which foreground the *somatic*—and what I've called elsewhere an excessive, particularising, metamorphic quality—we might think of an artist like Sondra Perry.[22] Her work concerns itself with and uses avatars, digitality and contemporary lifestyle/health tropes in order to consistently foreground the problem of materiality and differentiation via gender, race, class which cannot be solved or ameliorated through technology but instead may be exacerbated by it. Or, in a somewhat different vein and more referred to here as a retort to aspirational nihilism's evacuation of the social (or its false sociality), I would like to mention the work of Women's History Museum (WHM), which lies somewhere between an art project and a fashion project. Yet, unlike the dissolution between those realms merely forming a side effect of how, as Stakemeier argues, digitality forms the interface between art and capital,[23] the work of WHM puts pressure on this dissolution not to save art from fashion or to elevate fashion as art, but rather in a way which steadfastly refuses the fantasies of art's autonomy, or fashion's aspiration towards a status that might cleanse its proximity to gendering, racialisation, class and labour. The body is central in all these works, but in a way which is markedly different to what Marina has previously criticised as a current theoretical trend which foregrounds 'bodies' as a pseudo-concrete attempt to produce a kind of 'solidarity through precarity' that signals its radicality through its generic quality which pretentiously comes to form a kind of ontology.[24] I would see that trend as correspondent with the pseudo-sociality of Herndon, Metahaven, left accelerationism.

Against the aspirational nihilism which yawns as it strengthens its sense of self-possession, I see WHM's work, Sondra Perry's practice and many aspects of popular culture like Childish Gambino's wildly successful song/video *This is America* (2018) as doing something very different in how they approach subject formation. I see all these works as somehow thinking through or addressing the submission of the

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[22] Marina Vishmidt, 'Corporeal Abstractions: Body as Site and Cipher in Feminist Art and Politics', keynote at *Speak: Body. Art, the Reproduction of Capital, and the Reproduction of Life*, conference at School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, University of Leeds, 21-23 April 2017. Published paper forthcoming in *Radical Philosophy*.

[23] Stakemeier, 'Exchangeables: Aesthetics against Art', op cit, p 126

[24] Vishmidt, 'Corporeal Abstractions: Body as Site and Cipher in Feminist Art and Politics', op cit

subject to authoritarianism along lines which counter the resigned rationalism which dominates the cultural sphere. I want an art, and art theory, that is capable of consistently unsettling the subject in some way, or at least the subject's convictions about herself. *Not* strengthening it. This also returns to the issue of what *kind* of anti-fascist art, culture and theory we want, and the necessity of refusing the narcissism of negation in order to instead ask what can *exceed* this pattern as we support its development and growth.

Marina: There's so much in the above to pick up on and work through. Perhaps one point to begin with is Larne's highlighting of the conjunction of technophilic ideologies and private property in some current, or perhaps just elapsed (if BB9 'jumped the shark', as the kids used to say), trendscapes of contemporary art, and the attempt to capture it in the formulation 'aspirational nihilism'. This seems useful to me, because once again that gives us tools to focus on the structural determinations of what seem like highly ideologised practices that are calculated to invite polarised responses *on their own terms*. I also say trendscapes because while discerning the clear echoes of authoritarian subjectivities behind the grinning inanity of the commodity aesthetics in that event, or in a certain configuration of 'post-internet' and post-that practices, we can't lose sight of precisely the 'commodity' part. Which seems like a ridiculous thing to underline when we're discussing an event which put the supercession of art by marketing as the affirmative horizon of its whole descriptive and prescriptive project. But what I mean specifically is the significance of novelty in the 'attention economy' (which may be tenuously or directly compounded in the money economy) and how technology has always been the greatest legitimation, and naturalisation, paradoxically, of the *desperation* of the commodity to remain ever-new, ever-same, and thus for invested capital to be realised. It's no different for curatorial and institutional agendas functioning in that very same economy, driven by those same subjectivities it generates; the infrequency with which we encounter the term 'post-internet' nowadays would seem to bear that out. In the current ideological moment, naive corporate art cannot afford to be quite so solipsistic anymore, perhaps, but also it's a trend that's been eclipsed by other things.

That kind of technological determinism, in its capacity of legitimation, is always used to shut down debate, whether it's Jünger in the 1920s or Denny's capital-

intensive tech-bro bibelots nowadays.[25] This can proceed through the modality of glorifying violence, or through optimism – it's the neutrality, the dissociation from the historical and social, that gives technology its utilitarian advantage over ideology. This is perhaps a correlation between the more and less sympathetic sides of contemporary practice that prioritise technology in their methods and narratives, though Larne's distinction between the standpoint of people like Metahaven and Novitskova as the difference between an interest in the social/geopolitical and the asocial/mythical capacities of digital technologies is clarifying. We can also think of figures like Benjamin Bratton, and other commentators and theorists who in more or less sophisticated ways propound the view that politics are irrelevant when the earth has been subsumed by technological infrastructures.[26] This is a sort of anodyne version of the Land thesis, and it is insidious, mostly because it is in the service of de-legitimating any direct political action as retrograde and dogmatic, and a lot of the 'red guards' type of criticism of the campaign to shut down the fascist LD50 art gallery in London came from people espousing those kinds of views.

With regard to the ontology of 'bodies', or perhaps more expansively, a 'politics of vulnerability' in the current moment, I am reminded of Christopher Chitty's observation that 'self-assertion of the body in a politics of recognition is a rigged liberal game. While maybe essential to getting tangible needs met, it's also how liberalism weasels its way into the movement, neutralising more radical tendencies. It risks a merely symbolic resistance, posturing and new moralisms.'[27] This is a rather prevalent tendency now in artmaking and discourse, though the

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[25] See Ernst Junger, *The Storm of Steel: From the Diary of a German Storm-Troop Officer on the Western Front*, Basil Creighton, trans, Chatto & Windus, London, 1929. A comprehensive array of objects from Simon Denny's blockchain cargo cult was at Galerie Bucholz in Cologne, 12 May – 15 June 2018.

[26] The insistence that algorithmic governance has rendered politics redundant is a recurrent trope which unites techno-determinisms across the political spectrum since the mid-twentieth century at least. Currently, we can see this consensus bridging the divide from the left accelerationist longing for strong states and disdain for 'folk politics' to the cultural theory that warns of the epochal shifts that arrive with 'planetary-scale computation'. See Benjamin Bratton, *The Stack*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2016.

[27] Christopher Chitty, 'Reassessing Foucault: Modern Sexuality and the Transition to Capitalism', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 20 April 2017, https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/04/20/reassessing-foucault-modern-sexuality-and-the-transition-to-capitalism/, accessed 17 September 2019

affective modality has been around for a while, and certainly informed some of the more visible practices in the 'post-internet' landscape. (What's also interesting there, of course, is the aesthetics and symptomology of the reflexivity about hyper-technologised hyper-affect, which we can see in the vocabulary of 'feels' and of course in baroque concatenations of emojis – this is something to be considered more extensively, for sure.)

The form and the content of artworks are both key to take into consideration when locating them within a fascist or an anti-fascist infrastructure of feeling. I am interested in the blurrings between these, the functionality of ambiguity, and the appeal to affect – to evocations of the feeling of being lost, confused, objectified, exploited, overwhelmed; or, certainly in relation to a lot of the theoretical work many of those practices are drawing on, *implicated*. Given Angela's discussion of postmodernism as having contradictory authoritarian tendencies, this does seem to echo very closely Jameson's writings on postmodern affect. And how this can in turn be codified and performed in highly racialised, gendered and classed ways, though the latter social relationship is more buried most of the time. We have been naming names already, as anti-fascist (or any partisan) theory should be doing, and here I am thinking particularly of many of the curatorial and artistic positions that for the last five years or so have been promulgated through the London commercial gallery Arcadia Missa, but far from only there.[28]

Strategic ambiguity is, of course, a kind of default setting in much contemporary art, to the degree that it's hardly worth remarking upon, but I think particularly the constant return to the feeling of implicatedness, or complicity, the

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[28] Initially located in Peckham, Arcadia Missa (AM) is one of a handful of galleries that contributed to the gentrification of southeast London. Alongside the artists they work with, AM's brand has partly been developed through the discursive wing of the gallery. This discourse placed emphasis on radical identity claims and often concluded that 'full subsumption' by capital renders critique redundant – a stance frequently framed with pathos rather than cynicism. Exemplifying Chitty's diagnosis above, this has led the gallery to distance itself from intra-art politics in London that might impinge on its commercial prospects, such as the Boycott Divest Zabludowicz campaign. See Alex Greenberger, 'Citing Concerns about Gentrification, Arcadia Missa moves to London's Soho Neighborhood', *Artnews*, 26 February 2018 http://www.artnews.com/2018/02/26/citing-concerns-gentrification-arcadia-missa-moves-londons-soho-neighborhood, accessed 11 Feb 2019; and Alice Brooke, Gulia Smith, Rozsa Farkas, eds, *Re-Materialising Feminism*, London, Arcadia Missa, 2015. Larne Abse Gogarty and Marina Vishmidt contributed to the publication.

passionate 'cruel optimism' of inhabiting and profiting from violent structures while denouncing violence in a sort of intensely affective and subjectively dissociated way – abstractly – is something I have been thinking about under the rubric of 'reproductive realism', and like the techno-positive/ist orientation, it is an insidious set of mannerisms that lead to the narrowing of the political space. Like with techno-positivism, this is a tendency that deflects critique – if the former designates it as a lack of engagement with complexity, the latter does this and identifies it as an expression of privilege. If we read both kinds of tendencies symptomatically, they're just different ways of escaping the social, or, certainly, trying not to think about social abstraction and the role it plays in our experience, artistic and otherwise. In that light, both technology and corporeality are two fantasies of imputed concreteness which offer an escape from all politics but the most metaphorical.

Sexuality, Whiteness, Feminism

Angela: Speaking of fantasies, Teixeira Pinto's recent essay 'Male Fantasies: The Sequel(s)' on fascism and sexuality discusses Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* (1977) as 'the sociological counter-part' to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972). Theweleit's discourse analysis of diaries kept by members of the Freikorps showed that the hatred for communism appeared as castration fear. Teixeira Pinto discusses more broadly fascism as partly a reaction to the threat posed by feminist demands (suffrage) and working-class women's public existence.[29] The same is witnessed today, she notes, as 'the exaggerated masculinity of fascist fantasies is the magnified form of "normal" sexual norms, whose maleness already entails denying that anything coded as "feminine" could be a legitimate dimension of social and political experience.' Crucially, and relating to the technology question above, this

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[29] See Ana Teixeira Pinto, 'Male Fantasies: The Sequel(s)', *e-flux journal* 76, October 2016, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/76/72759/male-fantasies-the-sequel-s/ where we read: 'The Freikorps men hated women, particularly working-class ones. They feared being swallowed by their shrieks, engulfed by their hordes. These imaginary assaults justified all forms of real aggression. In their diaries, members of the Freikorps fictionalized the killing of women, describing in lurid detail how bullets and bayonets penetrated their bodies, how hand grenades turned living, breathing beings into a "bloody mass." For order to be restored, women had to die gruesome deaths; only after all traces of their existence were gone could the world be made "safe and male again".'

fantasy 'finds its apex in the martialisation of artificial intelligence, personified as a distilled form of white-maleness-without-white-men' and the cyborg's realisation as 'smart city'.[30]

There are then numerous angles from which to pursue the fascism-gender-sex nexus, but my question is how to approach the latter from within contemporary feminist struggles, including those crossing through art and theory. There is certainly anti-fascist feminist activism, but if there is a body of theoretical work that we might call anti-fascist feminism, its history is scattered and unknown and mostly dealing with the twentieth century. And I don't think the 1975 debate between Adrienne Rich and Susan Sontag has received the attention it deserves in feminist art theory –with Rich arguing that feminism necessarily stands against authority either as fascism or other expressions of patriarchy and with Sontag defending certain expressions of 'authority', 'meritocracy' and 'hierarchy', insisting that 'the hope of abolishing authority as such is part of a childish, sentimental fantasy about the human condition.'[31] Donna Haraway's 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs' (1985) has found all sorts of interpretations, and my perception is that technology as such has become the ground for new divisions within feminism and LGBTQ struggles – indeed, a ground over which charges of fascistic attitudes currently fly. Re-constructing a (any) specific body through technology (medical, military, AI-based) is a material reality formed within capitalism, and it seems, so far, to lock us into dependency to capital's distributed fantasy of self-realisation, self-definition, and various other promises made to the 'self' as a private and privatised individual. That said, this abstraction – 'any body'- is at least questionable because in racialised capitalist patriarchies bodies are vastly unequal and subject to intersecting *hierarchies*, not merely 'differences'. We are, of course, aware of the *historicity* of nature, desires, needs, at least since

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[30] Teixeira Pinto observes: 'From this viewpoint, only male sexuality is "sexual," and all kinds of issues can be reframed as narratives of masculinity: the Left is seen as emasculated and lacking in libidinal energy; liberals are viewed as whiners; demands for inclusion are a symptom of (hysterical) oversensitivity; political correctness is castrating; the preoccupation with "local" politics is said to signal surrender and impotency. Teeming with male fantasies, the entertainment industry speculates that neither the Holocaust nor slavery would have happened if their victims had "manned up" and fought back […].' Ibid

[31] See Adrienne Rich, 'Feminism and Fascism: An Exchange', *The New York Review of Books*, 20 March 1975, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1975/03/20/feminism-and-fascism-an-exchange/, accessed 2 September 2018.

Marx but, at the same time, there is no *inherently* emancipatory technology in capitalism, as David Harvey stresses.[32] One issue for anti-fascist feminism is that contemporary fascist discourse plays both cards: speaking to a return to order and traditional gender roles, on the one hand, and promoting techno-fantasies of assisted supremacy, on the other, even more than historical fascism.

Besides this, there is always the issue of women in fascist movements. It's an old issue but also very contemporary, if one watches *Golden Dawn Girls* (Håvard Bustnes, 2017), where the party's daughter and surrogate leader, as her father is under trial, is proud of her Freudian library and studies Psychology. She loves and admires her father and continues his political work, but this also gives her political power and opportunities for self-realisation. We have the case of the fascist 'Colonel Barker', who proved to be a lesbian, from the 1920s in Britain.[33] And ultimately, if 'fascism promises a triumph of Spirit over the dismal material reality of the present', as put by Sven Lütticken, why wouldn't women as residents in this dismal material reality embrace this promise too?[34] Is it really a paradox that Milo Yiannopoulos is gay and that Alice Weidel is lesbian? We have much literature on the contradictions of capitalism, but much less on the contradictions of fascism, whereas they could be deployed strategically against it.

Larne: Does anything other than the possessive investment in whiteness permit the seemingly contradictory position of Milo Yiannopoulos and Alice Weidel as lesbian and gay fascists? We could also mention the LGBT league within the English Defence League (EDL) – but as Angela already suggested, LGBTQ histories are not necessarily progressive – so how much these figures mark a contradiction, or how this

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[32] For Harvey, 'there is no such thing as a good and emancipatory technology that cannot be co-opted and perverted into a power of capital'. See John Jipson and P.M. Jitheesh, 'There Is No Such Thing as Emancipatory Technology': Marxist Scholar David Harvey', *The Wire*, 9 February 2019, https://thewire.in/economy/david-harvey-marxist-scholar-neo-liberalism, accessed 11 February 2019.

[33] See Julie Wheelwright, ''Colonel' Barker: A Case Study in the Contradictions of Fascism', *Immigrants & Minorities*, Vol 8, Nos 1-2, 1989, pp 40–48. The 'Colonel', active in Britain's National Fascisti organisation, the abstract notes, 'was […] revealed as Valerie Arkell- Smith, a woman who had married her lover, Elfreda Haward, in a Brighton Parish church and literally convinced hundreds of men with her disguise.'

[34] Sven Lutticken, 'Who Makes the Nazis?', *e-flux journal* 76, October 2016, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/76/69408/who-makes-the-nazis/, accessed 2 September 2018

could be deployed against fascism is not clear to me right now. But this brings me onto the question of desire. In 2018, Andrea Long Chu's essay 'On Liking Women' caused much debate, as did Amia Srinivasan's 'Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?' partly written as a response.[35] At the center of this discussion was the relationship between desire and identity, which in Long Chu's essay focused on the relationship between political lesbianism and trans politics, and in Srinivasan's essay, focused on the desire of 'incels', short for 'involuntary celibates', a sexual identity which took shape online, mostly through Reddit, and formed a facet in the misogynistic murders committed by Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian.[36] To try and keep this as simple as possible, the central issue in celebrating one's identity or desires seems to be the loss of a political horizon, an issue that was clarified for me through conversation with the writer Hannah Proctor. This isn't to disavow celebrations of historically oppressed identities but to recognise that this can't be the end goal, because as Proctor describes, that runs the risk of living as if society has already been transformed.[37]

Along these lines, it was interesting to read the last section of Sontag's response to Rich, where she disavows aspects of feminism as anti-intellectual, criticising 'that wing of feminism that promotes the rancid and dangerous antithesis between mind ("intellectual exercise") and emotion ("felt reality")' because she sees the emphasis on the latter and excision of the former as cogent with fascistic tendencies.[38] This seems pertinent today, as already delineated in Marina's discussion of the aesthetic deployment of 'feels'. If Sontag saw feminism's communal drive as anti-individual and punitive, it was at the expense of her capacity to imagine a collective political subject. Therefore, I wouldn't want to repeat her argument against contemporary feminisms that stress feeling and vulnerability, and coincide with aspects of contemporary queer and affect theory. Instead, it seems worth

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[35] Andrea Long Chu, 'On Liking Women', *n+1* 30, Winter 2018, https://nplusonemag.com/issue-30/essays/on-liking-women/; Amia Srinivasan, 'Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?', *London Review of Books*, Vol 40, No 6, 22 March 2018, pp 5–10, https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n06/amia-srinivasan/does-anyone-have-the-right-to-sex, accessed 4 September 2018

[36] See David Futrelle, 'When a Mass Murderer Has a Cult Following', *The Cut*, 27 April 2018, https://www.thecut.com/2018/04/incel-meaning-rebellion-alex-minassian-elliot-rodger-reddit.html, accessed 11 September 2018

[37] The conversation took place on 19 October 2017, at Chisenhale Gallery, London, and its audio file is at https://chisenhale.org.uk/artists/hannah-black/, accessed 10 February 2019

[38] See Sontag and Rich, 'Feminism and Fascism: An Exchange', op cit

conceptualising those positions in relation to the self-possessing investment in whiteness which papers over the contradiction of being a lesbian fascist, and which guides the most repellent, entitled idea of desire, as articulated on dating apps where users request 'no rice, no spice, no chocolate, no curry' conceiving of this as simply personal preference rather than racism (here, of course, the tech question arises again).[39] The idea that this is OK rests upon the same principle that one must be true to oneself in a totally uncompromising way described earlier: the aspirational, bourgeois prioritisation of self-realisation and self-definition.

This also feels tied to the tonal polarisation of irony and sincerity. As in, the way that the affectless harsh metallised irony of the neo-fascists has been conceptualised, mistakenly, by writers such as Angela Nagle as the logical response to the affect-laden, vulnerable sincerity of what she derides as online identity politics.[40] We have to find somewhere between the misogynistic, overly rationalising disavowal of emotion and vulnerability and the naïve affirmation of those states as imminently true and undisputable. To come back to art, I think Hannah Black's 2017 exhibition at the Chisenhale Gallery articulated one way through this impasse.[41] The clay creatures and stuffed bears that littered the gallery conveyed a vulnerable, lonely quality and states of attachment, while the central text, *The Situation*, toggled between the enormity of world-scale politics and the intimacy of conversation between friends, all obliterated at the end of the show when the books were shredded. I see Black's work as offering us a means to think about identity, desire and political struggle in a way that is anti-solipsistic and communal.

Marina: It's interesting that you bring up Hannah Black's exhibition, Larne, as an example of someone essaying a much more tenuous and open mediation between the systemic and the affective (so, between cognitive registers and between scales), the corporeal and the collective. I would agree with your description of what she's doing,

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[39] Srinivasan discusses this in her essay. Also see the Runnymede Trust's report on persistent racism in the LGBT community, 'Black and Gay: The Persistence of Racism in the LGBT Community', 8 August 2017, https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/black-and-gay-the-persistence-of-racism-in-the-lgbt-community, accessed 4 September 2018.

[40] Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, Zero Books, London 2017

[41] See Hannah Black, 'Some Context', Chisenhale Gallery, London, 22 September – 10 December 2017, https://chisenhale.org.uk/exhibition/hannah-black/, accessed 17 September 2018.

and also agree with what you say about the necessity of working in such complex conceptual and material acknowledgement of what is at stake in any politics of the artwork, the institution, or of performing as an artist with a speculative relation to emancipatory politics – around race, around gender, around communism. It is only this kind of mediation that can really get under and disrupt the crystallisation of fascist dispositions of exacerbated privileged solipsism or of exclusionary collectives, as you've both described. What I also find so important about what Black was doing with *The Situation*, and other campaigns she's engaged in over the past couple of years, is negation (gestures of negation, performative negations). This maybe links to what I was saying earlier that, on the one hand, an attention to the political performativity of negativity suspends the sort of positivity of affect and the embrace of self-care that has become very current in some ways, and that can become a tendency to evacuate or marginalise contradiction or 'bad feeling', on the systemic as well as the personal scales (and disavow the fact that building the connections between those scales is the primary simultaneously affective and analytic task), and, on the other, it suspends the overdetermined space of *who* can perform as a critical subject.

We should remember here that the 'possessive investment in whiteness' is also the claim to the universal, the claim to criticality, and even the claim to deviance, as we have with ethnonationalist projects that emphasise their libertarian credentials as the heritage of Western universalism against the fanatical and backward brown hordes (Jasbir Puar has written particularly effectively on this, but the more generic term of 'pinkwashing' can be evoked).[42] So queer subjects use the investment in whiteness as license to perform deviance and unleash aggression against their critics, as with Yiannopoulos. And what is the 'God-Emperor Trump' if not the pretext for de-sublimation of fascism *imagined as* deviance, as transgression? Whereas in the space of the art institution what is perceived as really disturbing and far-reaching criticality becomes a language only available to white men, such as Jordan Wolfson, associating it with spectacular and solipsistic, capital-intensive self-loathing (a bit incely?). I am interested in how Black, but also Sondra Perry, Diamond Stingily and

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[42] Of course, the reverse can be observed in white ethnonationalist paradigms such as Russia with its state and populist anti-gay politics, or anywhere that organised religion rather than the Enlightenment is the scaffolding of ethnonationalist projects.

others, are reclaiming a critical language of abstraction and negativity as an immanent and material force of critique and associating it once again with affect and complexity, in their work but also in many cases in their activism. For me, this kind of negativity contests the universalism that lends such a powerful quality to possessive, and often innocently assumed, investments in whiteness, and here I think of the work of Sylvia Wynter and her insistence that the Human as a 'genre' defined by the overdetermined historical accident of white supremacist patriarchal capitalism (with the understanding that there's never been any other kind, so the redundant descriptors are unpacked for a reason) is something yet to be dismantled in our theoretical and critical practice, as a matter of urgency. Angela's reference to Haraway is relevant to that, I think, because at least in her 'Manifesto for Cyborgs', disaggregating the sedimented understanding of the human insofar as it legitimates domination over everything situated outside it was identified as a crucial agenda for socialist feminism.

Going back for a moment to this ruse of rationality, and Nagle, I am always struck by how politically oblivious such calls are, and how incredibly overdetermined they are – universalism is defined nostalgically as a norm whose racial and gender politics, and conditions of possibility, are constitutively disavowed, whereas the bad object of 'identity politics' is the irrational, dividing, narcissistic source of all disaffection with emancipation and a swing to fascist cultural politics. Rationality is always the red herring here – as if the contest over what constitutes reason and its others is not the very fulcrum of political antagonism. It's this kind of complacency that I also detect in discursive formations like 'xenofeminism' who fall some way behind Haraway by invoking 'science' and 'alienation' as a positive resource for an emancipatory gender politics without actually having much interest in querying that terminology, either from the history of feminism or any other anti-systemic political project.[43] Meanwhile, it is mainly white men (and a few right-wing women trolls, like the artist Deanna Havas) who are grandstanding for 'free speech' (code for rationality) on the internet and elsewhere, which claims universalism but rather transparently clamours for more space for themselves and others like them, often to express or support violently reactionary attitudes under the flimsy cover of 'debate'.

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[43] See 'Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation' by Laboria Cuboniks
http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/, accessed 11 September 2018.

Such passionate, *affective* commitments to possessive whiteness (and maleness, as the Theweleit reference makes so explicit) do parallel, I think, the only apparently neutral legitimacy afforded by discourses of technology to what are often *de facto*, if no *de jure* (someone like Peter Thiel being a *de jure* exception) enthusiasms for elitism and (anti-)social Darwinism proper to the libertarian capitalist mindspace. As Asad Haider has written, if there is to be any revolutionary, or for our purposes here, non-fascist, use of universalism, it has to be in its capacity to create identification across alterity and not in the subsumption or erasure of difference into an ascriptive or aspirational norm – when that difference itself reinforced by the relentless sorting operations of structural violence that operate precisely through the attachment to norms.[44] Here I would maybe query, or perhaps just qualify, the undesirability of living *as if* society has already been transformed. The risk of complacency is certainly present there, but that kind of paradoxical temporality also seems inextricable from the intimate register of any transformative politics. If you can't relate that transformation to your own experience, then the given certainly seems far more unchangeable and unassailable; natural, in other words.

And it's the claim to diversity of opinion that levels all real-life disparities in both power and access to legible articulation, and evacuates the space of debate of any actual political resonance, which is such an effective diversion from the actual connections between far-right discourses e.g. online or in the art world and the street and institutional politics that enact them on a widespread basis, as is obvious with the transition from Pepe to Trump to mass deportations in the US. Nothing can more clearly announce the gendered and racialised insulation of whiteness, and white maleness foremost, than the notion that there is zero connection between far-right discourse about destroying other people, and the actual - systematic or punctual - destruction of those people. I am thinking here of all the disingenuous, uninformed defenses of the erstwhile fascist art gallery in London in the name of diversity of opinion, but also how the space of art is particularly prone to such positions, and how they never really go away, regardless of the political situation. I mean, you'd think in the current global moment, as well as in a country where Golden Dawn has enjoyed relatively broad popular support and where violent state suppression of migrants and migrant solidarity movements often operates under the 'horseshoe' theory that

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[44] Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump,* Verso, London, 2018

extreme left and extreme right must both be brought to heel (though in practice it is only ever the former pole which is targeted), you wouldn't necessarily expect to have the Athens Biennale of 2018 reiterating precisely those discourses of de-contextualised 'extremes' but in a totally idiotic, aestheticised way, citing 'the gym, the office, the tattoo studio, the dating website, the migration office, the shopping mall, the nightclub, the church, the dark room' as all spaces where we may indulge in 'the pleasure and discomfort evoked by revolt and reaction'.[45]

The scale and range of antagonisms, and the potential of critique

AD: A number of points have been raised in exploring here the possibility of an art theory as anti-fascist thought and praxis. First, if fundamental aspects of fascism exist already in the everyday life of racialised, patriarchal capitalism, the liberal art world's anxiety over the confident re-organisation of these elements as fascism should be exposed as hypocrisy. Second, both the technology question and the discussion of sexuality, whiteness and feminism introduce the issue of form, of abstraction, and the absence of a safe position generated by default through specific processes of identification. Third, an anti-fascist art theory would not be reducible to critical examinations of aesthetics (Leni Riefenstahl, the contested case of a woman whose aesthetic creativity served Nazism, was at the core of the Rich-Sontag debate) but must confront also the material dissemination of ideology. There is nothing simple about this, it's not a matter of intentions or institutional vigilance. An institution may well *not* invite an artist who supports the Alt-Right, but the attention economy is too wide and full of surprises. There is effectively no protection from being at some point counted among 'the useful idiots of the art world'.[46]

Today, art as the attention economy re-establishes the 'anything goes' of postmodern open-endedness on the ideological level. But this 'anything goes' is scripted within the capitalist art world's commitment to competition. The accommodation of Alt-Right positions can appear 'original', and even have a certain

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[45] See 'Athens Biennale 2018: Anti-', *Athens Biennial*, 6 May 2018, http://athensbiennale.org/en/news/athens-biennale-2018-anti/, accessed 14 September 2018

[46] Megan Nolan, 'Useful Idiots of the Art World', *The Baffler*, 8 March 2017, https://thebaffler.com/latest/ld50-nolan, accessed 7 September 2018

shock value, which is, ultimately, market value, either for individuals or institutions. The useful idiots exist, but so do intelligent fascists, and liberals who may self-identify as antifascists and yet embrace the illusion of centrist politics or art as 'apolitical' (which *any* Deanna Havas or Lucia Diego, owner of LD50, proves as quite political), or as a sacred context for 'free speech': that Jonathan Jones, in *The Guardian*, stood in support of LD50 on these grounds is not incidental but rather illuminates the carefully maintained terrain of ideological hegemony in which antifascist art theory must intervene.[47] Overall, the art field has few idiots, I believe, and many who commit their intellect to the visibility-equals-survival rat race – both individuals and institutions. This is why resisting the current legitimation of fascism, in which the art field does take part, is a very complex operation.

So, one question for anti-fascist art theory is: what kind of vocal collectivity would counter the creeping fascist collectivity? Is it a matter of alliances? Where would these alliances be sought, given that *realpolitik,* majoritarian democracy as such stands without protection mechanisms against fascism?[48] In such a context, should we fear that anti-fascism may end up being just another 'anti' – an excuse for most on the left spectrum (which may oppose neoliberalism but has largely helped naturalise capitalist values) to identify yet another temporary anomaly, another glitz?

Fascism is not nihilism or aestheticisation or irony or stupidity gone morally wrong, and in these concluding lines, it's worth reminding ourselves what fascism is about. Fascism is a *historically evolving* politics that forges collectivities of social hatred and purity and acts on the principle of supremacy; it can claim to be an answer to 'over-population' and scarcity, or, conversely, to the falling fertility rates of a 'nation'; encountered in the far end of the right (with all that this implies), it is a particular way of organising and realising power over its identified others, but can often recruit through the promise of 'fairer' distribution. It straddles therefore

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[47] Jonathan Jones, 'No One Should Demand the Closure of Galleries – Not Even for Far Right Artworks', *The Guardian*, 22 February 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2017/feb/22/art-galleries-free-speech-ld50-dalston, accessed 3 November 2018

[48] Tellingly, the 'European Parliament resolution on the rise in neo-fascist violence in Europe', 23 October 2018, comes after years of documented violence incited by the far right in the continent. The Resolution is at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=MOTION&reference=P8-RC-2018-0481&language=EN, accessed 3 November 2018.

recognition and distribution – it's part of its appeal. It mobilises a community spirit, an organisation of 'bonds' (as 'fascism' suggests also etymologically) normally supervised by 'charismatic' leadership. It offers a composite worldview where tradition and nostalgia meet technological 'progress' in a politics of justified extermination. Essentially, this is what anti-fascist theory, including that developed through art, is up against. This is where arises the potential of anti-fascism as critique.

Yet, despite much public talk to the opposite, people in the art field often seem to believe that their politics is merely discursive, or exploratory, and ultimately without social impact - unless a scandal comes up, who cares about art apart from those who make a living or profit from it? For impact, go to the voting booth or a demo, support or oppose an army - whereas art has the license to be business as usual. I see an anti-fascist art theory as praxis not only confronting the illusion of 'business as usual' but also exposing what 'business as usual' has been. It is an effort to put together the big picture of this art-field reality, elucidate its emergence, and openly attack the social and economic forces that perpetuate it. Anti-fascist art theory must be the end of naïveté in facing the scale and range of antagonisms at play, which I understand this conversation to have been about.