

## FROM THE EDITORS

We have a new type of rule now. Not one man rule, or rule of aristocracy, or plutocracy, but of small groups elevated to positions of absolute power by random pressures and subject to political and economic factors that leave little room for decision. They are representatives of abstract forces who've reached power through surrender of self. The iron-willed dictator is a thing of the past. There will be no more Stalins, no more Hitlers. The rulers of this most insecure of all worlds are rulers by accident, inept, frightened pilots at the controls of a vast machine they cannot understand, calling in experts to tell them which buttons to push.

This excerpt from William Burroughs's 1970 poem "Ah-Pook the Destroyer" reverberates more than ever in late capitalism. As the world appears increasingly fragmented and chaotic, even the positivist social sciences with their technologies of oracular predictions seem to be purely imaginative exercises as they fail to diagnose even the most immediate outcomes of political and social processes. "Who is in control?" seems to be the question of our days. The latest rise of right-wing ideologies and their seizure of state apparatuses already weakened by several decades of neoliberal reforms signals a transformation of the neoliberal global order, a transformation that has yet to be analyzed.

Today the broader historical, economic, cultural, and political contours of this possibly new period within capitalism are becoming increasingly visible, while at the same time historical parallels are being drawn with the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1930s, with tsarism, and with Stalinism. There is a general sense that history repeats itself. But history's repetitions—via a temporality endemic to capitalism, one of perpetual crises and recoveries—seem not merely farcical today, but comical and tragic all at once. In this light, it is imperative to historicize our contemporary repetitions of history.

*ARTMargins* is committed to a dialectic of contemporaneity and historicity. We conceive of contemporary culture as a historical condition, while at the same time we see contemporary relevance in historical studies and documents. Such a historical understanding of the contemporary might help us find answers to the question “Who is in control?” and ultimately challenge the constitution of “this most insecure of all worlds.” We do not believe that the answer is to be sought within the disciplinary confines of art history alone, or within the prevalent conception of art as a sphere detached from the social totality. Rather, we want to examine the discipline of art history and the sphere of art alike as constituted by, and constitutive of, the social totality, a term that for us includes both social production and reproduction, technological and scientific development, as well as politics, ideology, and culture.

The current issue of *ARTMargins* contains a roundtable edited by Karen Benezra. In issue 5:3 (October 2016), we published the first English translation of the seminal essay “Art, Society/Text” (originally published, in Slovene, in the journal *Problemi-Rasprave* [*Problems-Debates*] in 1975). Introduced by art historian Nikola Dedić, who situates the text in nascent Yugoslav poststructuralism, that document considers a materialist analysis of art and literature by inquiring into art as both rooted within a determinate society and traversed by the organization of class struggle. Given the pertinence of this approach today, both in terms of reinvigorating a materialist critique of “symbolic forms” and for its political commitment, we asked a number of critical theorists to comment on “Art, Society/Text.” The commentators explore the theoretical and institutional consequences of the *Problemi-Rasprave* editorial's claim on the renewal of dialectical and historical materialism.

If, in a Benjaminian sense, every document of civilization is also a

document of barbarism, then the promise of a document lies less in its capacity to serve as a historical testimony of victory than in its ability to reactivate a failed historical event in its potential for the present. This is the impulse behind our publication of the first English translation of Iranian art student Amir Esbati's article "The Student Movement of May 1968 and the Fine Art Students" in the Document section. The text was originally published in Tehran in 1980, in the journal *Kār va honar* [*Labor and Art*]. Esbati's article, along with the revolutionary posters that Morad Montazami discusses in his introduction, reflects a post-revolutionary moment in which the Islamist co-optation of the revolution had yet to be acknowledged by society.

A similarly disjointed temporality lies at the heart of Benjamin Murphy's contribution, "Juan Downey's Ethnographic Present." Murphy argues that if the synchronous reception and transmission of the feedback loop in Downey's videos on the Yanomami people cancels any sense of the past and the future, another type of feedback—playback—offers the potential of situating the Yanomami as historical subjects. Murphy argues that the temporal lag between transmission and reception that playback offers resituates the anthropological object in the historical temporality of the subject and opens up the possibility of "coevalness" between the anthropologist and the people studied.

Christopher Schmidt's "Vik Muniz's *Pictures of Garbage* and the Aesthetics of Poverty" is similarly concerned with questions of medium, materiality, and representation, albeit this time in relation to a social "other": "waste," or the devaluation of labor by capital. Schmidt discusses Muniz's 2008 series *Pictures of Garbage*, in which the artist photographs the garbage pickers—*catadores*—on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Muniz's intention, according to Schmidt, is to resubjectivize "dead" labor, to turn the *catadores* into historical subjects by representing their daily ordeal. Yet Schmidt finds that the photographs ultimately become doubly objectified: the waste commodity appears to be more alive than the trash pickers themselves, while at the same time Muniz's representations of the trash pickers circulate as a commodity in the art market.

At least since the advent of Pop Art, traffic between the art world and the world of commodities has not been a one-way street. But what are the conditions that allow for an artistic engagement with consumer culture and its material waste? This is the question that informs Alex

Kitnik’s review of the exhibition *International Pop*, which toured from Minneapolis to Dallas and Philadelphia in 2015–16. If North American Pop Art reflects an ironic reworking of the materials of “low culture” as high art, *International Pop*, according to Kitnik, demonstrates that Pop does not necessitate an affluent society. Conceived in an international dimension, Pop is marked by geopolitical difference and punctured by localities and their varying relationships to global consumer culture.

A key concern of *ARTMargins* has always been the question of the margins—whether geopolitical, structural, economic, cultural, or textual. It is through the textual margins constitutive of a “core text” that Faride Merib intervenes in this issue’s Artist Project section. *Colophon as a Marginal Witness* explores the colophon as a conceptual figure, a formal device, a historical document, and, more specifically, as “a marginal witness to an authorial insurrection in publishing” in Venezuela. Rarely read and almost always ignored at the end of a book, the colophon bears witness to the conditions of its publishing. In Merib’s work, the colophon appears through traces and fragments, almost always as an ornament, yet one that, like any witness, says either too much or too little.

////////////////////

On August 22, our managing editor of four years, Nick Pici, left *ARTMargins* after defending his doctoral dissertation. We are very sad to lose him from the team, but we also understand that it is time for him to move on to new challenges. Yet, as editors of this journal, we do not want to let him go without a few words of appreciation, lifting for a brief moment the shroud of anonymity that generally surrounds the managing editor of an academic journal. To all of us, Nick was, and will remain, indispensable. His extraordinary ability to maintain a bird’s eye view of the editorial process while at the same time being intimately acquainted with every article submission down to the proverbial “t” soon became legendary among us. As one of the editors notes, “I cannot think of an inline query in an advanced, copy-edited manuscript that Nick did not help to resolve.” A passionate organizer who could be picky where necessary, yet generous and flexible whenever the situation allowed it, Nick showed the most remarkable patience for the quirks of (some) authors and, yes, editors. As we were trying to

come up with a phrase or expression that might most memorably sum up Nick's tenure, one especially came to mind: he never dropped the ball. Not on a single manuscript, not on a review query that we needed to chase, and not on that copyright issue that seemed unresolvable. For this, for never dropping the ball on us, we thank him warmly and wish him all the best for the future.

#### THE EDITORS