The Photofilmic

Entangled Images in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture

Brianne Cohen & Alexander Streitberger (eds)

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Hilde Van Gelder

Part 1. *Inventing the Possible*: A "Curatorial" Path

In a recently published interview with Victor Burgin, David Campany brings to mind one of the artist's most remarkable statements of the past years. On the occasion of the exhibition of his projection work, *Hôtel D* in the Hôtel-Dieu Saint-Jacques in Toulouse (2009), Burgin emphasized that "... the most important work that art can attempt is to provide alternatives to the hegemonic popular common sense created by industrialized mass culture and propagated by the media." (Burgin and Campany, 2014: 139)[1] Such a noble ambition runs as a guiding principle through many photographic and filmic works of art produced today. These artworks seek to trigger our "political" imagination in the sense that Chantal Mouffe defines the term. (Mouffe, 2007: n.p.) Understood in this way, the political is not to be taken literally, on the level of everyday party politics in a society. Mouffe instead suggests a conception of the political in the larger, figurative sense: as a community-building concept. Whenever a work of art succeeds in

catalyzing its spectator in this "demotic" way, (Burgin and Campany, 2014: 138) it becomes a space for imagining new potentialities with regard to how life can be viably organized on this planet.

How can we, as theorists of photography, seek to contribute in making such artworks achieve their objectives? Is it possible for these works to truly reach a wider audience? Is it realistic for us, theorists, to facilitate that mediation in order to probably—who knows—influence some of the politicians who possess the power to enforce changes through new regulations and laws? A much heard counter-argument is that visual art can very well intend to improve social cohesion, reduction of violence or ecological consciousness, and aim at remediating a democratic deficit, but that it will always fall short, at the relatively inoperative level of utopian ideas. Even stronger, many researchers in the field of photographic theory endorse the position that it is crucial for artworks to not seek to cross that very threshold. Art's place in society, such critics claim, consists exactly in its capacity to address metaphorically certain topics that cannot be discussed as readily or as easily in other contexts.[2]

Preserving for the visual arts that very delicate space of discursive freedom is crucial indeed. Art should never directly seek to become involved in concrete politics. Too many historical examples have demonstrated that this only leads to a diminishing or negating of the artwork's potential or even its iconoclastic destruction. Yet instead, to recall Mouffe's position, visual art can develop a space for an agora in which an "'agonistic' struggle" can be pursued, and in which "dissensus" is considered a constructive social tool. (Mouffe, 2007: n.p.) That said, a driving force behind visual art's "agonistic struggle" will always be the hope that the message, or at least a part of it, will eventually seep through to a level of concrete politics. Many artists and critics, it is true, will never cease trying to achieve this—and I reckon myself among these "fools" (as the more skeptical thinkers describe them).

Over the past years, I have spent much energy and undertaken multiple efforts to walk the thin line of engaging in "political" debate. I have taken seriously the proposed potentiality-space of socially committed artworks, as an imaginative space for reflecting upon our common future. A point of departure has been the question: if utopia inevitably needs to be assimilated to a realm of the impossible, where then is the possible to be situated?

One way of pursuing this space of the possible has been to step out of theory and to proceed to practice. In 2012, Marta Gili, director of the Jeu de Paume in Paris, proposed developing a project for a video library. During the fall and winter of 2014-2015, Marta Ponsa Salvador (senior curator at Jeu de Paume) and I presented as co-curators a selection of twenty-six works under the title *Inventer le possible. Une vidéothèque éphémère / Inventing the Possible. An Ephemeral Video Library*.[3] Marta Ponsa Salvador had composed the first edition of Jeu de Paume's *Ephemeral Video Library* project in 2010 under the title *Faux Amis* (*False Friends*). It focused on the representation of history in contemporary video, as seen from the perspective of memory, identity, and loss. Mingling documentary and fiction, the selected works questioned notions of historical reality through narrative forms, which, far from laying any claim to the "veracious," chose to be "falsifying."

Similarly premised upon concepts of the "falsifying narration" and the "power of the false," (Deleuze, 1985/2013: 131-142) our second edition of the video library set out to explore the potentiality-space between history and narrative—between *history* and *story*. The works included in the second video library explored, with varying degrees of humor or sense of tragedy, our bafflement in the face of successive utopias throughout the 20th century. Our hypothesis was that without the hope for a possible, "better" future—beyond utopia—the brutal abruptness of a return to reality would be all too unbearable. This is a point Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño—whose work inspired the project—presses home in his "First Infrarealist Manifesto:" "We dreamed of utopia and we woke up screaming." (Bolaño, 1976: n.p.)

We selected documentaries and fictional films, animated films, experimental and performance videos, all products of the new millennium that somehow seek to continue the—often intense—dialogue concerning the reality, movements, and events of the preceding century. Our "ephemeral video library" was intended, above all, as a provisional archive of such videos, made in extremely varied contexts and territories: from the Kuwait desert to the Amazon rainforest, and including northern Canada, Bangladesh, Senegal, and Cambodia.[4] With narratives often bathing in mystery, these videos put our epoch on display, with all its doubts and uncertainties. Their addressed time frame turns out to be equally rich in possibilities: the themes tackled by these works are frequently in the conditional perfect tense—"this would have been"—but also, and most often, in the desire-triggering future perfect of "this will have been." (Baudelaire, 2012: 6) In combination,

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those two tenses fracture the linearity of the relationship among past, present, and future, and through fiction, create a zone of indeterminacy.

Specters

In what follows, I investigate how the photofilmic structure of a selection of these works not only contributes to shaping that zone, but also helps to formulate new insights that arise from within this potentiality-space of indeterminacy. A key example is Pauline Horovitz's *Des châteaux en Espagne* [*Castles in Spain* or *Castles in the Air*] (2013). (fig. 1) In a humorously bittersweet vein—with the help of a soundtrack that integrates Klezmer as well as French and Spanish folk or tear-jerker music—this work takes us back to the atrocious fate of the Jewish people in the 20th century. Horovitz weaves a personal family saga into the film's narrative by focusing on her father's fascination with Spain: "the only country in Europe that decided not to deport its Jewish citizens during the Second World War," she sharply reminds us in the opening sequence of the film. It turns out that the one significant piece of advice that her father continuously insisted upon, during the artist's entire childhood, was to have one's suitcase ready at all times. From his perspective, being "flexible" in life means being prepared to leave everything behind at once, to abandon one's past, and to choose to live.

This state of mind and of being—or as Jacques Horovitz phrases it: "to leave to live [*partir pour vivre*]"—appears profoundly embedded in Jewish culture up until now. Though at several intervals the film treats its loaded subject matter in a treacherously

Fig. 1. Pauline Horovitz, *Des châteaux en Espagne* [*Castles in Spain* or *Castles in the Air*], 2013, 26 min., DV, color, photogram. Courtesy of the artist. © Pauline Horovitz.

"light" way, the spectator becomes aware of how deeply the traumas of the past still haunt us today. This is particularly the case when Horovitz films her father from a fixed camera perspective. Thus, she creates a photofilmic point of view since, as a result, the viewer is obliged to observe his face moving in and out of the camera, and to listen to the sound shifting back and forth from a dialogue between father and daughter to a mere voiceover when both are off screen. These intervals of reduced visibility and confused audibility contribute to what the work wants to tell us.

In French, "châteaux en Espagne" means building "castles in the air." The original phrasing thus remains untranslatable. Spain was indeed a relatively safe haven for Jews during World War II, and Spain does possess magnificent castles built on towering rocks—almost as if they are hovering in the air, or space shuttles about to take off to some heavenly paradise. The film, as a result, documents them amply.[5] Horovitz's deeply moving work warns us that, for Jews, it remains extremely difficult to believe in a truly safe haven, in a place where they might live quietly and peacefully.

More generally, her work demonstrates that the building of a cohesive society, based on an equitable social contract, calls for more than just collective citizen determination. Our vigilance must not falter in the face of intolerance, imperialism, and megalomania ever-present in our societies. Specters from the past loom as warnings against atrocities that none of us can be sure will cease to exist in the future. The recent tragic attacks on the Jewish Museum in Brussels, the Paris kosher supermarket, and the synagogue in Copenhagen have, unfortunately, demonstrated this still again. Yet, *Castles in Spain* encourages us to dream, and to devise alternatives.

The same is true for Theo Eshetu's *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* (2009). (fig. 2) Originally designed as a fifteen-channel television-monitor installation, but displayed as a single-channel projection of fifteen moving images in the exhibition's black box, this work demonstrates the reparative impact of activists who resisted being complicit with the long-running scandal of Italy's unwillingness to return the Axum monument to Ethiopia. Eshetu documents the reconstruction—on its original site in Axum, Ethiopia—of the so-called "Roman" Axum Obelisk, more than seventy years after it was looted by Benito Mussolini's troops. This reuniting of the Roman Obelisk with its Axum twin was done, quite belatedly one must say, in execution of the post-World War II Treaty between Italy and Ethiopia to restitute all spoils of war. Eshetu beautifully writes about this return of a major "African symbol" as marking "the birth of a new era" for the continent, adding: "[n]o longer

Fig. 2. Theo Eshetu, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, 2009, 26 min. 46 sec., video installation made for 15 monitors, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist. © Theo Eshetu. Single-channel installation view in the second room of the exhibition *Inventer le possible. Une vidéothèque éphémère / Inventing the Possible. An Ephemeral Video Library* at Jeu de Paume, Paris (14 October – 8 February 2015). Photo: Adrien Chevrot. © Jeu de Paume.

a reminder of colonial conflict and postcolonial debate, it now stands in its original site as emblem of new balance in North-South relations." (Eshetu, 2014: n.p.)

In *Inventing the Possible*, Eshetu's work magnificently echoed the contextual setting of the Jeu de Paume—on the Place de la Concorde, facing the Luxor Obelisk. Indeed, during workshops I gave at the Jeu de Paume for various French audiences (such as teachers, retired people, school children), the "obelisk issue" was much debated. It needs, of course, specification—and this is rather common knowledge in France—that, contrary to the Axum obelisk, the Luxor obelisk was not looted from its original setting. Instead, it was "donated" to France by the Khedive of Egypt, Muhammed Ali, in the early 1830s. It was installed in its current setting on the Place de la Concorde in October 1836. As a consequence, France has never felt compelled to return it, since it is considered as a special gift—a "tribute." Initially, moreover, the viceroy of Egypt had even been so generous as to offer two Luxor obelisks! The second one, though, never left Luxor. In 1981, under François Mitterand, it was officially decided to "politely decline" that second gift and definitively leave the twin obelisk in its original setting.

It needs emphasis that, in the case of the Roman Axum obelisk, nature came to give a helping hand: struck by lightning in May 2002 and badly damaged after that, it had to be dismantled anyhow. That unexpected turn of events helped speed up the restitution process. All these elements, as one may imagine, have provided

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food for thought, and the work's compositional structure stimulated that debate in a most fascinating way. It develops from a simultaneous projection of fifteen different Ethiopian narrative paintings, telling the story of the Queen of Sheba, into an assemblage of an equal amount of staged video clips of the same foundational myth. Subsequently displayed are excerpts from black-and-white footage of the Axum site before it was looted. Then, as soon as Eshetu begins showing the journey of the Obelisk back home, the projected fragments on the fifteen screens increasingly interact more directly. They finally merge into one single photofilmic image at the triumphal moment when the obelisk is almost completely reinstalled.

As already mentioned, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* sometimes released heavy emotions from its audience, and incited visitors to potentially look differently at the Luxor obelisk on Place de la Concorde, when leaving the Jeu de Paume's building. The project's overall display strongly encouraged such personal involvement. (fig. 3) In the first and main room, people were allowed to discover the works at their own pace, and to engage deeply with the images on a temporal level: it took eight and a half hours to watch all the selected videos—but entrance was free, so people could come and go as much as they pleased. Spectators were actively invited to engage in independent thinking, since the exhibition space provided personal computers with a special interface through which visitors could view

Fig. 3. Installation view (principal room) of the exhibition *Inventer le possible. Une vidéothèque éphémère / Inventing the Possible. An Ephemeral Video Library* presented at Jeu de Paume, Paris between 14 October 2014 and 8 February 2015. Photo: Romain Darnaud. © Jeu de Paume.

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works independently. As an open-ended structure, the ephemeral video library thus offered complete freedom of viewing choice. Within this variable cluster, unexpected encounters between viewers and works could, and did, take place. Quite often, visitors responded that they had not only learned another (historical) perspective on today's reality, but had also glimpsed potentially different futures than ones they had envisioned before entering the exhibition.

Animals

Several of the works selected for *Inventing the Possible* address the question of a power paradoxically regained by nature, in an era increasingly identified via the complex notion of the Anthropocene, or a period when human activity has affected the ecosphere so significantly that nature has begun to react in unpredictable ways.[6] Yet, this has not only led to visualizing impotence: displaying horrific situations may also provide inspiration for a more hopeful outcome, as human and animal life recovers its strength at the most desperate of moments. A fascinating work in this context is Wim Catrysse's *MSR* (2012) (fig. 4), a single-channel video installation. The approximately fifteen-minute film depicts the same, at first sight, completely desolate desert landscape. During the first six-and-a-half minutes, Catrysse almost exclusively uses a long traveling shot. When, however, stray dogs appear in the scene—walking around, lying on the ground, resisting the strong winds of a heavy sandstorm—the camera stops and

Fig. 4. Wim Catrysse, *MSR*, 2012, 14 min. 18 sec., HD video, 16/9, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist. © Wim Catrysse.

continues to film from a static, photofilmic perspective for the remainder of the film, emphasizing the dogs' connection with the land. The viewer feels completely disoriented: one knows that this must be somewhere, during some time on this planet, yet the setting appears so post-apocalyptic that it is hard to believe that these are actual living conditions in some place on earth. The scavenger dogs rather appear as uncanny survivors in the aftermath of a global disaster. It is only at the end that one obtains confirmation of human presence in what turns out to be the Kuwaiti desert's Main Supply Route to the strategic military airbase of Ali Al Salem (to which the title of the work refers).

Curator and writer Anne Pontégnie emphasizes the fact that, in Catrysse's works, the viewer experiences a strong sense of loss of control. The reason is that our generalized conception of a supposedly Cartesian, "watertight subjectivity" appears increasingly to fall apart in the film. (Pontegnie, 2014: 8) Building on Bruno Latour's influential "Attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto" (2010), she defends an art that irrevocably and without regrets, leaves behind "the modern project." (7) In her view, the ecological crisis has convincingly demonstrated that the destiny of humans and non-humans from now on needs to be intricately linked once again, on an equal basis, and with full respect for the non-human inhabitants of this planet.

Part 2. Imagining New (Human) Rights: An Interdisciplinary Trajectory

Although these experiments in the field of curatorship may strive to be as democratic as possible, the slumbering activist in me says that they may not sufficiently allow one to leave his or her comfort zone. In that sense, one cannot but agree with Hans den Hartog Jager, who recently caused major controversy by polemically accusing curators of contemporary visual art of being "naïve," engaging in a "ritual dance" in which they appear not to realize that "their 'commitment' is simply an integral part of the carousel of art production, subventions, and (museum) exhibitions"—a "protected deer park that society ever-increasingly experiences as exotic." (Den Hartog Jager, 2014: C11 [author's translation]) Of course, Den Hartog Jager is aware that "[a]rt, good art always exists by grace of a paradox: from within its own system it constantly needs to try to keep on changing that very system—and preferably also immediately the world." (2014: 183 [author's

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translation]) This is also why Renzo Martens objected to Den Hartog Jager's criticism on behalf of a contemporary curating community, arguing that committed visual art needs a "space," and that for European society, this space is largely created and preserved by curators. (Martens, 2014: 9 [author's translation])

One potential way out of the aforementioned deadlock that contemporary visual curatorship finds itself in, has been the suggestion that my own discipline—contemporary art history, cultural/media studies, or the larger field of visual art research—may need to look for help from others. As a result, my ambition has been to explore possibilities beyond curatorship, and to investigate under what conditions the visual arts can rise above the relatively inoperative level of "a virtual community between spectators," as Sharon Sliwinski has eloquently called it, in order to realize an impact on the ground. (Sliwinski, 2011: 5) The working hypothesis has been that these art pieces may be able to succeed in moving beyond their own impotence by taking seriously the potentially legal claim that they express.

This has led me a long way back in time, to my very first intellectual fascination as a teenager, which is the field of law—more specifically human rights law (I was trained as a lawyer before decisively turning towards art history). A critical reader will readily object that seeking to remediate the utopian impotence of one's own discipline by making it join hands with yet another utopia (that of human rights), may soon prove to be unproductive. Probably so, but so far the adventure has proven to be fascinating and with some small success—all the more since I am pursuing this research in collaboration with Eva Brems, who is an internationally established human rights scholar at Ghent University. In September 2014, we presented the first results of this joint research at the 10th anniversary conference of the European Society of International Law (ESIL) in Vienna. We were thrilled to discover that our paper was received with interest from this completely non-art world audience of predominantly legal scholars and lawyers.

For the concrete legal proposals that we made there, I refer to that paper.[7] Yet, it is appropriate in this context to reference the landmark project that the argument of our paper builds on. I am referring to an installation realized in 2012 by the political philosopher, photography theorist, curator, and filmmaker Ariella Azoulay. At both STUK Contemporary Arts Centre in Leuven (Belgium) and the Center for Digital Art in Holon (Israel), Azoulay's projection work *Civil Alliance* (2012) was on view inside a prototypical black box. (fig. 5) This 52:36 minutes-long

Fig. 5. Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History*, 2012. Courtesy of Ariella Azoulay. Installation view at STUK, Leuven, Spring 2012. © Liesbeth Bernaerts / STUK.

work portrays people of mixed Palestinian and Jewish background, dressed in mid-20th-century clothing, who gather around a circular table depicting a map of Mandatory Palestine. The camera either zooms in on them, or films the table from above, thus creating a strong photofilmic effect for the viewer. The group recites short stories in Arabic and Hebrew about civilian engagements and agreements achieved between January 1947 and May 1948. These narrated fragments testify to a joint civilian will to imagine a peaceful coexistence in the various villages that are marked, one by one, with dots on a map.

Azoulay provided a larger context for *Civil Alliance* via mostly black-and-white photographs encountered in formerly undisclosed Zionist archives (such as Israel's Government Press Office, abbreviated as GPO), which she both installed on the projection room's exterior walls and reproduced in a foldable booklet that was available for free in the exhibition room. When it was completely folded, the booklet's cover displayed only part of a photographic image, which shows a man in a costume firmly holding someone's hand. Upon opening, one finds that the second person is an Arabic man. A further revelation from the booklet is a caption that reads: "Ya'acov Epstein holding hands with Jabri Amin El Haj during a visit of Jewish settlers from Zichron Ya'acov at the Arab village of Subrin. Photographer: Zoltan Kluger, GPO 20.01.1940." (Azoulay, 2012: n.p.) From the left-hand side of the picture, which

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reveals a third person's arm or back, one sees that the two men were not alone in the room. Azoulay not only includes the complete photograph in the installation but also comments on this in the booklet, writing that the presence of other men provides a "public meaning" to these two men's encounter "that transcends their personal relations." She adds that "these openly public gestures of proximity turn them into a promise made in view of witnesses, one of whom is the photographer." Thus, the picture unfolds before our eyes as a strong image of a "civil alliance."

In the exhibition, Azoulay combined such images with self-written, mural text fragments. Titled *Potential History* (2012), the sequence began with a contemporary color photograph of an encrusted wooden box that was looted from the former Palestinian village of Deir Yassin. The mural text told us the following:

> The agreement between the inhabitants of Deir Yassin and Giv'at Shaul was violated not by local residents but rather by Jewish militiamen. This wooden box was looted from one of the houses in Deir Yassin and kept in the home of one of the Jewish assailants. For years its provenance was an open secret in the house where it was kept. It is now in my keeping. I regard it as a priceless deposit placed in my keeping until the story of this place be rewritten, until life as it was known here until the curse of partition took hold of it would be retold, and conditions would transpire for founding a shared museum—to tell how the national war machine ground to dust civil hopes for shared life. In this box borrowed time is stored.

Now in Azoulay's possession, the box became a tool for her to claim, both on the walls and in the exhibition's booklet, the "right not to be a perpetrator." She has, on the same occasion, pleaded for forgiveness by making a case for the universal right of each and every one on this planet "to imagine one's future."

Looting and destroying civilian property under circumstances of war is a violation of international law (cf. Geneva Convention). A plea for the universal introduction of such a new "right not to be a perpetrator" therefore does already have an embryonic legal foundation. For Azoulay, basing herself on the metaphorical potential of this tiny box, it allows her to not only express her firm will, but also to claim her fundamental right to no longer participate in the continuation of such atrocities today. She also pleads for an altogether "new declaration of human rights," which should not only protect victims of human rights violations, but also protect individuals who believe that they are susceptible of becoming (co-)perpetrators of a

human rights violation—even if only passively, not actively committing the violation. These individuals should be conferred a concrete right to refuse contributing to such perpetrating acts. She writes: a truly workable "declaration of human rights […] should be based on the assumption that every time a right is violated, another right is also violated with it—the right not to be a perpetrator." (Azoulay, 2013: 42) Ariella Azoulay has thus become an influential defender of a committed visual art practice and writing, which she sees as a quite powerful tool to plant the seeds of new human rights. While combining a photofilmic video work with not only historical photographs, but also a color photograph she made herself, she aims at pushing our spectatorial imagination as far as possible. With Azoulay, I believe, indeed, that proposals for visual art to take up a concrete commitment may be less wild than one would at first think. Human rights have, historically, always resulted from growing social consensus, and often in direct response to indignation about stories that have come to see the light of day.

Samuel Moyn, in the catalogue for the exhibition *Newtopia: The State of Human Rights*, which was held in Mechelen (Belgium) in 2012, urges human rights law to reinvent itself by moving beyond its currently reigning standards. If human rights law finds itself in an impasse today, he argues, this is because it relies too much on judges in the courts and has insufficient contact with "grassroots" movements. (Moyn, 2012: 53) As a result, it often lacks the reality checks made by such movements, which express human rights claims that do not necessarily reproduce the status quo within the field of human rights, but instead represent human rights as they could or should be in the eyes of these activists. Building on Moyn, who does not explicitly mention this in his essay, I wish to propose that we need to come to see committed forms of visual art as such potentially productive grassroots movements.

Youth

No doubt, if a grassroots movement aims to be successful, it needs to reach out to young people. Within *Inventing the Possible*, it soon became clear that one key guiding principle among several of the works on display was the impact that education has, both today and in the past. The research and artistic production group Declinación Magnética presented such an idea, with one of their seven videos that constitute together *Margen de Error* (2013).[8] *Libros de texto* (2013) demonstrates how the collective engaged in active thinking with young Spanish teenagers by reading and annotating together—while sitting around a large

Fig. 6. Declinación Magnética, *Margen de error (Libros de texto)* [*Margin of Error (Textbooks)*], 2013, 17 min. 14 sec., video, color, sound. Courtesy of Declinación Magnética. © Creative Commons.

table—both historical and contemporary school books that narrate the history of Spanish colonization. (fig. 6) The result is shocking. Such a potential trauma is immediately tackled by allowing the youngsters to erase passages and illustrations in these textbooks with a black alcohol marker.

As the project's overall title indicates, it aims to make us reflect on the construction of our subjectivity via what is presented to, and what is hidden from, us during our early education as young persons. It explores the many errors of history, and tries to reconstruct some of its aspects via a discovery of the margins of information. The collective claims that, in this way, they may instigate "autonomous imaginaries" that stimulate:

> […] unframing hegemonic knowledge and visual regimes through processes of cultural performance which allow to incorporate alternative knowledges and […] to re-configure the dominant systems of value, naming and legitimating. (Declinación Magnética, 2014: n.p.)

Love

A final common factor in the photofilmic works presented at Jeu de Paume was love of one's fellow humans—as in the contributions of Els Opsomer, and Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat. Hito Steyerl's *Lovely Andrea* (2007) is a work that convinces us not only that friendship can last beyond the grave, but also that no ideal or quest is impossible if one truly believes in it. Yet, even if such works demonstrate that

solidarity can achieve much in this world, they also warn us: one can feel surrounded by a tremendous amount of love in a desperate situation and yet suffer nonetheless.[9]

My concluding example therefore is a thought-provoking one. It is that of Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares' recently completed *Forest Law* (2014).[10] (fig. 7) This work makes a quite explicit claim urging us to refuse complicity in—and to install a universal right not to participate in—any further destruction of nature, animals, and human beings. Filmed in the Ecuadorian Amazon, in the region where the indigenous Kichwa people of Sarayaku live, it engages in debates about what it means concretely for individuals to fight for their deep, ancestral love for the "living forest" and all its inhabitants. (Biemann & Tavares, 2014: 17) In 2008, the Constitution of Ecuador accorded fundamental rights to Nature, or "Pachamama."

When this (non-human) right of Nature is violated, the Ecuadorian law grants individuals the right to demand recognition of the fundamental rights of Nature before a courtroom. Article 72 of the Constitution even goes so far as to grant Nature the right to restoration.[11] Such a law reinforces the claims expressed by the native people of Sarayaku, who filed a case against the State of Ecuador before the Inter-American Court for Human Rights, for having licensed their indigenous land to foreign oil companies. In July 2012, the court ruled in their favor.[12] In *Forest Law*, Biemann and Tavares portray the inhabitants of Sarayaku as they explain their intimate relationship with the forest while standing beside a tree or in the midst of bushes. The camera does not move, but only registers, as a silent presence, the wise discourse of the Sarayaku elders.

Fig. 7. Video still from *Forest Law*, a collaborative project by Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares, 2014, two-channel video installation with sound, 42 min. Courtesy of the artists. © Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares.

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Both the photofilmic artworks discussed here, as much as the committed exhibition contexts in which they have been shown, contribute to putting heavy pressure on governments worldwide for an installation of this right not to be a perpetrator on a much wider scale than in the Ecuadorian Constitution alone. As such, they are a grassroots movement helping to "invent the possible," to imagine a different way of living together that does not need to stop short at the level of utopia, but instead, may contribute to creating a post-utopian future. This future, of course, may still never come about, for it is and remains conditional: it will depend on potentialities that will or will not be fulfilled. Yet, unmistakably, what such photofilmic works have in common is their intention to mobilize new energies, to construct imaginative possibilities. "Imagine," stemming from the classical Latin *imaginari*—means to inventively "picture to oneself (something not real or not present to the senses)." (*OED*, 1989: 670)

Notes

[1] The original statement was published online on the website of Jeu de Paume, Paris. Cf. http://www.jeudepaume.org/index.php?page=article&idArt=1069 (accessed on March 31, 2015).

[2] Recently, public debate on this topic has been quite lively in The Netherlands. For an introductory overview of various contemporary positions, see the reader *It's very political*, published by the Dutch Platform BK, including among others Jelle Bouwhuis, Hans den Hartog Jager, Boris Groys, and Renzo Martens. It can be freely downloaded via: http://www.platformbk.nl/2014/11/its-very-political-het-trippenhuis/ (accessed on March 31, 2015).

[3] *Inventer le possible / Inventing the possible* (10/14/2014-02/08/2015) included works by Edgardo Aragón Diaz, Yto Barrada, Eric Baudelaire, Ursula Biemann, Wim Catrysse, Declinación Magnética, Theo Eshetu, Mahdi Fleifel, Yang Fudong, Sirah Foighel Brutmann & Eitan Efrat, Peter Friedl, Pauline Horovitz, Marine Hugonnier, Hayoun Kwon, Martin le Chevallier, Naeem Mohaiemen, Wendy Morris, Carlos Motta, Els Opsomer, Daniela Ortiz & Xose Quiroga, Anxiong Qiu, Khvay Samnang, Allan Sekula, Hito Steyerl, Atsushi Wada, and Artur Żmijewski. Also on view at Arts Santa Mònica, Centre de la creativitat, Barcelona, from May 5 - June 22, 2015. Cf. http://www.artssantamonica.cat/EXP/EXPOSICIONS.aspx?any=201504128#exposicio128 (accessed on March 31, 2015).

[4] Instead of producing a catalogue, we have created a software application for *Inventer le possible / Inventing the possible*, which is available for iPad via the App Store and for Android via Google Play. In it excerpts of all the included works discussed below (with the exception of Theo Eshetu's work) can be viewed. Synopses of the films, as well as biographies and statements by the artists, and an essay on each work by a critic (or the artist) can be consulted there as well. In the main text of this essay and in the bibliography, this App is referred to as *ITP*.

[5] About this approach, Pauline Horovitz writes the following: "Au départ ma traductrice voulait même traduire par 'The Rain in Spain' - allusion à *My Fair Lady*, quand Eliza Doolittle fait un exercice de diction où elle répète en boucle 'The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain.' Le jeu de mots était d'autant plus intraduisible que tout le postulat de départ du film résidait dans le fait de prendre l'expression au pied de la lettre et d'aller littéralement cataloguer tous les châteaux espagnols." Email to author (February 10, 2015).

[6] The concept of the Anthropocene is given serious consideration within art theory nowadays. See, for example, the discussion generated by the exhibition *Anthropocene Observatory* at BAK, Utrecht (February-April 2015): http://www.bakonline.org/en/Program/AnthropoceneObservatory?parent=Index (accessed on March 31, 2015).

[7] It is published as nr. 4 in vol. 4 of the SSRN Conference papers Series of the European Society of International Law (2014). It can be freely downloaded as a PDF via this weblink: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2546142 (accessed on March 31, 2015).

[8] Members of Declinación Magnética are Aimar Arriola, José Bueso, Diego Del Pozo, Eduardo Galvagni, Sally Gutiérrez, Julia Morandeira Arrizabalaga, and Silvia Zayas. An overview of the collective's activities can be found on their website: https://declinationmagnetic.wordpress.com/magnetic-declination/ (accessed on March 31, 2015).

[9] Cf. also Brian Kuan Wood's essay "Is it Love?," published in 2014 in *e-flux*. In it, he warns us against an all-too idealistic belief in love's capacity to change the world: it can also just as much be an immobilizing tyrant, he points out. Available at: http://www.e-flux.com/journal/is-it-love/ (accessed on March 31, 2015).

[10] This work was not included in *Inventer le possible / Inventing the possible*, but it premiered in France during one of the four debate evenings that Jeu de Paume organized in the context of its video library project.

[11] All the articles concerning the rights of nature can be consulted at http://therightsofnature.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/Rights-for-Nature-Articles-in-Ecuadors-Constitution.pdf (accessed on March 31, 2015).

[12] Cf. http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/ecuador-inter-american-court-ruling-marks-key-victory-indigenous-peoples-2012-07-26 (accessed on March 31, 2015).

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