

ALL INCOMPLETE

STEFANO HARNEY AND FRED MOTEN



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Stefano Harney and Fred Moten

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www.minorcompositions.info | minorcompositions@gmail.com

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PO Box 568 Williamsburgh Station

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www.autonomedia.org

info@autonomedia.org

A PARTIAL EDUCATION

Total Education

IS IT NOT THE CASE THAT WE ARE FACED TODAY WITH A TOTAL EDUCATION? THE term comes from Foucault's classic passages on the modern prison regime. Recall that Foucault used the term to speak about the instruction of prisoners in every aspect of daily life and routine. Foucault writes: "It must be the most powerful machinery for imposing a new form on the perverted individual; its mode of action is the constraint of a total education."²⁷ He further outlines this instruction deployed against perversion:

In prison the government may dispose of the liberty of the person and the time of the prisoner; from then on, one can imagine the power of the education which, not only in a day, but in the succession of days and even years, may regulate for man the time of waking and sleeping, of activity and rest, the number and duration of meals, the quality and ration of food, the nature and product of labor, the time of prayer, the use of speech and even, so to speak, that of thought...²⁸

Now Foucault stressed that because this instruction represented the reform of 'perverted' bodies – bodies that previously had no such discipline – any call for reforming the modern prison was a call for more instruction. Reform produced more instruction. Instruction produced more constraint, or discipline. Discipline only confirmed the underlying perversion of these bodies, and called forth more reform, which called forth more instruction to reform the perversion discipline confirmed. This process is reflected in Foucault's use of the oxymoron "perverted individual," an oxymoron that is nonetheless the

source of total education. Perversion violates the principle of the individual by failing to accede to its proper boundaries and comportments, and thus the perverted individual is an ongoing violation that calls total education into being.

In Foucault's account, perversion appears as a turning aside (from the truth) that is, somehow, prior, already existing. A prior turn. An already given turning that requires straightening, that summons reform. Instruction is how we get straightened out insofar as it is how one is straightened out. Correction begins with the ascription of the body itself, the imposition of body onto flesh; the attribution of perversion to the specific body, which justifies its correction, follows from its isolation and manifests itself as the theft of the body that has been imposed by those who assert a right to instruct insofar as *theirs* are bodies that *they* have supposedly both claimed and transcended. The ascription of body, the imposition of bounded and enclosed self-possession, of a discrete self subject to ownership, of ownership activated and confirmed either in theft or trade, might be said to be the first reform, the first improvement, insofar as it is the condition of possibility of reform, or improvement. The assignment of body to flesh is the first stripe of the long, hard, torturously straight, tortuously straightened row. Instruction is the setting in order, the straightening out. Instruction thereby reveals the essential relationship between improvement and impoverishment, between the private and privation at the heart of total education. Perversion's wealth becomes education's profit.

Today there would appear to be few examples of Foucault's total education in prison regimes. The program of reform, the program of prisoner



improvement, has been replaced almost everywhere by one of punishment alone, or what Foucault calls simply the deprivation of liberty. At the same time, in pointing out that the current prison program of 'slow-motion genocide' has long been the global norm in racialized regimes, abolitionist scholars refuse to countenance reform of the exception, alerting us to the fact that reform of the prison *and* reform of the prisoner are as much modalities of genocide as the interplay of privation and privatization that racial incarceration relentlessly innovates.²⁹ But what if? What if perversion is placed under constraint in the very idea of individuation, which projects improvement's subject as improvement's object? Then the figure of the perverted individual is always already in the system. Conversely, if perversion's location in the individual body is a form of imprisonment and instruction, then perversion is an already given anti-/ante-individuation. If prison/school are two sides of a common institutional structure that operates by way of individuation, then perversion is a pre-carceral breaking out of prison, a pre-scholarly dropping out of school, that continually reveals the ubiquity of the total education that hunts it down and puts it to work. Insofar as it is the case that in prison and in school one's job is to learn, to get it straight, to straighten out, then it is also the case that every citizen and non-citizen, every person and non-person, every worker who is in or out of work – even the enemy combatant, the prisoner, and the supposedly unemployable – is subject to a total education. Indeed, the rampant speculation on improvement made possible today by finance requires an all but universal diagnosis of perversion, a diagnosis that requires instructional methods and institutional structures that are, at once, extremely narrow and hierarchically subdivided. This suggestion may seem to run counter to our common sense about today's price-making market. This market appears to create an atomized landscape that leaves each individual to his or her own devices, free to choose and to act. Indeed, we hear a lot about states that are hollow, and institutions that are dysfunctional. In such a landscape, the idea of a total education requiring a total institution to set it in motion and a totalizing method to set in motion may seem misplaced. Certainly, the assertion that such a total education effectively dominates this landscape appears counterintuitive.

But the idea that we have been left to our own devices, or more technically that we are now responsible for our own social reproduction, needs to be supplemented. We are precisely not left to our own devices. We remain *their* devices both because of and except for *our* perversions, which prompt their constant regulatory and (e)valuative assault in a system in which regulation and valuation constitute and reinforce one another. We are faced with the relegation of perversion to what Silva calls "the equations of value," whose primitive axiom and fundamental operation is individuation.³⁰ Prior resistance to individuation is both the primary mode of our perversion as well as the structure and activity of persistence that is most essentially productive of value. In this

regard, perversion is total education's primary object and justification insofar as all our efforts at social reproduction must be deemed wrong, insufficient, and weak. And, at the same time, all those efforts are capitalized, becoming the engine and the fuel and the object of continuous improvement. It is precisely because of the withdrawal of state and institution from social reproduction that we can be diagnosed as perverted. State and institution withdraw from it, transcend it, separate from it, and in so doing make social reproduction the object of their possessive epistemological and economic grasp. Indeed in many instances the withdrawal itself is now retroactively attributed to our perversions. In other words, without the state and its institutions, how could we be sufficiently regulated and segregated, as a way of achieving and maintaining propriety and securing the freedom found therein? We could not. Then again, maybe, as Etta James says, most of all we just don't want to be free.³¹

We are withdrawn from the state so that the object, in its separation, can be enjoyed. But withdrawal is not truly abandonment; what is at stake, rather, in this withdrawal is a subdivision of enjoyment. What emerges is a kind of homo-socialization (or politicization) of enjoyment – a regulatory straightening and monolithic consumption and de-(en)tangling of enjoyment, as if orgy were constantly replaced by serial monogamy. What separation does to enjoyment is crucial, and cruel. Withdrawal from the object of enjoyment is an act of individuation that is imposed upon that object. More precisely, self-ownership is imposed upon the object as a dormant or etiolated capacity whose ineffectiveness requires that it be submitted to a regime in which it is absolutely subject to being-enjoyed by another. Consider, for example, the imposition upon the enslaved of bodies retroactively and simultaneously declared to be both their own and improperly and ineffectively self-possessed and the concomitant theft of those bodies by the one, The Man, who enslaves. This is the difference between two modes of enjoyment: enjoyment in separation and enjoyment in entanglement; the enjoyment (the use) of (the separable) body and the enjoyment of (entangled or undercommon) flesh. It is for this very reason that instruction is necessary. Instruction is the regulation (for purposes of employment and individual enjoyment) of anoriginal perversion. And because these failures – the constant threat of total system failure as the anoriginal perversion – run across all areas of the social reproduction of life, instruction must also cover all areas.³² It must everywhere convert failure from a perversion to a point on a line. It must everywhere reduce failure to a bell curve. It must be everywhere. It must be a total education.

The Market Instructs

Today, it is of course primarily the (straightened version of the) market that instructs. It is the market that disposes of our liberty and our time to put itself

in the position to offer total education.³³ (If our liberty is disposed of by the state we can be assured that no instruction for reform will be forthcoming.) The first lesson of this total education – after the inevitable diagnosis of perversion (willfully misunderstood as sickness rather than as health) stemming from our deinstitutionalization – is that we must improve. But not just that we must improve, we must improve in every area of life, in all the areas in which we have been abandoned. Our labor, yes, but also our health, our citizenship, our property, our children, our relationships, our tastes. To improve we must be instructed. Instruction begins by making clear that there is nothing wrong with the state, with institutions, or with the market that is not our fault. Instruction requires us to see the straight lines it imagines (in a deeply regulatory modality of imagination as self-picturing, as a picturing of the self-as-one, *Einbildungskraft*) for the sake of a kind of transcendental desire for improvement.

In contrast to the institution, there is something wrong with us because we are never straight enough, never improved enough, recitative in our perversions. And from the perspective of total education, this is not wrong. There is something wrong with us – namely, that we don't wanna be right. This is to say, along with Luther Ingram, that we are in love.³⁴ They want to own, use, and continuously improve (what's wrong with?) us. They seek to impose upon us the perpetual straightening to which they are submitted. Samuel Delany says the normative, which is to say abnormal psychological, model of 1950s homosexuality was that it was a “solitary perversion.”³⁵ But this is also, and perhaps more precisely, to say that the institutional judgment of the normal and the abnormal (or, as the artist Arthur Jafa says, the abnormative)³⁶ was in the interest of a submission of perversion, in general, to the solitary for the purposes of its serially solitary ownership, use, improvement, and enjoyment. Indeed any failures in the market, the state, or institutions can be traced back to us. Our improved participation in these entities will improve them. But it will not improve us, at least not enough, because in the end we are the source and sustenance of perversion necessary for total education.

It is we, not society, that are to be reformed, and any critique of society becomes further instruction for us. The reform of any institution under total education is always the reform of us. Everything is wrong with us, and our trouble is that they want what's wrong with us in order to initiate the continual improvement and straightening out of what's wrong with us; this facilitates their imagining themselves somehow to have always already been straight, right, correct. We are the wayward music against which a certain fantasy of straightness will have come into relief, recasting the general as mere background. That fantasy is one among an infinite set that constitutes the general warp and curve and tangle. It is a solitary version of our general perversion, a thing of lightness we must acknowledge ours. The fantasy of dominance and

transcendence is dominant and transcendent until we let it go, place it back in the general music of displacement, disallow the severance and detachment that is its essence, recalibrate and celebrate the generality and mutuality of use, enjoyment, feel. Every aspect of us is perverted. Every aspect of individuality can be improved, can be instructed. But because every aspect of us *is* perverted, individuation is imposed upon us in order to make improvement and instruction simultaneously possible and necessary. Every aspect is in need of reform and therefore instruction. The market is concerned not only with “the nature and product” of our labor, but “the time of prayer, the use of speech, and even, so to speak, that of thought.”³⁷ The market does not seek to punish. It seeks to instruct. And since every aspect of us is perverted, instruction must have access to our every aspect. It must have logistical access. It must insist on reforming our bodies to be conduits for the interoperability of work, money, energy, and information. A logistical education means every aspect of us is (to be) a means. Integrated with this improvement in/as all means is the second lesson of this total education. We will fail to improve enough. We will always need improvement and we always will.³⁸ Another word for this second lesson is speculation.

The market joins forces with the state and its ideological and repressive apparatuses in this second lesson. Indeed in many instances it is the state that makes the diagnosis of perversion, and in every instance the state that secures the market. The state returns to its settler roots securing not just private property but the private individual, indeed securing individuation itself as a principle necessary for speculation of this kind. Maria Josefiña Saldaña-Portillo teaches us how property rights were foisted on indigenous people not only to extract land but also to instantiate individuation as the basis of the settler state’s expansion and legitimation.³⁹ Incessant privatization of social production, policing, property rights, and propaganda remain the state’s specialties in this regard. But the state also joins the instruction in improvement, and in particular the speculative market in improvement. As a brief example, think of gentrification. To experience gentrification is to be instructed in speculation. One must learn to see history, parks, schools, natural environments, cultural difference, health, and public life all as monetized values that can be bet on, or against. These contemporary pilgrims want to ‘bring the neighborhood up.’ They desire its improvement, which means they also desire that which is to be improved. They detach themselves from, or exile, that which is to be improved and that detachment remains the essential structure of their desire. That’s why gentrification, as a force, is always seeking after the next neighborhood to conquer. It’s a Lacanian cheap trick, as it were. They not only want that which is to be improved, they also want to be wanted by that which is to be improved, desired by perversion. Crime, failing schools, disused or misused parks, and public transportation are subjected to the diagnosis of perversion. And the diagnosis is carried out by citizens. Citizens of gentrification take over schools,

clean parks, work with the police, and generally identify those with something wrong with them. This conduct of oneself as a citizen of gentrification has as its schoolmaster this speculative state. To be instructed in gentrification is however not just to subject others to evaluation for improvement but also oneself. It is to submit to self-diagnosis, testing one's capacity for improvement in the form of more speculation, such as the ability to take on more debt, more lifelong learning, more flexibility, more subservience to this speculative market in improvement. As degrading as this self-diagnosis may be, it is preferable to being diagnosed by those who self-diagnose, better, in other words, than being the ones who are said by others to have something wrong with them. It's better to say something is wrong with me than it is to have them say there's something wrong with you. It's better to straighten yourself out.



Usufruct's Modernity

This regime of improvement might be said to have its origins in modern *usufruct*. Usufruct is a term that signals the coming together of two kinds of improvement at the beginning of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the bourgeoisie had been championing the possibility, and necessity, of improving oneself, in contrast to the static status of the aristocracy. On the other hand,

the growing imperatives of colonialism and capitalism to find investment meant that all land and all people became judged by how much more they might improve, how much more they might yield and *should* yield from investment. What is truly sinister about this social synthesis is that it reinforces the fictitious idea of the self-improving, self-owning, self-authoring individual precisely through the act of positing the unproductive and under-willed land and people that surround this fiction, which requires massive resources to sustain itself, producing the impoverishment it posited by means of *individuated* dispossession in the service of ownership. Thus, the supposed independent will of the ‘usufructuary,’ the one who improves someone else’s property, having penetrated will’s relative absence in the ‘naked owner,’ is destined to dominate, to improve, to instruct the other. One could argue that this has also been the basic model of the formal education systems that subsequently developed. Another word for it is marriage.⁴⁰

So we might well ask where this grim picture of compulsory improvement – culminating today in total education – leaves those who traditionally have been classed as instructors: the parent, the teacher, the artist, and the movement leader. We would say it leaves them at study. Study perverts instruction. Study emerges as the collective practice of revision in which those who study do not improve but improvise, do not develop but regenerate and degenerate, do not receive instruction but seek to instantiate reception. Study is our already given gift of the *general* dispossession of ourselves for each other, and our service to that dispossession. Study is the (im)permanently unformed, insistently informal, underperforming commitment to each other not to graduate but instead indefinitely to accumulate an invaluable debt to each other rather than submit ourselves to their infinitely fungible line of credit. Study is a partial education.

Partial Education

Partial education begins with a frank perversion of a frankly Maoist formulation. His formulation is the one becomes two; ours is that the one becomes more and less than that. This indigent refusal of the integer, this violation of number’s wholeness, is the first antagonism of a partial education, the opening partisan move. The first action in the practice of a partial education is to say the total education with which we are faced is not total, not one, but more and less. And if it is more or less more and less, then this means some part of it does not belong to it. It belongs to us, and therefore no one and all. To say total education is (not one) is to say we are not just faced with critiquing their instruction, but that we are also at study, and that, insofar as this is true, we ain’t studying them. A partial education also insists on the asymmetry of this formulation. Our thing is fundamentally unlike their thing, because our thing is unfounded, ungrounded,

undercommon. A partial education is never ready, never started or finished, underfundamental and unsound(ed). It is destined to be unfinished and undone. A partial education is an incomplete education undertaken by we who are incomplete, to borrow Robinson's ante-seminal, ante-sermonic formulation in *The Terms of Order*.⁴¹ A partial education is practiced by the parts that are more and less than themselves, so much so as to continually generate much ado. A partial education is a perversion of instruction. Invaginatively, it plays out the irreducible interplay of usufruction and instruction.

A partial education is also not a neutral education designed to be rightly whole, total, and thereby to replace the bad total education we now face. Its concern is not with replacement but with displacement. A partial education is the partisan point of view of no point of view. It insists on how what is ours is more and less than that. A partial education is a partisan brigade that calls forth the general antagonism in its distinction about what it is not, and what it is. In other words, while a partial education is an antagonistic education, it is also more and less than that in what Silva teaches us to call its inseparable differences.⁴² It moves against the grain of the taxonomies, categories, and identities of total education set forth by the usufruct of the European Enlightenment. A partial education is a sensual education, a sensate education. It is a synesthetic theory of the senses, after the fact of the senses having become theoreticians in their practice.⁴³ A partial education *spills* its own senses – as Alexis Pauline Gumbs's term turns loose.⁴⁴ A partial education proceeds and recedes by its own spills.

Gumbs's work is inspired by Spillers, just as the concept of a partial education is inspired by the way Spillers calls into question the oneness both of capitalism and its most insightful critique, Marxism.⁴⁵ This critique, never mind its object, requires that there be some distance between the commodity and the laborer, no matter how small or how threatened with collapse into each other, for 'politics' to exist. Spillers, like Robinson, teaches us in effect that even this one, Marxism, is more and less than that because the commodity that could speak is an antagonism internal to that irrevocable antagonism to capitalism, and for this reason may carry something more and something more partial than politics.⁴⁶ By implication, then, this critique embodied particularly in the slave woman, and continually fleshed out by her under the most brutal conditions of what Hartman calls "burdened individuality," is also a critique of politics itself and therefore of the very idea of the state, as we can perhaps see in the artists discussed below.⁴⁷

The Singapore Model

In 2015, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in an interview with CNN, "People say we are paranoid which I suppose we are and we need

to be.”⁴⁸ He was widely ridiculed for a remark that sounded like a throwback to Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s, when his father ruled the country with an even more authoritarian grip. But in fairness to the younger Mr. Lee, he was speaking about the pressure Singapore felt to remain competitive in a world where globalized firms and international finance limit the traditional role of developmental states like Singapore. Nonetheless, the comment was symptomatic, because harkening back to an earlier era of instruction in the nation-state. Singapore emerged precisely as a ‘model’ through its claim to make citizens who were less perverse. Singapore did this by ruling pretty much everything inside the country as perversion, *except* wage labor and compulsory savings, deference to state power, and heteronormative family life. But Singapore also did this by instructing its citizens that even more grotesque perversity lay all around the island nation, from the enemy within, such as those of Chinese descent, who might be allied to the communists in Malaysia or in China, to the religious fanatics submerged below the surface in a sea of Islam surrounding the secular nation-state, to common criminals lying in wait should Singaporeans travel abroad. Even today, the first thing one hears as a visitor from a local taxi driver is how safe Singapore is – as if one could never survive a walk through Bangkok, or Jakarta, or Hanoi, without encountering bandits.

Contrary to the stereotype, even many Singaporeans often saw through these very visible attempts at instruction, and for this reason the Singapore model was not truly a model of total education. It was not the bodies and souls of Singaporeans that were trained, but merely their public manners – their comportment as citizens, more than subjects. Even today, awkward public education campaigns, like Mr. Lee’s comment, remain an anachronistic feature of this kind of straightening of the Singaporean into citizenship. But although Mr. Lee had the wrong kind of instructor’s manual in his hand, he had the right concern about continuous improvement in Singapore today. Singapore is subject to a new regime of usufructuary. And with it a new kind of total education in Singapore is emerging, one led by the global economy, with the government scrambling to update its curriculum to keep up. Indeed, today Singapore is a prime example of bodies being instructed logistically by the global economy. With its dominant sectors of finance, hospitality and travel, retail, and health and education leading the way, a new kind of instruction in access is emerging that would be invasive even for Foucault’s prisoners. Total education is taking the form not so much of a speculative improvement, but a logistical one. With most people in Singapore living in government housing, and class mobility severely constrained, it is logistics, not finance, that most characterizes the education of the population in this financial center. The Singapore ‘model’ helps us to understand how we might understand the way in which a logistical instruction operates as a general degradation of means.

With this instruction, the body is to become a means only for the smooth flow of transactions. It is to become a means for the interoperability of all things. Instruction is given in opening the body through such discourses and practices as customer service, prosumer behavior, and indeed in financialization of the self, as Randy Martin put it, but most of all endless availability, 24-hour access, to every aspect of the body.⁴⁹ Even the exhortations to creativity, criticality, and entrepreneurship chiefly train the body for the extension of access into social life, imagination, and cultural knowledge. The body is instructed in becoming a means to these flows above and below the level of its integrity as body, to these connections that source new planes of intellect and affect. But always this training is in/as a means to the transaction, to accumulation, to the realization of private profit from social production. Capital seeks only the degradation of means and cannot abide what Malcolm X understood as an end when he uttered his famous phrase “by any means necessary.” Not any means but only those that serve capital’s limited imagination, that is to say only those means that can be degraded through individuation, through placing freedom above necessity.

Logistical instruction, the new total education in Singapore, allows us to understand the government’s latest paranoid attempts to aestheticize its curriculum and move beyond the crude ‘rote learning/no cane no gain’ approach of its state-led industrialization.⁵⁰ Still this total education in logistics cannot but reveal the new perversions on which it thrives, perversions that are at the same time very old in the region. This total education is indeed symptomatic of the perversion of the Singapore model, which is to say its basis and its baseness. These perversions threaten the wealth of the city because that wealth depends on them, a dependency. We will return to this.

Marx predicted that the flows of capital would become part of the production process. We find this prediction in full effect in the work of Anna Tsing, who even demonstrates the dominance of such flows in many sectors, including many of the sectors prominent in Singapore’s economy.⁵¹ Developing a capacity of being not just open to others, but opened by others, to be parted, parceled, sent, shipped is to develop what we have elsewhere called *logisticality*.⁵² Logisticality is the perversion of logistics, which again is to say its formless fount. A logistical education responds to this underflowing, undercommon logisticality. It attempts to straighten out – that is degrade – this pervasive perversity of access, of vulgar openings. It must respond to a reversal of the first reform – the imposition of the body on the perversion of flesh. Logistics treats the body partially, accessing parts, disaggregating parts, leaving parts behind. It is therefore crucial that logistics not lead to the kind of partial education where such perversity – of flesh without integral bodies, of bodies entangled with flesh rather than housing it – might re-emerge as a form of study among those who want to be accessed because they want to be wrong.

Logistical Perversions

The arts can help here. Or rather the art market, the art scene, the art experience, as Singapore has both imported and created them. The opening of the Gillman Barracks signaled the Singapore government's commitment to making the island nation-state a hub of contemporary arts. The Gillman Barracks, a colonial-era military facility spread across several lush acres in the west of the island, was refurbished to house numerous small private art galleries, restaurants, and the Centre for Contemporary Art, the public institution anchoring the redevelopment. Shortly thereafter, the Singapore Museum of Modern Art opened its doors in the colonial-era supreme court building, now housing modern art of the region from the twentieth century, providing the patrimonial credentials for the push into the world art market. Indeed the clear market strategy of investment in the arts is apparent in the way Singapore Art Week, a massive commercial show held in the iconic Marina Bay Sands buildings on the harbor, has eclipsed the Singapore Biennial, housed in a colonial-era orphanage: although recently this former orphanage, now the Singapore Art Museum, has closed for upgrades. Through these institutional vehicles, and through residencies, publications, grants, university programs, and smaller festivals, the Southeast Asian artists, curators, critics, and collectors have been drawn in substantial numbers to this golden hub. A contemporary art scene has been incorporated into the Singapore model. Singaporeans are to receive a total education in art.

But in what are they to be instructed? Art theory? Investing in the art market? The value of art as social practice? Well, indeed all of these. In a country as wealthy as Singapore, where one quarter of households is said to have over one million US dollars in disposable income, a bit of art theory in the form of instruction from curators, academics, critics, and gallerists will grease the wheel of art market investment, and perhaps social practice will step in when the wheel runs over someone. Singapore Art Week included in its catalogue a buyer's guide that instructed potential investors not to buy undiscovered artists over fifty years of age, since they are at that point unlikely to be discovered and become a good investment, or alternatively to wait until they die to buy them, since posthumous discovery is also a market strategy.

But most of all, on display in the Gillman Barracks private galleries, at the Singapore Biennial, and during the Singapore Art Week is an aesthetic lesson bound to logistical education. Art will shore up the integrity of the Singaporean at a time when logistics cares not for such individuation. It will allow for persistence of individuation, just as speculation does, at the moment things are falling apart, to parts, toward a partial education. This moment remains necessary not just for instruction and improvement, but for realization itself, for scythe of privatization of social production, and the hammer of privatization. At a time when logistics takes some emotions and leaves others, groups

some of our tastes with tastes of others, lines up our desires with others, merges our criticism with others, art can teach us that we still have boundaries, still have bodies to be constrained, still have individual judgment. The aesthetic lesson, itself a marriage of flesh and body consummated by a higher faculty, is the part of the curriculum designed to put a break on our logisticality, designed to break our logisticality. In other words, it is through the aesthetic lesson that Singapore will seek to secure individuation amid a broader logistical education that must flirt with logisticality. But will we learn the lesson? Or will we continue to fall to pieces in/as our study, in our perverse, partial education? A partial answer for those who would seek to pervert instruction can be found in two of the artists at the Singapore Biennial.

Marta Atienza and Hemali Bhuta

Two installations supposed to be integral to this emerging aesthetic education in Singapore, one by Marta Atienza, an artist from the Philippines working in Rotterdam, and one by Hemali Bhuta, an artist from India, instead fell apart from this total.⁵³ Both were extraordinarily powerful and beautiful works. Amid a typical contemporary biennial, orderly and ordering of artists, nations, curators, and spectators, something perverse is in the works, in their works. The biennial produces a tour with integrity of individuated countries, art works, artists, opinions, judgments, and sales. By the end of an art world version of a Lonely Planet trip we are to be restored for further instruction in logistics. But Atienza and Bhuta do not take part in this tour. They part from it, depart from it, and from themselves too. Itineraries drop into parts in the presence of their work. We forget where we were going, our senses filled with being where we are. Atienza's work fills a room and – like Bhuta's – spills out at us before we reach the room down a small hall. We hear the sea. Her installation consists of a kind of deck onto which water spills, a porthole that moves up and down on the horizon, half submerged by the sea, and a series of watery projections. We learn that she took a ride on a tanker, the kind plying the waters around Singapore. We learn she has connections with Filipino sailors who work these tankers. To be in the room is to have our sense of the sea disassembled. We can hear it and see it, and we feel we should be able to smell it and touch it. the isolation of sound and sight renders us partial. We cannot put ourselves together, can't pull ourselves together in this seascape. Something is wrong and it is us.

Bhuta's installation is also reached before we arrive. The air forms a scented path. The viewer follows the path and turns to see a thicket of hanging incense, hung delicately from the ceiling but heavily too, like it would be hard to push aside and easy to become entangled. The red forest is textured by the rough growth of each incense stick and it is hard to know if this surface is soft or

sharp, safe or dangerous. But most of all the scent occupies us, a silent scent we dare not touch. As with Atienza's work, we are affected, again to use a term from Silva.⁵⁴ The senses lose composure and we lose a bit of self-possession. We become partial. Ferreira da Silva writes about the denigration of the affectable ones in early Enlightenment Europe, those who are not fully self-owning and self-defining, but are affected, undone, made incomplete, made partial by others. Both pieces allow us to feel the dispossession of partiality, the mere part. There is an excited feeling of wanting to be with others in this art.

These two works by female artists from the Philippines and India could instead have engaged in critique, like a number of artists appeared to do in the Biennial and at Art Week. They could have questioned the exploitation of Filipino sailors under Singaporean flags, of Filipina domestic workers locked in the homes of Singapore's middle class, of South Asian construction workers indebted and injured building Singapore's mega-projects, of the skin-color racism still hurled at South Asian children in Singapore school yards. Indeed there were several other pieces that referenced the housing condition of migrants from South Asia, and sounds of the city filled with the voices and languages of its migrants. These two artists would likely have also been included in the Biennial for such gestures. After all, reform requires Singapore to confront international newspaper headlines like "Buy a discount maid at Singapore's malls," or simply and commonly "Singapore's Migrants Face Abuse and Resentment."⁵⁵ The arts would then clearly be instructing us in a misalignment. And indeed they would be making the case for reform, for more instruction, and ultimately for more art. But their art is far more partisan than this.

Non-State Non-Being

A partial education does not produce citizens who think this way because it does not produce anything as complete as a citizen, but something much more perverse. In the craft of these artists one is instead encouraged to become entangled with not-citizenship, with not-state being. One begins to feel the migrant workers not as slighted citizens, but as part of another tradition of partisanship, of cultural experiment, and of perversion in the face of the citizens, nations, and states that would claim them. Not by coincidence the region has in fact a rich history of this perverse notn-statism as James C. Scott teaches us in *The Art of Not Being Governed*. In describing the vast regions of what he calls Zomia, highlands and remote regions that extend from India through mainland Southeast Asia to Southern China, Scott speaks of peoples who not only live without states, but develop strategies to avoid being incorporated into those states, to avoid being "in-gathered." Scott notes that these peoples were often known in the language of those who hunted them, those who lived in states, by the word in those state languages for 'slave,' even before they

became enslaved, signed a previous perversity. Scott's work gives us an historical context for contemporary diplomatic citizenship, and the partial education that confronts it. He writes about Southeast Asia:

Paraphrasing an observation by Karl Marx about slavery and civilization, there was no state without concentrated manpower; there was no concentration of manpower without slavery, hence all such states, including especially the maritime states, were slaving states... Slaves, it is fair to say, were the most important "cash crop" of pre-colonial Southeast Asia: the most sought-after commodity in the region's commerce.⁵⁶

And this is not just a context for our present discussion but, together with European colonial indenture, *the* historical context of the Singapore model:

Another way of describing the process is the systematic removal of captives from non-state spaces, particularly, the hills, in order to deposit them at, or nearby, state spaces... The scale of slaving and its effects are hard to imagine... whole regions were stripped of their inhabitants...

As is so often the case with a major commodity, slaves became virtually the standard of value by which other goods were denominated – the tight association between hill peoples and the social origin of most slaves is strikingly indexed in the fact that the terms for slaves and hill peoples were often interchangeable.⁵⁷

Moreover, because it is so recent, this maritime state, Singapore, may appear to be the product of more recent colonial-era indenture. Indeed from Chinese *kongsis* (big brothers) indenturing laborers from Fujian, and addicting them to opium, to the British indenturing the Tamils on rubber plantations, to the displacement of Malay peoples on the island, this modern nation-state might appear to be only the product of the movement from subject to citizen in the post-colonial era.⁵⁸ Although inserted into a racial hierarchy, working-class Chinese, Tamils, and Malay peoples all became Singaporeans upon independence. But, with the help of Atienza and Bhuta, with the benefit of a partial education, the one-off post-colonial citizenship soon becomes more than one and less than two, and something partial, something non-state, something echoing the legacy of Zomia emerges. Because Singapore has come to require precisely that "concentration of manpower" that the slaving states required. And this raises the question not of what Singaporeans call those who must be

“in-gathered” so much as what the in-gathered might come to call themselves, so much as their own ungathered, split practices of the partial.

At any given moment there are roughly five million people in Singapore. Three million are citizens, legacies of the subject to citizen history, together with a policy of *sinification* that has encouraged post-independence migration of those of Chinese descent. The rest are migrants, most on two-year work visas, working as domestics, in construction, and in all forms of maintenance, repair, and physical upkeep of the world city. A small portion of these are on longer work visas, and are called expats, and are mostly white. In other words, bringing in concentrated manpower remains the model of the state. It is not now a slaving state, though Singapore continues to be a regional hub for trafficking women and girls. It does, however, regulate an economy that produces massive numbers of indebted to the point of indentured South Asian male workers, and one that produces new runaway domestic workers every day of the calendar year. The scale of the dependence on this concentrated manpower, the widespread dehumanization of those in-gathered, and the utter dependence of the Singapore model on this manpower turns the one of total education into two. It is not so much that these migrant workers are misaligned with their nations and states, as Singapore is misaligned with itself. Its model is perverse. It presents itself as a model of Southeast Asian development. But it is present to itself as a perversion.

Given Derangement

What does not and can never belong to these workers is a model that exhibits the worst of both entwined histories – the pre-colonial model of sweeping up non-state peoples through violence, and today through debt, deceit, and development, and the colonial model of European racism. This latter model means that these workers will never be considered potential Singaporean citizens, as they probably would have become ‘padi-state’ subjects under pre-colonial slaving states. We have in-gathering without the prospect of citizenship. The colonial regimes stained the region with a form of racism that allows post-colonial regimes to choose the worst of both worlds. This is the actual Singapore model. Not free market but massive concentrations of unfree labor. Little wonder it can be extolled, sold, but not copied. What other nation-state could in-gather and exclude with such ferocity without raising the ire of its own substantial impoverished population? None. Not even Singapore.

But from our point of view, which is the refusal of a point of view that partial education makes more fully operative, this last question and reality of the Singapore model in general is precisely their thing, not ours. What spills out from the perverse splitting in two of this model, of this total education, are the parts we might care about. Atienza and Bhuta do not instruct us in aesthetic

individuation. Their works cannot be reformed. Their partiality stands with us in antagonism to reform, to instruction. The sea, the air, the spirits that carry these beings gathered by Singapore in, but not of, its model spill out in an irreconcilable critique of state life, of citizenship, of the individual body. Their presence in the state is a refutation of the state as universal form, as total education. And in the uncoercive re-arrangement of the senses – to swerve with Spivak's term – these works allow us to ask what perversions might already be here and now.⁵⁹ Those who sojourn derange their senses for others, who offer to pervert us. And without the state to order them into citizens, these dispossessed senses form the baseless, found education of another kind: a turning to our partial versions.

- 24 We're thinking, here, of a collaboration between Theodore Harris and Amiri Baraka, *Our Flesh of Flames* (Philadelphia: Anvil Arts Press, 2008).
- 25 Mary Pat Brady, *Traffic: Density's Resistance to Scale* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).
- 26 For more on Savoir-faire see *Klondike Kat #1*: <https://youtu.be/qAXZb7qLKp4>

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- 27 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1991), 334-337.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 See Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition," *Globalizing California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007) and Jordan T. Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016).
- 30 Denise Ferreira da Silva, "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ - ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," *e-Flux Journal* 79, February 2017, available online at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value>
- 31 Etta James, "All I Could Do Is Cry," Chess Records, 1960, written by Billy Davis, Barry Gordy, and Gwen Gordy, <https://youtu.be/3Pc9BmXN998>.
- 32 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 33 See, for example, on the demands of instruction for employment, Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009).
- 34 Luther Ingram, "If Loving You Is Wrong," Koko Records, 1972, written by Homer Banks, Carl Hampton, and Raymond Jackson for Stax Records, https://youtu.be/rmiuAUt_tQ
- 35 Samuel R. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004).
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- 37 Foucault, *op. cit.*
- 38 See, for example, on endless demands of employment, Peter Fleming, *The Mythology of Work: How Capitalism Persists Despite Itself* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).
- 39 Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 40 For a superb examination of the couple and the heteronormative family as extensions of individuation see Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Cambridge: Zone Books/The MIT Press, 2017).
- 41 Cedric J. Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).
- 42 Silva, *op. cit.*

- 43 See Fred Moten's discussion of synesthesia in the essay "Amuse-Bouche," *Jacket 02*, February 2, 2015, available online at <https://jacket2.org/article/amuse-bouche>, accessed May 21, 2017.
- 44 Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 45 Hortense Spillers, *Black and White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
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